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moral point of view

Moral Point of View Theories (MPVT) came into being during the middle third of the twentieth century—the heyday 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 were Stephen Toulmin, Kurt BAIER, Kai Nielsen, Paul W. Taylor, and William K. FRANKENA (1908–1994); Arthur E. MURPHY (1901–1962), Stuart Hampshire, John RAWLS (in his early writings), and Marcus SINGER developed 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, E. W. Hall, 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; it and Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View* (1958) are the central paradigms of MPVTs. Toulmin argued that all the standard metaethical accounts collapsed before the same objection: 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. Its *central* task is to give an account of sound MORAL REASONING. We start by asking what is the purpose of morality—why do societies have a morality, any morality at all, and what roles do moralities play in our lives? Examining this question leads 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 points of view. 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 there is a distinction between good and bad reasoning about morality. And, just as good inductive reasoning is distinct in important respects from good deductive reasoning, so good moral reasoning is distinct in important respects from both inductive and deductive reasoning, as well as from legal reasoning, purely prudential reasoning, or the reasoning deployed in military planning.

For moral philosophers, the central task is to give a perspicuous representation of what criteria we actually use in distinguishing good and bad reasoning in our moral lives. In general, the purpose of reasoning is to give valid arguments whose conclusions are worthy of acceptance. But whether the conclusion is worthy of acceptance will depend on the kind of argument (whether moral, scientific, purely prudential, religious) for which it is designed to be a conclusion. The criteria of valid reasoning (some formal features aside) will be of a kind that is appropriate to a distinctive mode of reasoning. We discover the criteria appropriate to a distinctive type of moral reasoning by a careful examination, in the living contexts of their use, of paradigms of moral reasoning (Baier 1954, 122). On such an account, one cannot stand outside of the mode of moral reasoning and the social practices that go with it and determine what the correct criteria are.

In determining 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 these theories justified in giving the moral point of view such centrality? Is the moral point of view a reification, and are there in reality just different moral points of view of 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, 123) With the MPV so characterised, we can distinguish moral deliberation

from other kinds of deliberation, MORAL RULES from other kinds of rules; we can ascertain rules of differentiation and priority which will enable us to sort out where the weight of reason lies and what reasons are genuinely good reasons for moral decisions. The moral point of view, according to Baier, is the point of view "of an independent, unbiased, impartial, objective, dispassionate, disinterested observer." (Baier 1958, 201) On this account, a moral conviction is justified if, and only if, it is a conviction that would be agreed to by all who honestly take the moral point of view and are clearheaded, logical, and fully knowledgeable about the relevant facts. Moral rules, moreover, are for the good of everyone alike and "are binding on everyone alike quite irrespective of what are the goals or purposes of the person in question." (Baier 1958, 195) The moral point of view is egalitarian: the life of everyone is to count, and to count equally.

Most critics of MPVTs claim that such a characterisation of the moral point of view (whatever the author's intentions) is not a characterisation of "the moral point of view *sans phrase,*" but a characterisation of the liberal point of view of modern morality (Mackie and Monro). To claim (as Baier, Taylor, and Frankena do) that the MPV necessitates having "an attitude of equal respect for all persons or a belief in their having equal intrinsic worth (or having equal basic rights)" clearly implies that 'the moral point of view' applies to a restricted cluster of moralities—primarily liberal moralities, but not to all those things, and only those things, that are moralities. (Frankena 1983, 60)

It also could be argued that the very idea of the MPV rests on a mistake. The MPV is a reification; in reality there is no such thing as a MPV. There are simply differing, conflicting, and frequently incommensurable moral points of view. MPV theorists resist this charge. They say that to take a point of view (moral or religious or scientific) is to take a general approach to making judgements of a certain sort (moral ones, religious ones, scientific ones). It involves adopting a general outlook that is adopted by anyone trying to reach conclusions in a certain domain. MPV theorists claim there is a distinct and definable point of view "which may appropriately be called the MPV, and which is a single PV and not somehow a plurality or family of them." (Frankena 1983, 43) But this gives force to the charge of reification.

The reification challenge denies that there is anything general that is uniquely constitutive of the domain of morality—nothing that gives it its essence, for there is no essence to be had. Indeed there is no such clearly demarcated domain. However universalistic Baier's intentions, he limits the moral point of view to a restricted cluster of moralities, and most paradigmatically to liberal morality. The other MPV theorists are similarly ethnocentric, a *reductio* of MPVTs

MPV theorists could accept this criticism and, biting the bullet, say the MPV they characterise is simply the MPV of liberal societies. Just as John Rawls has moved to a political conception of justice which is meant to include only modern liberal societies, so MPVTs could be rationally reconstructed as attempts to give an accurate characterisation of the core of liberal moralities. Just as Rawls does not claim that his liberal principles of justice are superior to those extant in nonliberal societies—hierarchical societies with established and mandated social estates—or even that they apply to such societies, so MPV theorists could assert that they do not intend the moral point of view to include Medieval Icelandic moralities, or moralities sanctioning ethnic cleansing or widow burning, or radically fundamentalist Jewish, Christian, or Islamic moralities. As Rawls's theory pays a price for such a restriction, similarly MPV theories would pay a price as well. (On Rawls in this respect, see Sen 1992, 75–79.) But the restriction would, as it does for Rawls, also have its gains. It could enable him, free of claims of universal scope, to spell out the general features of what liberals are committed to morally, and the underlying rationale for having such commitments; it could delineate good ethical reasoning for people living in approximately liberal societies; and it could 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 an MPVT could describe more generally what morality looks like in liberal societies and what its underlying rationale is.

Some (*e.g.*, Paton) have thought that MPV theorists do not push questions of justification deeply enough. We need to both understand what it is to reason in accordance with the moral point of view and be able to justify being moral—justify taking the moral point of view. Suppose we ask the fundamental questions, "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?" MPV theorists have split over these questions, if indeed they are genuine questions. Toulmin regards them as pseudo-questions, questions which cannot be answered because nothing could logically count as an answer to them. For him, asking "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 questions cannot arise for, given that very meaning of 'should', being moral is just what we must do. 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 questions cannot arise. We are asking for a *self-interested reason* for being moral even when being moral is not in our self-interest. But it is logically impossible that there can be a self-interested reason for our doing what is not in our self-interest. (Thornton)

By contrast Baier, Frankena, Nielsen, and Taylor, though they construe what is involved in different ways, give the putative questions a construal such that "Why be moral?" and "Why take the moral point of view?" are not pseudo-questions. But note that MPV theorists, including Toulmin, agree that the questions are not *moral* questions to be answered from the moral point of view, but (if they are genuine questions at all) nonmoral, normative questions intended to challenge the authority and primacy of morality with its alleged, all-things-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 in which people are reasonably safe, there is no *decisive* reason which would commit them 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 MPV theorists cannot "show that it is irrational not to be moral." (Frankena 1983, 73) Some MPV theorists, 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, 73) Both Frankena and Taylor believe that when we press the why-should-I-be-moral question, we should take it as the question of how one can live a rational life, everything considered: this comes to a consideration 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, 74)

Nielsen, by contrast, thinks that what has not been shown is that rationality *requires,* independently of a person's dispositions or attitudes, that a rational agent must be moral: that is, must be a morally good person as distinct from a person of good morals—something a thorough amoralist could be. He argues that philosophers (such as Baier and Gauthier) have shown how people can be morally good persons without any failure in rationality. But what is in *accordance* with rationality is one thing; what rationality *requires is* another. Baier and Gauthier (who is not an 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. Not being *required* by rationality does not show morality is not part of the rational life, though not being *compatible* with rationality plainly does. It has not been demonstrated that morality is incompatible with rationality, only that it is not required by it. In many circumstances there is no rational alternative for us but to do what morality requires, but there are perhaps other circumstances in which, if we push our deliberations far enough, we will run out of reasons and we will recognise that we will just have to decide what sort of persons we want to be. However, Nielsen adds that this should not provoke any great existential anxiety, nor should it conjure up pictures of our moral lives as being lives in which we are repeatedly faced with stark choices without any recourse to reason. In almost all circumstances, given a reasonably stable society, being reasonable (itself a morally charged concept) is *both* the decent thing to do and in accordance with our rational self-interest. In certain circumstances this is not so; then, if we are being guided *solely* by considerations of rationality, we must simply decide how we are to act. Our choices cannot but affect the kind of persons we are and aspire to be. We en-

counter this when things are coming apart in our society and chaos prevails. We may also encounter this in stable, more or less decent settings where a prudent free ride would be to our advantage. In both situations we may, as far as reason is concerned, simply have to decide what sort of persons we want to be. The morally wrong course, even the amoral course, 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 then from this false generalisation make the extravagant conclusion that we are mired in the arbitrary. (Falk, 256–60)

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 (1958) has discussed these questions, and even if (as Frankena and Nielsen believe) he has not given a satisfactory answer to "Why should *I* be moral?" he has given a satisfactory answer 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 are rational—not at all rationally at fault—this will not destabilise, let alone refute, the Hobbesian answer Baier gives to why *we* should be moral. "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, 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.

See also: ANALYTICAL PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS; BAIER; FRANKENA; IMPARTIALITY; METAETHICS; MORAL REASONING; MORAL TERMS; MURPHY; RAWLS; REASONS FOR ACTION; SINGER.

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Kai E. Nielsen

moral psychology

The central issue in moral psychology is moral motivation: Does a satisfactory account of human nature yield the view that in virtue of our psychological makeup we are naturally motivated to act morally? That is, does morality hold a natural attraction for us given the way in which we are psychologically constituted? Our psychological makeup is the beliefs, attitudes, and feelings (or EMOTIONS) that we are subject to having as a matter of proper human development. If morality holds a natural attraction for us as a matter of proper human development, then a second question arises: Which moral theory, if any, is favored by our psychological makeup?

In general, moral theorists presuppose or have been concerned to show that the first question admits of an affirmative answer. This is the most empirical aspect of moral psychology; for the claims made here are based upon the actual accounts of the psychological makeup of persons as delivered by science and theoretical reflection upon experiences. In the history of Western moral philosophy, some of the most distinguished endeavors, since PLATO (c. 430–347 B.C.E.) and ARISTOTLE (384–322 B.C.E.), to offer an affirmative answer to the first question have been made by the British moralists—especially Bishop Joseph BUTLER (1692–1752) and Adam SMITH (1723–1790). Each was directly concerned to show that the various emotions and sentiments natural to persons served to underwrite proper moral behavior.

An affirmative answer is deemed necessary if persons are to be thought of as *freely* choosing to act morally (and not immorally)—a cherished view in moral philosophy, owing much to the influence of Immanuel KANT (1724–1804). The idea here is this: First, no sense can be made of (nonrandom) choice between options in the absence of some motivational explanation according to which one option is preferred over the other; a person who is completely indifferent to the options could have no basis for choosing one alternative over the other—could not be motivated to make a nonrandom choice between the alternatives. Second, a choice is not free if the motivation is owing to external constraints. Accordingly, if persons act morally and it is not on account of some constraint that they do so, then it has to be because morality holds a natural attraction for persons.

It is obvious that the two questions are related; an answer to the first bears directly upon an answer to the second. This is because an answer to the first presupposes some account of human motivation; and given such an account presumably some moral theories will hold a greater natural attraction for us than will others. Now, moral theorists differ in their accounts of motivation with regard to both the locus of motivation and the character of motivation.

Locus of Motivation

Following David HUME (1711–1776), some maintain that our psychological makeup is such that desires and only desires can be the seat of motivation, moral or otherwise. Others, most notably Kantians, while allowing that desires can indeed motivate a person to act, nonetheless maintain that our psychological makeup is such that reasons alone can also suffice to motivate persons to act morally, and that in order for an act to have moral worth it must be motivated by moral reasons and only moral reasons. Respectively, these are the desire-based and the reason-based conceptions of moral motivation. Kantians, in particular, are hardly concerned to deny that morality holds a natural attraction for persons or that this is so in virtue of human nature. Rather, they just want the locus of that attraction to be reason and not DESIRE. Kantians hold that in virtue of proper development, reason and reason alone is capable of motivating fully rational individuals to do what is right, whatever and however deep-seated