

Moral Point of View

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A generally agreed upon sense of “the moral point of view” will be difficult to find, given how the very phrase engenders the question of exactly which or whose point of view counts as authoritative (*see* MORALITY, DEFINITION OF). The phrase is ambiguous, and favoring one disambiguation over others ought to be a conclusion arrived at through something more than an appeal to stipulated claims about the semantics of “moral.” So, while it might be possible to rule out the identification of “the moral point of view” with “the quantum point of view” or “the point of view of a frog” just by appeal to the meaning of the term “moral,” we ought not to build positive, substantial attributes into it on the basis of meaning claims alone. Arguably the phrase can do most work at a level closer to conceptual or philosophical analysis, by discerning what is required for engaging in peculiarly *moral* thought. There is little agreement on “the moral point of view” among those who work on issues of normative moral theory and metaethics, though the assumptions that generate the disagreement are often so deep as to go undetected.

One fundamental and helpful way into the issue is through a distinction introduced, in slightly different terms, by W. D. Falk (2008) and William Frankena (1966) (*see* FALK, W. D.; FRANKENA, WILLIAM K.): is the word “moral,” as it appears in “the moral point of view,” primarily a descriptive or a normative term? As a first gloss, on the descriptivist account, a set of principles (Frankena’s term is “action-guide”) counts as a “morality” if it meets the purely formal condition of playing a certain authoritative role in the life of the person who takes it up. On such a view, both Gandhi and Hitler were moral agents who each had a moral point of view, however radically different they were. On the normative account, a set of principles must meet the formal conditions laid out by the descriptivists, but some further substantial, normative principle must also be included in the set in order for it to constitute a moral point of view. Determining which substantial principle ends up being deemed essential to the moral point of view would presumably be the task of normative moral theorizing. Indeed, Dale Dorsey (2016) argues persuasively for the methodological point that we cannot adjudicate between different normative accounts of the moral point of view prior to engaging in substantive issues about moral reasons and concerns.

To adopt the descriptivist account is to look for purely descriptive or formal criteria by which to pick out those views that count as moral points of view, while avoiding taking a stand on any particular substantial normative question or issue. This is to take a catholic view of normative matters by remaining as neutral as possible about the differences between good and bad morality, by not determining at the

outset which views are true (correct) or false (incorrect). On such an account, philosophers typically look to the role that people's moral views play in their lives. So Frankena (1966) says that, on this view, S has a morality if S has an action guide that fulfills the formal conditions of being both prescriptive – that is, saying what ought to be the case – and ultimate – that is, in accepting it, S regards it as “definitive, final, over-riding, or supremely authoritative” (1966: 688). (Frankena hedges on whether universalizability is one of these formal conditions; this is explicitly left out here, for reasons that will emerge below.) The idea is not that any possible action guide can be taken as a morality, but rather that it must make sense to think that people can live by, and organize their lives according to, the relevant principles. Thus, on the descriptive account, a person's morality is that person's “rule of life”; morality must be, to use a more contemporary term, overriding (*see* OVERRIDINGNESS, MORAL). These are the values by which a person thinks “I ought to live.” Of course, people may not live up to their own moral values owing to weakness of will or sheer neglect, but these failures do not take away from the idea that moral values are supposed to have normative force by the lights of those who accept them. Thus a person's moral values are prescriptive only if they are descriptively picked out by the authoritative role the values play in the life of a moral agent. Falk (2008) argues that the ancient Greeks held a descriptive conception of *morality* (*see* also Annas 1994; for arguments against the idea that the Greeks had a conception of *morality*, *see* Darwall (2013a, 2013b). Contemporary proponents of descriptivism include Warren Quinn (1994), Philippa Foot (2001), Judith Thomson (2003), Kieran Setiya (2007), and Bloomfield (2014).

As mentioned above, in order to derive the normative account of the moral point of view from the descriptive account just given, one must add to it some substantial normative principle or prescription about what is or is not to be done, what we owe to ourselves or to others, or what is or is not of “moral” value. On such a view, what typically separates the moral point of view from all others is that the moral point of view is identified as the *correct* way to understand “morality,” the correct set of values by which to live. Thus, on this account, “morality” is itself a normative, morally loaded term.

Most often, but not necessarily, those who think of the moral point of view in this way think that morality must, in some important sense, be other-regarding: the effects of φ -ing on others must be included in an agent's deliberations over whether or not to φ . (Frankena 1966 defines the normative view in these other-regarding terms.) On the normative account, typically, morality is fundamentally *social* and its purpose is to provide a check on the self-interest of agents, such that people who take up the moral point of view recognize some limitations on their freedom or liberty for the sake of making society possible. (Thus, on accounts of this kind, conventional codes of traffic or etiquette are “social” in the relevant sense but are not “moral,” since they lack the supreme authority of morality, which carries over from the descriptivist account.) From this normative point of view, it is rational for people to pursue their own interest – this is called “prudence” (*see* PRUDENCE) – but peculiarly “moral” thought does not begin until they start considering how their behavior affects others. For example, some of these views, though not all, take altruism

(see ALTRUISM AND BIOLOGY) to be, to some extent, morally obligatory. It is also this view, one might argue, that makes the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* a challenge to morality: the social origins of morality as a check on self-interest seem plausible upon considering that, were it not for fear of punishment, many would find no reason at all to take up the moral point of view (see WHY BE MORAL?; RING OF GYGES).

Exactly what the moral point of view is, on the normative account, will vary with the constraints that get added onto the descriptive point of view. The options are manifold. Kant, a rationalist, thought that the moral point of view could only be understood through "pure practical reason" considered from a universal perspective (*sub specie aeternitatis*); and, in a similar manner, Thomas Nagel (1986) calls it "the view from nowhere." Sentimentalists such as Hume and, contemporarily, Michael Slote (2010) think that the moral point of view is the result of our being empathic (what Hume called "sympathetic") toward others (see KANT, IMMANUEL; HUME, DAVID; SENTIMENTALISM). Bentham thought that the principle of utility must be considered by anyone who takes up the moral point of view, while Mill claimed that morality requires an ability to hold people accountable for their actions (see BENTHAM, JEREMY; MILL, JOHN STUART). Similar to Mill in this way, Allan Gibbard (1990: 47) claims that "to *think* an act *morally reprehensible* is to accept norms that prescribe, for such a situation, guilt on the part of the agent and resentment on the part of others"; and Stephen Darwall (2006) identifies the moral point of view with the "second personal standpoint" or the point of view from which each person has equal standing to make claims and demands of one another and to hold one another responsible. Another set of possibilities claims that social groups can be taken to determine moral truth, and these views count as adopting the normative account, since they all require that the moral point of view be the one that is countenanced as such by the group, culture, or society in which they are taken up. Three versions of how this can be accomplished are as follows.

- 1 In Kurt Baier's (1958) famous discussion of the moral point of view, he takes the first person plural, the "we," to be definitive of the moral point of view, so that morality is about the "moral rules" of any group; and these are
 - (i) part of the mores of the group, (ii) supported by characteristically moral pressure, (iii) universally teachable and therefore universalizable, (iv) not merely a taboo, (v) applied in accordance with certain principles of exception and modification, (vi) applied in accordance with certain principles of application whose prevalence is a condition of the group being said to have a morality. (Baier 1954: 108)
- 2 Cultural relativists like Gilbert Harman (1975) and David Wong (2006) take the truth about morality to be fixed by the norms of a group or culture, though Wong does impose some additional criteria of acceptability, which are based on the function of morality to promote social coordination and the intrapersonal ordering of motivations.

- 3 Contractualists like John Rawls (1971), David Gauthier (1986), and T. M. Scanlon (1982) can be read in a similar manner, though for them the moral point of view is the point of view agreed upon under certain specified circumstances (*see* CONTRACTUALISM).

The differences between the descriptive and the normative accounts can be helpfully compared and contrasted by considering the views of two famous twentieth-century moral philosophers, R. M. Hare and Philippa Foot (*see* HARE, R. M.; FOOT, PHILIPPA). These philosophers are often read as if they embody the two positions: Hare is taken by Frankena (1966) as a descriptivist about the moral point of view, while Foot has been thought of as someone who holds a normative conception of the moral point of view, since she has argued that it is impossible for us to praise someone morally for clasping their hands thrice in one hour. While Foot (1958) does adopt a rather thin normative account of the moral point of view, analytically casting it in terms of a concern for “harm, advantage, benefit, importance, etc.” (510), here I will attend to her purely descriptive arguments (Foot 1958–9) against Hare. In fact, if we look at their disagreement more closely, there are good reasons for drawing the opposite conclusion: that Hare holds the normative account, while Foot argued against him from a descriptivist point of view.

The reason why Frankena thinks of Hare as a descriptivist is that Hare thinks that the moral point of view is definitive of what has supreme authority to a person, of what Hare called “prescriptivity,” while also thinking that morality itself must be “universalizable” (Hare 1981). “Universalizability” (*see* UNIVERSALIZABILITY) is a term taken from Kantian ethics (though Hare, as we shall see, is a utilitarian), and implies a formal constraint on moral thought such that

One cannot with logical consistency, where *a* and *b* are two individuals, say that *a* ought, in a certain situation specified in universal terms without reference to individuals, to act in a certain way, also specified in universal terms, but that *b* ought not to act in a similarly specified way in a similarly specified situation. This is because in any “ought”-statement there is implicitly a principle which says that the statement applies to all precisely similar situations. (Hare 1991: 456)

This position seems to constrain the form of moral thought in such a way as to limit what can count as “the moral point of view,” yet take no stand on any particular, engaged moral issue or position. As such, it seems not to add the kind of substantial, normatively laden constraint on morality that is characteristic of a normative account of the moral point of view. Since Hare’s universalizability is so formally schematic, it seems especially suitable for picking out, in merely descriptive terms, when one is engaging the moral point of view and when one is not.

In fact the situation is not so straightforward. Evidence for this is Hare’s own attempt to derive utilitarianism from morality’s prescriptivity and universalizability. Were this possible, as Hare evidently thought, it would be like pulling a normative

rabbit out of a descriptivist's hat. But, since deduction is typically thought to merely unpack the conceptual material contained in the premises, Hare's success would have proved that universalizability is not normatively neutral, as is typically thought. Admittedly, few philosophers think that Hare's derivation of utilitarianism is a success; most think that utilitarianism may be true, but that, if it is, this result is not to be deduced from the concept of *morality* and logic alone. And this might make it look as if Hare's project, in the absence of his misbegotten derivation, is indeed a paradigm of descriptivism. But this would be mistaken.

The easiest way to see how universalizability places normative constraints on the moral point of view despite its (seemingly) purely formal character is by attending to two different kinds of egoism (*see* EGOISM): what is typically called "ethical egoism" and what we can call "ethical solipsism." Ethical egoism is an ethical theory that holds that each of us ought to behave in a way that maximizes his or her own personal interest, however we may choose to define it. Regardless of its prospects as a viable moral point of view, ethical egoism does satisfy the constraint of universalizability: ethical egoists think that *everyone* should be an ethical egoist. All the individuals within the range of the theory may be specified in universal terms, without reference to any specific individual. Now, contrast ethical egoism with a more insidious position, in which I think I ought to always behave in a way that maximizes my personal self-interest, but I do not think that everyone else ought to do the same. I do not universalize my position but think, rather, that it is best if I follow one set of rules while everyone else follows another. Given only my self-interest, I would prefer it if everyone else accepted conventional morality, were altruistic, and tried to be fair and just. For this would make most people much easier to manipulate and take advantage of; and, since I am only invested in my self-interest, I would be able to maximize it best if everyone else acted in accord with conventional morality. This sort of ethical solipsism is the position of the free rider (*see* FREE RIDING), who cannot think that everyone ought to ride freely, since, if everyone did, then there would be no "paying customers" and, soon, nothing left upon which to freely ride.

Now, on the descriptive account, the ethical solipsist clearly has a moral point of view. True, it is despicable, but in any case the ethical solipsist has a "rule of life" that meets the descriptivist's requirements. Note, however, that the ethical solipsist does not think in conformity with universalizability, and this shows that universalizability is not normatively neutral among all viable moral points of view (understood descriptively). It is, rather, a substantial and normatively loaded principle. And this puts Hare's theory in with the normative accounts of the moral point of view. (See MacIntyre 1957 for a similar argument to the conclusion that Hare's employment of universalizability begs the question against existentialists.)

"Moral Beliefs" is one of Philippa Foot's most important philosophical articles; and it is an argument against a theory of moral language taken from Hare and from Stevenson (1937), wherein, roughly, moral language is based on non-cognitive expressions of moral approbation and disapprobation, or moral praise and blame (*see* STEVENSON, C. L.; NON-COGNITIVISM). Foot's argument against these early forms of "expressivism" was that there are constraints on what we can approve of or

condemn from the moral point of view and that, barring any special pleading, it would be impossible, for example, to adopt a pro-attitude of moral approbation toward people for clasping their hands together thrice in one hour (*see* PRO-ATTITUDES). She writes:

On this hypothesis a moral eccentric could be described as commending the clasping of hands as the action of a good man, and we should not have to look for some back-ground to give the supposition sense. That is to say, on this hypothesis the clasping of hands could be commended without any explanation; it could be what those who hold such theories call “an ultimate moral principle.” (Foot 1958–9: 85)

Foot thinks this is absurd in the same way as someone’s trying to take pride in the sky’s being blue is absurd (1958–9: 86), and this is supposed to teach us about the logic or formal characteristics of “the moral point of view” and “pride.” And indeed it does; but exactly what it teaches us is easily misinterpreted. The way Foot is often read here is as accepting the normative account of the moral point of view, since she seems to put upon a descriptivist’s account just the sort of constraint that turns it into a normative account instead. This interpretation, however, is mistaken. By claiming that hand-clasping cannot be a person’s “rule of life,” she is not taking a stand on any substantial moral issue. She is merely pointing out the absurdity of taking hand-clasping as a possible “rule of life” for a human being, in effect arguing that hand-clasping does not meet the descriptivist’s formal criteria of the moral point of view as laid out by Frankena. Without special pleading, it simply makes no sense to say that a person’s “ultimate moral principle” is that it is morally good to clasp one’s hands thrice an hour.

In comparing how the normative account rules out the free-riding ethical solipsist with the way the descriptivist account rules out the hand-clasper, we can see an important difference in how these accounts work. It does seem to beg normative moral questions to rule out the solipsist, while the hand-clasper is ruled out for principled, nonnormative reasons. In general, on normative accounts of the moral point of view, those theories that do not include the normative principle defended by a particular account do not even enter into the running as potentially true moral theories: recall that, for Darwall (2013a, 2013b), the Greeks did not have a false moral theory, rather they had no theory of morality at all. While this is not ultimately decisive, it does look as if descriptivists have a dialectical advantage over normative accounts of “the moral point of view,” in that they are more ecumenical and neutral and less open to the charge of begging the question against those with whom they disagree about normative moral theory.

See also: ALTRUISM AND BIOLOGY; BENTHAM, JEREMY; CONTRACTUALISM; EGOISM; FALK, W. D.; FOOT, PHILIPPA; FRANKENA, WILLIAM K.; FREE RIDING; HARE, R. M.; HUME, DAVID; KANT, IMMANUEL; MILL, JOHN STUART; MORALITY, DEFINITION OF; NON-COGNITIVISM; OVERRIDINGNESS, MORAL; PRO-ATTITUDES; PRUDENCE; RING OF GYGES; SENTIMENTALISM; STEVENSON, C. L.; UNIVERSALIZABILITY; WHY BE MORAL?

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