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Ethical Argumentation, Objectivity, and Bias

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Abstract: On one account, the moral point of view is impartial, hence in this sense objective. On a different account, morality sometimes seems to recommend partiality, hence, in one sense of 'partiality,' bias. Still another view says that in some cases morality is neutral between impartiality and partiality in choosing between alternative actions. I will explore the topic of impartiality (objectivity) and partiality (bias) in first-order ethical argumentation by reference to selected philosophers, including Derek Parfit and Peter Singer.

Keywords: ethical argumentation, impartiality, objective, objectivity, Parfit, partiality, practical reasons, Singer

1. Introduction

I begin with terms in the title of my paper. Following Alvin Goldman, I will take *argumentation* to be "an act of presenting an argument to an audience or an interlocutor" (Goldman, 1995, p. 60). *Ethical* argumentation presents an ethical argument, practical or theoretical.

Objectivity, in one sense, is impartiality. The philosopher Shelly Kagan (1998) has this sense of the word in mind when he speaks of "talking about goodness from what is sometimes called an 'objective' point of view, [or] an 'impartial' point of view" (p. 42). In another sense, for something to be objective is for it to be mind-independent. If values are in this sense objective, then their being values is independent of our mental states, hence independent of our attitudes.

Bias, in one sense of the word, is a pejorative term associated with prejudice and unfairness. An online definition of "bias" lists synonyms of the word, one of which is "partiality"[1]; a Wikipedia entry on bias says in part that "[b]ias is an inclination to present or hold a partial perspective."[2] Hence the following question: in ethical argumentation, is partiality (hence non-objectivity in the impartiality sense of objectivity) necessarily bias in the pejorative sense? I will answer this question in due course.

My main concern will be with impartiality and partiality (hence with objectivity and bias in corresponding senses of these words) in relation to arguments of the kind presented in first-order ethical argumentation (hence in relation to first-order ethical arguments). Part of my discussion will focus on one type of theory of practical reasons; theories of this type are objective in as much as they hold that practical reasons are based on values that are objective in the mind-independent sense.

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[1] https://www.google.ca/?gws_rd=ssl#q=bias+definition
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bias

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A further and final introductory point. There is a distinction to be drawn between objectivity, in the sense of impartiality, as a possible *feature* of ethical argumentation, and objectivity, in the sense of impartiality, as a *topic* of ethical argumentation in the domain of moral philosophy. This domain is standardly divided into three areas: meta-ethics, normative ethics, and applied or practical ethics. The question whether argumentation in applied or practical ethics must be objective in the sense of impartial is a question in meta-ethics in as much as it pertains to the meta-ethical topic of justification in ethics, but it is also a question in normative ethics inasmuch as it pertains to normative-ethical theories—for example, utilitarianism.

2. The moral point of view

First-order ethical argumentation (for example, argumentation in applied ethics) is argumentation from the moral point of view. On one account, the moral point of view is impartial, hence in this sense objective. I am thinking in particular of an account given by the philosopher Wayne Sumner. According to Sumner (2011), the moral point of view appears to be distinguished from other evaluative points of view "in two respects: its special concern for the interest, welfare, or well-being of creatures and its requirement of impartiality. Adopting the moral point of view requires in one way or another according equal consideration to the interests of all beings" (Sumner, 2011, p. 408). This is how utilitarians see the moral point of view. Utilitarianism is rigorously impartial. It holds that when utilities are calculated the utilities of all concerned are to be counted and equal utilities are to be counted equally no matter whose they are. But for a number of moral philosophers, the impartiality of utilitarianism is a defect of the theory. Russ Shafer-Landau is a case in point. In an appraisal of utilitarianism, he says:

> morality sometimes seems to recommend *partiality*. It seems right, for instance, that I care about my children more than your children, that I care more for friends than strangers…. And it also seems right to translate my care into action. If I have saved a bit of money, and it could either pay for my son's minor surgery or relieve the greater suffering of famine victims, most of us will think it at least permissible to pay the surgeon. But to do that is to be partial to the interests of my son. (Shafer-Landau, 2012, pp. 141-42)

3. Parfit and practical reasons

The philosopher Derek Parfit, for his part, believes that morality can accommodate both partial and impartial perspectives. This view of his is anchored in a meta-theory of practical reasons.

Some theories of practical reasons, Parfit (2011) holds, are objective, and others are subjective. Objective theories claim that certain facts give us reasons to have certain desires and aims, and to act on them. "These reasons are given by facts about the *objects* of these desires or aims," and so Parfit calls such reasons *object-given* (Parfit, 2011, p. 45). "If we believe that all practical reasons are of this kind, we are Objectivists about Reasons" (Parfit, 2011, p. 45). Parfit adds that "[o]bject-given reasons are provided by the facts that make certain outcomes worth producing or preventing, or make certain things worth doing for their own sake" (Parfit, 2011, p. 45). Hence "we can call these objective reasons and theories *value-based*" (Parfit, 2011, p. 45).

Subjective theories, in contrast, claim that our reasons for acting are given by facts about *us*, and are therefore *subject-given*, rather than object-given. A theory of this sort might appeal to our present desires or aims, or it might appeal to "desires or aims that we would now have … if we had carefully considered all of the relevant facts…. If we believe that all practical reasons are of this [subject-given] kind, we are *Subjectivists about Reasons*" (Parfit, 2011, p. 45).

Objectivists can admit that "many reasons for acting can be claimed to be given by the fact that some act would achieve one of our aims," but they would say that "these reasons *derive their force* from the facts that give us reasons to *have* these aims. These are the facts that make these aims relevantly good, or worth achieving" (Parfit, 2011, p. 45). For subjectivists, in contrast, "we have no such reasons to have our aims" (Parfit, 2011, p. 46).

Parfit makes a detailed and scathing critique of desire-based subjective theories (Parfit, 2011, chs. 3, 4). He believes that "we ought to reject all subjective theories, and accept some objective theory" (Parfit, 2011, p. 65). More specifically, he thinks we ought to accept what he calls a wide value-based objective theory. Such theories are wide because they assign a place to both impartiality and partiality. They hold that

> [w]hen one of our two possible acts would make things go in some way that would be impartially better, but the other act would make things go better either for ourselves or for those to whom we have close ties, we often have sufficient reasons to act in either of these ways. (Parfit, 2011, p. 137)

Parfit (2011) later says:

> On such views, we are often rationally permitted but not rationally required to give significantly greater weight, or strong priority, both to our own well-being and to the well-being of those to whom we have close ties, such as our close relatives and those we love. (p. 382)

In a similar vein, Parfit says that we can have strong reasons to care about the well-being of certain people who are in certain ways related to us. He calls such reasons "*person-relative* or *partial*" (Parfit, 2011, p. 40). But he also thinks that we can have reasons "to care about everyone's well-being" (Parfit, 2011, p. 40). Such reasons, he says, "are *impartial* in the sense that… [they] are reasons to care about anyone's well-being whatever that person's relation to us" may be (Parfit, 2011, p. 40). In addition to the possibility of our having impartial *reasons*, there is the possibility of our having an impartial *point of view*. Our point of view is impartial "when we are considering possible events that would affect or involve people who are all strangers to us" (Parfit, 2011, p. 40). Moreover, even when "our actual point of view is not impartial, we can think about possible events from an imagined impartial point of view"; we can do this "by imagining possible events that are relevantly similar except that they involve people who are all strangers to us" (Parfit, 2011, pp. 40-1).

Parfit doesn't claim that we are rationally required to give equal weight to everyone's well-being; rather, he holds that we are rationally *permitted* "to give strong priority to the well-being of ourselves and certain other people, [and] that we are also rationally permitted to give great weight to the well-being of strangers" (Parfit, 2011, p. 388).

He gives an example in which "I could save either some stranger's life or the life of someone to whom I have close ties," such as my child (Parfit, 2011, p. 140). Parfit says: "I could not rationally choose to save this stranger. I ought morally to give priority to my child. I would have other strong non-moral reasons to act in this way, such as the reasons … involved in my love for my child" (Parfit, 2011, p. 141).

Here Parfit speaks of what I ought morally to do. He would say that I have sufficient reason, indeed a decisive reason, to save my child. The reason is presumably given by what I would aim to achieve, namely the saving of my child's life. This reason is, in Parfit's sense, object-given; it's also value-based because the saving of my child's life would be good for my child. Suppose that my saving my child's life would fulfil a present desire of mine that is stronger than any conflicting desire I may have. Then an adherent of a desire-based subjective theory of reasons would *agree* that I have a decisive reason to save my child.

But there are moral cases in which, Parfit thinks, objectivists and subjectivists about reasons would disagree. He gives an example in the course of discussing a moral principle he calls the Consent Principle. This principle says: "It is wrong to treat people in any way to which they could not rationally consent … if [they] knew the relevant facts, and we gave them the power to choose how we shall treat them" (Parfit, 2011, p. 184). The example is this:

> [T]wo people, *White* and *Grey*, are trapped in slowly collapsing wreckage. I am a rescuer who could prevent this wreckage from either killing White or destroying Grey's leg. (Parfit, 2011, p. 185)

Parfit calls this example *Earthquake*. He says we should assume that "White, Grey, and I … are all strangers to each other; nor do we differ in any other morally relevant way" (Parfit, 2011, p. 185).

Parfit asks what the Consent Principle implies for his *Earthquake* example: does it imply that I ought to save Grey's leg, or that I ought to save White's life? What the principle implies depends, Parfit says, "on our assumptions about which facts give us reasons" (Parfit, 2011, p. 185). Suppose that if I saved Grey's leg, this would "much better fulfil Grey's present fully informed desires" than if I saved White's life (Parfit, 2011, p. 185). According to a desire-based subjective theory, the Consent Principle would then imply that it would be wrong for me to save White's life (Parfit, 2011, p. 185). But if we accept a wide value-based objective theory, the Consent Principle would require me to save White's life because, Parfit argues, Grey would have sufficient reasons to choose either that I save her leg, "since this choice would be much better for her," or that I save White's life, "for Grey could rationally regard White's well-being as mattering about as much as her own, and White's loss in dying would be much greater than Grey's loss in losing her leg" (Parfit, 2011, p. 186). In contrast, "White would not have sufficient reasons to give up her life so that I could save Grey's leg" (Parfit, 2011, p. 186). Thus, the Consent Principle "requires me to save White's life, since this is the only act to which both Grey and White could rationally consent" (Parfit, 2011, p. 186).

Suppose, however, that Grey is my best friend. Parfit would say that this assumption adds a further morally relevant fact to the example—a fact directly relevant to the question whom I should rescue.

Consider the following argument:

> (a) Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me. Therefore, other things being equal, I should rescue Grey rather than White. But White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss. On balance, then, I should rescue White rather than Grey.

According to this argument, the fact that Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me presumptively favours my rescuing Grey rather than White, but this presumption is outweighed by the fact that White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss.

Next, this argument:

> (b) White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss. Therefore, other things being equal, I should rescue White rather than Grey. But Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me. On balance, then, I should rescue Grey rather than White.

According to argument (b), the fact that White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss presumptively favours my rescuing White rather than Grey, but this presumption is outweighed by the fact that Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me.

Arguments (a) and (b) are balance-of-considerations partialist arguments. Argument (a) is a *weakly* partialist argument in as much as it treats the fact that Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me as an overridable presumption in favour of my rescuing Grey rather than White. Argument (b), in contrast, is a *strongly* partialist argument in as much as for it the fact that Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me outweighs the counterconsideration that White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss.

A Parfit-type theory of practical reasons (that is, a wide value-based objective theory) would permit weakly-partialist argument (a). But what about strongly-partialist argument (b)? Does the fact that Grey is my best friend and White is a stranger to me outweigh the fact that White's loss will be greater than Grey's loss, so that I have sufficient reason to rescue Grey rather than White? This question, were Parfit to answer it, would require a value judgment on his part. I make this obvious point in anticipation of a related point I will make in a moment.

A Parfit-type theory of practical reasons must hold that the values on which object-given value-based reasons are based are objective in the sense of being mind-independent. For if these values were *mind-dependent* in the sense that their being values depended on their being objects of mental states such as desires, then reasons based on them would be subject-given, not object-given.

But suppose we wish to *apply* some Parfit-type theory with a view to deciding whether we have a sufficient value-based reason to act on some aim of ours. This will require us to evaluate the aim—is it good, or worth achieving? Our evaluation will express some mental state of ours, such as an attitude of approval, and so it will be subject-given. Thus, even though a Parfit-type theory of practical reasons is, for the reason Parfit gives, objective, its application is inescapably subjective. In this connection, the following comment by Parfit about his *Earthquake* example is noteworthy: "If Grey could choose how I would act, she would have sufficient reasons, *I believe*, to make either choice" [my emphasis]—that is, to choose that I save her leg or that I save White's life (Parfit, 2011, p. 186).

4. Singer's "basic argument" for donating to aid agencies

I turn now to an argument in practical ethics made by the philosopher Peter Singer (2011, p. 576). The argument is this:

> 1. Suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical aid are bad.

> 2. If it is in your power to prevent something bad from happening, without sacrificing anything nearly as important, it is wrong not to do so.
> 3. By donating to aid agencies, you can prevent suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care without sacrificing anything nearly as important.
> Therefore,
> 4. If you do not donate to aid agencies, you are doing something wrong.

Singer acknowledges that the phrase "nearly as important" in premises 2 and 3 is vague, but says that this is deliberate because he is "confident that [we] can do without plenty of things that are clearly and inarguably not as valuable as saving a … life" (Singer, 2011, p. 577). As to what these things are, Singer leaves it up to us, his readers, to decide.

He thinks that premise 2 is "very difficult to reject, because it leaves us some wiggle room when it comes to situations in which, to prevent something bad, we would have to risk something *nearly* as important as the bad thing we are preventing" (Singer, 2011, p. 576). For example if "you can only prevent the deaths of other children by neglecting your own children," the principle stated in premise 2 "does not require you to prevent the deaths of the other children" (Singer, 2011, p. 576). Rather, it permits you to give priority to your own children. Thus, the principle permits partiality.

Singer considers a selection of what he calls "Common Objections to Giving," and in reply to one of them he says: "It is true that most of us care more about our family and friends than we do about strangers. That's natural and there is nothing wrong with it. But how far should preference for family and friends go?" (Singer, 2011, p. 582). Suppose we are in a position to donate money to aid the poor, but could instead use the money to help family or friends. Singer admits that "[i]f family and friends really *need* the money, in anything remotely like the way those living in extreme poverty need it, it would be going too much against the grain of human nature to object to giving to them before giving to strangers" (Singer, 2011, p. 582). But later he says this: "The fact that we tend to favor our families, communities, and countries may explain our failure to save the lives of the poor beyond those boundaries, but it does not justify that failure from an ethical perspective, no matter how many generations of our ancestors have seen nothing wrong with it" (Singer, 2011, p. 583). This remark might be taken to imply that the ethics of giving preclude partiality. But Singer's premise-2 principle permits partiality in a case in which contributing money to saving the lives of poor people in other countries would require sacrificing the well-being of people in our own country whose need is at least nearly as great. Such a case may be very unlikely to arise in a wealthy country, but it's a conceivable case, and Singer's principle allows for it.

Suppose we decide in such a case that preventing the bad occurrences that (*ex hypothesi*) we could prevent by donating money to assist needy people in our country would be at least nearly as important as saving the lives of poor people in other countries. Then if we were to apply a Parfit-type theory of practical reasons to the case, we would presumably decide that the partiality we would show by giving priority to the needy people in our own country would be permissible. At the same time, the theory would permit us to say that the well-being of poor people in other countries matters as much as the well-being of poor people in our country.

5. Conclusion

Earlier I asked whether in ethical argumentation non-objectivity, meaning partiality, is necessarily bias in the pejorative sense of the word. Shafer-Landau would say that it isn't, and so would Parfit and Singer. I think this view is correct.

Finally, a point about morality, partiality, and impartiality, and a related point about first-order ethical argumentation. Even if there are cases in which morality permits partiality, there are surely many cases in which morality requires impartiality—cases in which there is no good reason not to give equal consideration to the interests of all those concerned. One way to accommodate cases of these different kinds would be to say that the moral point of view is defined partly by a defeasible presumption in favour of impartiality—a presumption that is overridden just in cases in which there are sufficient reasons for partiality. On this interpretation of the moral point of view, the same presumption applies to first-order ethical argumentation (for example, argumentation in practical ethics), and this means that, absent sufficient reasons to the contrary, ethical argumentation of this kind must be impartial, hence in this sense objective, and, *a fortiori*, free of bias.

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