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**Impartiality**

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Impartiality is primarily a feature of normative or evaluative deliberation –deliberation about what ought to be done or about something’s goodness or badness. An initial description is this: such deliberation is impartial when it is not unduly influenced by the deliberator’s own interests, preferences or loyalties. Derivatively, impartiality can be attributed to actions that are guided by (or perhaps merely conform to) deliberation with this feature, or persons who characteristically deliberate or act in this way.

“Impartiality” can be used in either an evaluative or a non-evaluative sense. There are many ways of not allowing your own interests, preferences or loyalties to influence your deliberation unduly, and not all are admirable. A judge who tosses a coin to decide a case displays a kind of impartiality – an unjust kind (see JUSTICE). However, calling a person impartial is commonly a form of commendation: “impartiality” is often used as the name of a VIRTUE. So understood, impartiality is not being unduly influenced by your own interests, preferences or loyalties, *in the right way*. Characterizing what that amounts to is the main task for an account of impartiality in philosophical ethics.

This task has three main components. The first concerns the *content* of proper impartiality. Is this a matter of giving each person’s interests equal weight in deliberations about how to treat them, of responding to each person as she deserves, of not deviating from a set of procedural rules, or something else? The second concerns the *scope* of proper impartiality. Towards whom should we be impartial, under what circumstances? The third concerns the place impartiality occupies in an overall account of morality. Is it somehow fundamental to morality? On one perennially influential view, the moral point of view just is, fundamentally, an impartial point of view. Different readings of that claim need to be distinguished before it can be evaluated. And if impartiality occupies only one part of morality, which part is that, and what it its relationship to the others?

A fourth, subsidiary task is to explain the relationship between the impartial and the impersonal.

§1 Content

Impartiality is commonly explained as giving equal weight to the interests of each individual who stands to be affected by one’s action (see EQUALITY). As a conceptual claim, that is clearly wrong. Judicial examples suffice to show that: judicial impartiality can apparently require awarding a decision in favour of the party with less at stake. Even if such judgements are incorrect, they are not conceptually confused.

Instead, a conception of impartiality as the equal weighting of interests seems better treated as one of a variety of alternative proposals about the content of proper impartiality. The deliberative context in which this conception seems most plausible is one in which a good is being distributed amongst those with an interest in receiving it. When we consider proper impartiality in this context, a first set of alternative views holds that this does concern the interests of different individuals, but not their equal weighting. One alternative is to give priority to the interests of the worst off, considering not the amount by which their welfare will be affected, but the absolute level of welfare they will end up at (see PRIORITARIANISM). A radically different, “perfectionist” view tells us to facilitate the highest absolute levels of welfare, giving priority to the interests of (those who will end up) the *best* off (see PERFECTIONISM).

These views take the content of impartiality to concern the interests of those affected by our actions. But there are further possibilities. If you are judging a contractual dispute, proper impartiality seems to require an unbiased attention to the rights, not the interests, of the affected parties. Another suggestion is that proper impartiality is allocation in accordance with desert or merit: this seems especially attractive concerning the allocation of praise and blame, punishment and reward (see DESERT).

In other contexts, however, none of these suggestions seems quite right. At the end of the *Iliad*, Achilles presides over a chariot race. When Eumelus unluckily comes last, Achilles takes pity and awards him second prize. Antilochus (who finished second) could have phrased his complaint by saying that Achilles fails to display the impartiality proper in a referee of a contest like this. However, Achilles does not fail to attend to anyone’s interests – on the contrary, his pity for Eumelus should be irrelevant to the awarding of prizes. Moreover, Eumelus did not deserve to finish last, and Antilochus has no right to second prize – the prizes are Achilles’ property. Rather, Antilochus qualifies for the prize under the rules that (at least implicitly) govern the contest: he may not deserve it, but it is his *due*.

There are other suggestions to consider. When deciding on principles for determining the distribution of resources in society overall, perhaps proper impartiality attends not to the actual welfare levels that will result, but rather to securing equality of *opportunity* to influence one’s level of welfare (see EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY). Or, according to another version of “perfectionism”, proper impartiality promotes the highest levels of excellence (whether this is in anyone’s interests or not).

More generically (and vaguely), it is sometimes suggested that impartiality satisfies each person’s claims in proportion to their strength. Claims, on this suggestion, have grounds of different kinds. There are claims to the fulfilment of RIGHTS, but also claims of need, desert, merit and (as with Antilochus) due. However, what this idea gains in generality it threatens to lose in explanatory usefulness. If a claim is simply what I ought to be given, this suggestion does not help to explain the forms that impartiality properly does and does not take.

Given this list of conceptions of impartiality, it is tempting to ask which of them is correct, rejecting the others. However, that may itself be a mistake. To see why, we should turn to our second issue.

§2 Scope

Our first question was: Impartiality with respect to what? The second is: Impartiality to whom, under what circumstances? Here, we need to consider possibility that the scope of proper impartiality varies depending on the context of deliberation. Ordinary moral thought seems to say so. It says that, when writing my will, it is proper to favour my children over strangers, but to be impartial between my children; however, if I am an official allocating public funds, the interests of my children in receiving them should be completely excluded. If the scope of proper impartiality varies in this way, we should ask whether its content does too. Different forms of impartiality may be appropriate to different deliberative contexts (see CONTEXTUALISM IN ETHICS).

Three broad kinds of deliberative context can be usefully distinguished here. First, there are contexts in which we are deciding how to distribute a good. Different distributive practices have different proper purposes, which determine the scope and form of appropriate impartiality. The purposes we properly have in administering emergency relief supplies, awarding competition prizes, distributing compensation payments and allocating educational bursaries explain why they should be distributed in proportion to need, performance, magnitude of loss and capacity to benefit, respectively. Secondly, there is a further range of situations where regulation is needed to establish mutually beneficial order. These rules might be formal, governing parliamentary or judicial procedure, or informal, as in conventions of queuing for service. Impartiality is properly exercised in framing, interpreting and following such rules when that is done without favouring the interests of any relevant party. Thirdly, there are cases of desert, merit or entitlement that fit neither of the first two (distributive and procedural) models. Examples include the application of restorative and retributive justice; also impartiality in evaluative judgement, praise and blame. Here, impartiality is properly directed towards proportioning the treatment of individuals to their rights, deserts, or merits.

This suggests that the proper content and scope of impartiality are context-relative. In each context, questions about the proper form of impartiality need to make reference to the point of the activity about which one is deliberating, whether it is distributing a good, applying rule for orderly procedure or meting out punishment or praise. Debates about the proper form of impartiality become debates about the proper principles of social welfare provision, the correct regulation of public institutions, the justification for rights to personal property and for practices of punishment.

§3 Impartiality and Fairness

Thus, impartial deliberation is not deliberation about a distinctive kind of object. It is deliberation about several different kinds of object: others’ interests, deserts, merits, and what they are due. There is a range of ways in which personal interests, preferences and loyalties can skew our deliberation and action, making us think and act towards others in ways we should not (see LOYALTY). Proper impartiality is the avoidance of those distortions.

Despite this heterogeneity, we can still talk of “the” virtue of impartiality. Impartiality is an “executive” virtue, like COURAGE or temperance. Unlike, say, kindness (whose goal is the welfare of others) or fidelity (which aims at the keeping of promises), the executive virtues lack a characteristic goal. Rather, they concern our control of motives that can prevent us from achieving proper goals. Where courage concerns the control of our aversion to danger or discomfort, and temperance concerns the control of our appetites for possession, impartiality concerns the control of our motives of personal attachment. (Thinking of this as a single virtue should not stop us from recognizing that people can display some forms of impartiality without others. That seems true not just of the other executive virtues but of every virtue.)

Another name for this executive virtue is *fairness*: fairness is appropriate impartiality. The range of different kinds of appropriate impartiality corresponds to the heterogeneity of fairness: goods-distributions, established regulations, judgements, punishments, and losses can all be evaluated as fair or unfair, with apparently different criteria of evaluation. Admittedly, we do talk of fairness as an object of deliberation – what we deliberate about, rather than how we deliberate. A judge aims to award a punishment that is fair; but it would be unusual to say that she aims to award a punishment that is impartial – rather, she aims to *be* impartial in awarding it. However, what fair distributions, regulations, judgements, punishments and so on have in common is not that deliberation about them is directed towards a single common object. What is common to them is that they are right, in a field of deliberation where finding what is right requires a form of impartiality. Fairness is no more a distinctive goal of deliberation and action than courage or temperance.

§4 Impartiality and Morality

As a feature of deliberation, impartiality seems to be one virtue amongst others – one required for morally good deliberation about various different topics. However, it is often suggested that impartiality is fundamental to the whole of morality, in two ways. First, impartiality is what characterizes the unity of morality, specifying what, most fundamentally, the moral point of view is (see MORALITY, DEFINITION OF). Secondly, it is suggested that claims about the particular contents of morality are fundamentally justified by reference to impartiality.

Within the history of Western moral philosophy, two broad lines of thought lead to these views. One is the thought, central to ancient STOICISM, that the full development of rationality leads to a detachment from the perspective of one’s own passions, and thus to expanding one’s concern for others so that it is no longer governed by their connection to oneself. A cognate modern thought tends to be formulated in terms of morality rather than rationality. Morality is the opposite of selfishness – of partiality to oneself. Morally speaking, no one is more important than anyone else. While my own concerns are more important to me personally, they are no less important morally than yours. The moral point of view is the point of view I occupy in recognizing this. Justifying an action morally requires justifying it from a point of view that privileges no one – that is impartial between everyone. If we add that the relevant form of impartiality involves counting everyone’s interests equally, we have a line of thought that seems fundamental to the thinking of the classical utilitarians, Bentham, Godwin and Mill (see UTILITARIANISM).

Three challenges to this impartialism about morality are worth highlighting. One concerns the reasoning that leads to it. It may be true that your concerns are as important to you as mine are to me, and that morality does not privilege one person above another. But how exactly does that support the conclusion that when I act morally (or rationally), I must take your concerns as having just as much of a claim on me as my own? Can morality not consist of principles permitting each of us, within limits, to pursue interests and projects of his own, without those principles privileging the point of view of any individual? The “moral point of view”, as ordinarily conceived, seems to allow for this: so the question arises whether there is a compelling argument for the stronger, impartialist conception of morality.

The other two criticisms concern the implications of this view, rather than the argument for it. One is that it seems incompatible with the possession of many of the goods that constitute our most important personal interests. Goods such as FRIENDSHIP and personal accomplishment are goods of attachment. If I take my “friends” as having no more of a claim on my concern and action than your friends, then my relationships lack the distinctive character of a friendship. So a view that requires me to count everyone’s interests equally seems incompatible with the possession of some of the goods we have the strongest reasons to pursue, and to help others to pursue.

The third, persistent criticism draws attention to the motivational unattainability of a practical attitude of counting everyone’s interests equally. This criticism has sometimes been developed by emphasizing the connection between reasons for action and motivational capacities. Good reasons are the considerations that motivate us when we are rational and well informed. But no matter how rational and well informed we are, we are incapable of being motivated to count everyone’s interests equally. Therefore, we cannot have good reasons to do so (see REASONS FOR ACTION, MORALITY AND).

Such problems have led moral philosophers to look for other ways of invoking impartiality to characterize the moral point of view. Two notable suggestions are these. Samuel Scheffler (1982) suggests that the moral point of view should be seen, not as my treating everyone’s interests as having an equal claim on me, but as a point of view that mediates between impartiality and self-interest. I am pulled in one direction by reasons of pure impartiality, in another by my own interests: morality is what I attain in reconciling those two conflicting pressures.

The other suggestion, advanced by Thomas Nagel (1991), characterizes morality in terms of a second-order impartiality. We have to recognize that the substance of a well-lived human life essentially involves forms of partiality – to people, projects, aims and ideals that structure what we are as individuals. However, we can then ask: from an impartial point of view that privileges no one, what forms of personal partiality are acceptable? Perhaps morality consists in the answers to that question.

§5 Impartiality and Impersonality

It was pointed out above that the argument sketched for identifying the moral point of view with an impartial point of view contains a gap. One way of attempting to fill that gap is as follows.

A distinction can be made between two ways of attributing value to things. Suppose an injury will be suffered by you or me. If it is suffered by me, that will be bad for me. This does not just mean I will regard it as bad. Even if I am disturbed or deluded enough to think otherwise, it *will* be bad, for me. However, we might also think that the fact that a person will be injured is bad, full stop. This fact would obtain whether the injury befalls me or you, and either way it will be a bad thing, from no one’s point of view – impersonally bad. Armed with this distinction, we might then say this. While of course it is good for me if my interests are advanced, this is no better impersonally speaking than if your interests are advanced. From an impersonal point of view, my interests carry no more weight than anyone else’s. Moral thought is possible for us because we are capable not just of evaluating actions from our own point of view but because we can evaluate them impersonally.

This last step still invites much discussion. The suggestion is that we can derive morality’s connection with impartial evaluation from its connection with impersonal evaluation. That a derivation of this kind can be considered relies on the difference between the two ideas. An impersonal point of view is no one’s point of view: “the point of view of the universe”, as SIDGWICK put it. An impartial point of view is the point of view that a deliberator occupies in excluding considerations of personal connection. Deliberation from an impersonal point of view could not be partial: since it is not deliberation from the point of view of any person, it could not draw on reasons of personal connection. But the reverse is not true: deliberation from *my* point of view is not impersonal, but can be impartial, to the extent that I succeed in setting my own interests, preferences and loyalties aside, in one of the variety of ways described earlier.

Worries have been voiced about the coherence of the idea of deliberation from a point of view that is fully impersonal – a “view from nowhere”. However, it has been argued powerfully by Thomas Nagel (1986) and others that our capacity to abstract ourselves in thought from the perspective of our own subjective experience is a core element of human thought, and has a deep significance for ethics.

Cross-References

Contextualism in Ethics

Courage

Desert

Equality

Justice

Loyalty

Morality, Definition of

Perfectionism

Prioritarianism

Reasons for Action, Morality and

Rights

Sidgwick, Henry

Stoicism

Utilitarianism

Virtue

References

Nagel, Thomas, 1986. *The View from Nowhere*. New York: Oxford University Press. 1986). Chapters 9 and 10.

(Traces our capacity for moral thought to our capacity to abstract from our own personal point of view.)

Nagel, Thomas, 1991. *Equality and Partiality*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 2.

(Advocates a “Kantian” conception of moral impartiality, as specifying the kind of personal partiality that is impartially acceptable.)

Scheffler, Samuel, 1992. *Human Morality*. New York: Oxford University Press. Chapter 7.

(Argues for a conception of morality as reconciling the competing demands of impartiality and self-interest.)

Sidgwick, Henry, 1907. *The Methods of Ethics*. 7th edition. London: Macmillan. (Reprinted Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981). p.382.

(A famous description of rational benevolence as impartiality.)

Suggested Further Readings

Cottingham, John, 1986. "Partiality, Favouritism and Morality". *Philosophical Quarterly,* 36: pp. 357-73.

(Argues that partiality is central to one’s identity as an agent.)

Annas, Julia, 1993. *The Morality of Happiness*. New York: Oxford University Press. pp. 262-76.

(Summarizes the Stoic argument for impartiality.)

Williams, Bernard, 1981. “Persons, Character and Morality”. In his *Moral Luck*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 1-19.

(Argues that the commitment to projects of personal significance is a condition of having reasons for caring about anything.)

Herman, Barbara, 1993. "Integrity and Impartiality". In her *The Practice of Moral Judgment*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. pp. 23-44.

(Develops the idea of morality as second-order impartiality, connecting it to a Kantian approach to the structure of morality.)

Wolf, Susan, 1992. “Morality and Partiality”. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 6: pp. 243-59.

(Criticizes impartialist conceptions of morality.)