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Moral Justification

William K. Frankena, an American philosopher who lived from 1912 to 1994, was known for his broad interests in moral philosophy and for his moderate and sensible philosophical views.

Frankena proposes that you arrive at moral beliefs by imagining what you would favor from a certain perspective, which he calls the "moral point of view." You try to be rational (informed, clearheaded, and so forth) and concerned about everyone's good; then you see what you favor from this perspective. Your moral belief is "rational" or "justified" if you would favor it from this perspective; your belief is "true" if everyone who was ideally rational and took this perspective would agree.

As you read the selection, ask yourself if you find Frankena's method plausible. Are there other elements that you would like to add? Do you find his defense of the moral life convincing?

A theory of justification

What makes some normative judgments moral, some aesthetic, and some prudential is the fact that different points of view are taken in the three cases, and that the point of view taken is indicated by the kinds of reasons that are given. Consider three judgments: (a) I say that you ought to do X and give as the reason the fact that X will help you succeed in business; (b) I say you should do Y and cite as the reason the fact that Y will produce a striking contrast of colors; and (c) I say you should do Z and give as the reason the fact that Z will keep a promise or help someone. Here the reason I give reveals the point of view I am taking and the kind of judgment I am making.

Now let us take up the justification of nonmoral normative judgments. We are interested primarily in judgments of intrinsic value such as were discussed in the previous chapter,¹ for such judgments are relevant to ethics because, through the principle of beneficence,² the question of what is good or bad comes to bear on the question of what is right or wrong. We cannot *prove* basic judgments of intrinsic value in any strict sense of proof, but this fact does not mean that we cannot justify them or reasonably claim them to be justified. But how can we do this? By taking what I shall call the evaluative

point of view as such, unqualified by any such adjective as “aesthetic,” “moral,” or “prudential,” and then trying to see what judgment we are led to make when we do so, considering the thing in question wholly on the basis of its intrinsic character, not its consequences or conditions.

What is it to take the nonmorally evaluative point of view? It is to be free, informed, clear-headed, impartial, willing to universalize; in general, it is to be “calm” and “cool” in one’s consideration of such items as pleasure, knowledge, and love, for the question is simply what it is rational to choose. If one considers an item in this reflective way and comes out in favor of it, one is rationally justified in judging it to be intrinsically good, even if one cannot prove one’s judgment. In doing so, one claims that everyone else who does likewise will concur; and one’s judgment is really justified if this claim is correct, which, of course, one can never know for certain. If others who also claim to be calm and cool do not concur, one must reconsider to see if both sides are really taking the evaluative point of view, considering only intrinsic features, clearly understanding one another, and so on. More one cannot do and, if disagreement persists, one may still claim to be right (i.e., that others will concur eventually if ...); but one must be open-minded and tolerant.

What about the justification of moral judgments? First, we must take the moral point of view, as Hume indicated, not that of self-love or aesthetic judgment, nor the more general point of view involved in judgments of intrinsic value. We must also be free, impartial, willing to universalize, conceptually clear, and informed about all possibly relevant facts. Then we are justified in judging that a certain act or kind of action is right, wrong, or obligatory, and in claiming that our judgment is objectively valid, at least as long as no one who is doing likewise disagrees. Our judgment or principle is really justified if it holds up under sustained scrutiny of this sort from the moral point of view on the part of everyone. Suppose we encounter someone who claims to be doing this but comes to a different conclusion. Then we must do our best, through reconsideration and discussion, to see if one of us is failing to meet the conditions in some way. If we can detect no failing on either side and still disagree, we may and I think still must each claim to be correct, for the conditions never are perfectly fulfilled by both of us and one of us may turn out to be mistaken after all. If what was said about relativism is true, we cannot both be correct. But both of us must be open-minded and tolerant if we are to go on living within the moral institution of life and not resort to force or other immoral or nonmoral devices.

If this line of thought is acceptable, then we may say that a basic moral judgment, principle, or code is justified or “true” if it is or will be agreed to by everyone who takes the moral point of view and is clearheaded and logical and knows all that is relevant about himself, mankind, and the universe.

The fact that moral judgments claim a consensus on the part of others does not mean that the individual thinker must bow to the judgment of the

majority in his society. He is not claiming an *actual* consensus, he is claiming that in the end – which never comes or comes only on the Day of Judgment – his position will be concurred in by those who freely and clear-headedly review the relevant facts from the moral point of view. In other words, he is claiming an *ideal* consensus that transcends majorities and actual societies. One’s society and its code and institutions may be wrong. Here enters the autonomy of the moral agent – he must take the moral point of view and must claim an eventual consensus with others who do so, but he must judge for himself.

The moral point of view

What is the moral point of view? According to one theory, one is taking the moral point of view if and only if one is willing to universalize one’s maxims. Kant would probably accept this if he were alive. But I pointed out that one may be willing to universalize from a prudential point of view; and also that what one is willing to universalize is not necessarily a moral rule. A more plausible characterization to my mind, however, is that of Kurt Baier. He holds that one is taking the moral point of view if one is not being egoistic, one is doing things on principle, one is willing to universalize one’s principles, and in doing so one considers the good of everyone alike.

Hume thought that the moral point of view was that of sympathy, and it seems to me he was on the right wavelength. I have already argued that the point of view involved in a judgment can be identified by the kind of reason that is given for the judgment when it is made or if it is challenged. Then the moral point of view can be identified by determining what sorts of facts are reasons for moral judgments or moral reasons. Roughly following Hume, I now want to suggest that moral reasons consist of facts about what actions, dispositions, and persons do to the lives of sentient beings, including beings other than the agent in question, and that the moral point of view is that which is concerned about such facts.

My own position, then, is that one is taking the moral point of view if and only if (a) one is making normative judgments about actions, desires, dispositions, intentions, motives, persons, or traits of character; (b) one is willing to universalize one’s judgments; (c) one’s reasons for one’s judgments consist of facts about what the things judged do to the lives of sentient beings in terms of promoting or distributing nonmoral good and evil; and (d) when the judgment is about oneself or one’s own actions, one’s reasons include such facts about what one’s own actions and dispositions do to the lives of other sentient beings as such, if others are affected. One has a morality or moral action-guide only if and insofar as one makes normative judgments from this point of view and is guided by them.

Why be moral?

Why should we take part in the moral institution of life? Why should we adopt the moral point of view?

We have already seen that the question, "Why should ... ?" is ambiguous, and may be a request either for motivation or for justification. Here, then, one may be asking for (1) the motives for doing what is morally right, (2) a justification for doing what is morally right, (3) motivation for adopting the moral point of view and otherwise subscribing to the moral institution of life, or (4) a justification of morality and the moral point of view. It is easy to see the form an answer to a request for (1) and (3) must take; it will consist in pointing out the various prudential and non-prudential motives for doing what is right or for participating in the moral institution of life. Most of these are familiar or readily thought of and need not be detailed here. A request for (2) might be taken as a request for a *moral* justification for doing what is right. Then, the answer is that doing what is morally right does not need a justification, since the justification has already been given in showing that it is right. On this interpretation, a request for (2) is like asking, "Why morally ought I to do what is morally right?" A request for (2) may also, however, be meant as a demand for a nonmoral justification of doing what is morally right; then, the answer to it will be like the answer to a request for (4). For a request for (4), being a request for reasons for subscribing to the moral way of thinking, judging, and living, must be a request for a nonmoral justification of morality. What will this be like?

There seem to be two questions here. First, why should *society* adopt such an institution as morality? Why should it foster such a system for the guidance of conduct in addition to convention, law, and prudence? To this the answer seems clear. The conditions of a satisfactory human life for people living in groups could hardly obtain otherwise. The alternatives would seem to be either a state of nature in which all or most of us would be worse off than we are, even if Hobbes¹ is wrong in thinking that life in such a state would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"; or a leviathan civil state more totalitarian than any yet dreamed of, one in which the laws would cover all aspects of life and every possible deviation by the individual would be closed off by an effective threat of force.

The other question has to do with the nonmoral reasons (not just motives) there are for an *individual's* adopting the moral way of thinking and living. To some extent, the answer has just been given, but only to some extent. For on reading the last paragraph an individual might say, "Yes. This shows that society requires morality and even that it is to my advantage to have others adopt the moral way of life. But it does not show that I should adopt it, and certainly not that I should *always* act according to it. And it is no use arguing on moral grounds that I should. I want a nonmoral justification for thinking I

should." Now, if this means that he wants to be shown that it is always to his advantage – that is, that his life will invariably be better or, at least, not worse in the prudential sense of better and worse – if he thoroughly adopts the moral way of life, then I doubt that his demand can always be met. Through the use of various familiar arguments, one can show that the moral way of life is likely to be to his advantage, but it must be admitted in all honesty that one who takes the moral road may be called upon to make a sacrifice and, hence, may not have as good a life in the nonmoral sense as he would otherwise have had.

Nonmoral justification is not necessarily egoistic or prudential. If A asks B why he, A, should be moral, B may reply by asking A to try to decide in a rational way what kind of a life he wishes to live or what kind of a person he wishes to be. That is, B may ask A what way of life A would choose if he were to choose rationally, or in other words, freely, impartially, and in full knowledge of what it is like to live the various alternative ways of life, including the moral one. B may then be able to convince A, when he is calm and cool in this way, that the way of life he prefers, all things considered, includes the moral way of life. If so, then he has justified the moral way of life to A. A may even, when he considers matters in such a way, prefer a life that includes self-sacrifice on his part.

Of course, A may refuse to be rational, calm, and cool. He may retort, "But why should I be rational?" However, if this was his posture in originally asking for justification, he had no business asking for it. For one can only ask for justification if one is willing to be rational. One cannot consistently ask for reasons unless one is ready to accept reasons of some sort. Even in asking, "Why should I be rational?" one is implicitly committing oneself to rationality, for such a commitment is part of the connotation of the word "should."

What kind of a life A would choose if he were fully rational and knew all about himself and the world will, of course, depend on what sort of a person he is (and people are different), but if psychological egoism is not true of any of us, it may always be that A would then choose a way of life that would be moral. As Bertrand Russell once wrote:

We have wishes which are not purely personal ... The sort of life that most of us admire is one which is guided by large, impersonal desires ... Our desires are, in fact, more general and less purely selfish than many moralists imagine ...⁴

Perhaps A has yet one more question: "Is society justified in demanding that I adopt the moral way of life, and in blaming and censuring me if I do not?" If A is asking whether society is morally justified in requiring of him at least a certain minimal subscription to the moral institution of life, then the answer surely is that society sometimes is justified in this, as Socrates argued

in the *Crito*. But society must be careful here. For it is itself morally required to respect the individual's autonomy and liberty, and in general to treat him justly; and it must remember that morality is made to minister to the good lives of individuals and not to interfere with them any more than is necessary. Morality is made for man, not man for morality.

Study questions

- 1 What distinguishes *moral* normative judgments from normative judgments that are *aesthetic* or *prudential*?
- 2 What is the "nonmorally evaluative point of view" and how can we use it to justify nonmoral judgments of intrinsic value?
- 3 What is the "moral point of view" and how can we use it to justify moral judgments? Under what conditions can we call a moral judgment "true"?
- 4 Why should society foster morality?
- 5 Are thinking and living morally always in one's self-interest?
- 6 What is it to "choose rationally"? Would we choose to live the moral life if we were to choose rationally?

For further study

This selection has excerpts from William K. Frankena's *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pages 110–16. For a collection of Frankena's essays, see *Perspectives on Morality*, edited by K. E. Goodpaster (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976). For a related view, see Kurt Baier's *The Moral Point of View* (New York: Random House, 1965), especially Chapter 5. For Thomas Hobbes's view, see his *Leviathan* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1947, first published in 1651); Richard Brandt gave a more recent version of this view in his "Rationality, egoism, and morality," in the *Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972): 681–97. Harry Gensler's *Ethics: A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998) discusses how to justify moral judgments in Chapter 9.

Related readings in this anthology include Habermas, Hare, Hume, Kant, and Rawls – all of whom talk about justifying ethical judgments from a rational perspective.

Notes

- 1 Frankena earlier argued that various things – not just pleasure and the avoidance of pain – are intrinsically good. Judgments about intrinsically

good relate equally to moral judgments (which are concerned with everyone's good) and to prudential judgments about self-interest (which are concerned with one's individual good).

- 2 Frankena's principle of beneficence directs us to do good and avoid harm. More precisely, it includes these four duties, in increasing order of strength: to promote good, to remove harm (what is bad), to prevent harm, and not to inflict harm.
- 3 Frankena refers to Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), who saw people as enlightened egoists who agree to social rules to protect their own interests. In an imagined "state of nature" prior to society, people out of self-interest would frequently lie, steal, and kill; this would make life miserable for everyone. To avoid these problems, enlightened egoists would agree to have an absolute monarch enforce social rules; the chief among these rules would be the golden rule: "Treat others as you want to be treated." Contemporary followers of Hobbes (like Richard Brandt) replace this "absolute monarch" with various kinds of sanctions. People who violate the social rules are made to suffer external sanctions like disapproval, alienation, and legal penalties, and internal sanctions like guilt, anxiety, and the loss of self-respect. People who follow the social rules are praised and made to feel their self-worth.
- 4 *Religion and Science* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1935), pp. 252–4. [Note from Frankena]