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Author(s): John Rawls

Source: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, Vol. 48 (1974 - 1975), pp. 5-22

Published by: American Philosophical Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3129858>

Accessed: 07/08/2009 14:33

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The Independence of Moral Theory*

JOHN RAWLS

I wish to sketch a point of view towards moral philosophy and express a conviction as to how I think a central part of this subject is, for the present anyway, best pursued. For much of the time my discussion is methodological, and while such matters are peculiarly controversial, I believe that the point of view I shall describe is now, and perhaps always has been, held by many, at least since the 18th century. My comments aim to support, by illustrations suitable to our time and place, a familiar tradition in this part of philosophy.†

I

Perhaps I can best begin by explaining the meaning of the title. I distinguish between moral philosophy and moral theory; moral philosophy includes the latter as one of its main parts. Moral theory is the study of substantive moral conceptions, that is, the study of how the basic notions of the right, the good, and moral worth may be arranged to form different moral structures. Moral theory tries to identify the chief similarities and differences between these structures and to characterize the way in which they are related to our moral sensibilities and natural attitudes, and to determine the conditions they must satisfy if they are to play their expected role in human life.

Now my thought is this: much of moral theory is independent from the other parts of philosophy. The theory of meaning and epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, can often

*Presidential Address delivered before the Seventy-first Annual Eastern Meeting of the American Philosophical Association in Washington, December 28, 1974.

†I am indebted to Alvin Goldman, Holly Goldman, Thomas Nagel, and Robert Nozick for many helpful comments and criticisms. Responsibility for the views expressed, however, is mine.

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contribute very little. In fact, preoccupation with the problems that define these subjects may get in the way and block the path to advance. To be sure, no part of philosophy is isolated from the rest; and so the same is true of that part of moral philosophy I call moral theory. But the study of substantive moral conceptions and their relation to our moral sensibility has its own distinctive problems and subject matter that requires to be investigated for its own sake. At the same time, answers to such questions as the analysis of moral concepts, the existence of objective moral truths, and the nature of persons and personal identity, depend upon an understanding of these structures. Thus the problems of moral philosophy that tie in with the theory of meaning and epistemology, metaphysics and the philosophy of mind, must call upon moral theory.

A contrary view is sometimes expressed. Modern philosophy is said to have begun with Descartes who made epistemology methodologically prior to the rest of philosophy. Since Frege many have come to believe that the theory of meaning holds this prior position. It is thought first that other philosophical questions cannot be satisfactorily resolved until the problems of epistemology, or nowadays the theory of meaning, are already settled; and second that these prior questions can be investigated independently: their answers neither rest upon nor require any conclusions from the other parts of philosophy. Moral philosophy is then viewed as secondary to metaphysics and the philosophy of mind as well, which are in turn secondary to the theory of meaning and epistemology. Thus in addition ethics awaits an answer to such problems as those of the freedom of the will and personal identity.

Whatever the merits of such a hierarchical conception for other parts of philosophy, I do not believe that it holds for moral philosophy. To the contrary, just as the theory of meaning as we now know it depends on the development of logic from, let's say, Frege to Gödel, so the further advance of moral philosophy depends upon a deeper understanding of the structure of moral conceptions and their connections with human sensibility. The philosophy of logic and mathematics was of necessity crude and primitive before the underlying structures of the propositional calculus and predicate logic and the foundations of mathematics in set theory were understood. The present situation in moral philosophy calls for a similar strengthening of our grasp of the structure of moral conceptions, and in many respects, this inquiry, like the development of logic and the foundations of mathematics, can proceed independently. As the theory of meaning and the philosophy of mathematics are related to logic and the foundations of mathematics, or even as the philosophy

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of physics is related to theoretical physics, so moral philosophy is related to moral theory, that is, to the account of moral structures and their basis in moral psychology.

II

Let us consider first a way in which moral theory is independent from epistemology. I suggest that for the time being we put aside the idea of constructing a correct theory of right and wrong, that is, a systematic account of what we regard as objective moral truths. Since the history of moral philosophy shows that the notion of moral truth is problematical, we can suspend consideration of it until we have a deeper understanding of moral conceptions. But one thing is certain: people profess and appear to be influenced by moral conceptions. These conceptions themselves can be made a focus of study; so provisionally we may bracket the problem of moral truth and turn to moral theory: we investigate the substantive moral conceptions that people hold, or would hold, under suitably defined conditions.

In order to do this, one tries to find a scheme of principles that match people's considered judgments and general convictions in reflective equilibrium.¹ This scheme of principles represents their moral conception and characterizes their moral sensibility. One thinks of the moral theorist as an observer, so to speak, who seeks to set out the structure of other people's moral conceptions and attitudes. Because it seems likely that people hold different conceptions, and the structure of these conceptions is in any case hard to delineate, we can best proceed by studying the main conceptions found in the tradition of moral philosophy and in leading representative writers, including their discussions of particular moral and social issues. We may also include ourselves, since we are ready to hand for detailed self-examination. But in studying oneself, one must separate one's role as a moral theorist from one's role as someone who has a particular conception. In the former role we are investigating an aspect of human psychology, the structure of our moral sensibility; in the latter we are applying a moral conception, which we may regard (though not necessarily) as a correct theory about what is objectively right and wrong.

It may seem that the procedure of reflective equilibrium is conservative: that is, that it limits the investigation to what people (including oneself) now hold. But several things prevent this. First

¹The notion of reflective equilibrium I have discussed in more detail in *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), pp. 19-21, 48-51.

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of all, one does not count people's more particular considered judgments, say those about particular actions and institutions, as exhausting the relevant information about their moral conceptions. People have considered judgments at all levels of generality, from those about particular situations and institutions up through broad standards and first principles to formal and abstract conditions on moral conceptions. One tries to see how people would fit their various convictions into one coherent scheme, each considered conviction whatever its level having a certain initial credibility. By dropping and revising some, by reformulating and expanding others, one supposes that a systematic organization can be found. Although in order to get started various judgments are viewed as firm enough to be taken provisionally as fixed points, there are no judgments on any level of generality that are in principle immune to revision. Even the totality of particular judgments are not assigned a decisive role; thus these judgments do not have the status sometimes attributed to judgments of perception in theories of knowledge.

I note in passing that one's moral conception may turn out to be based on self-evident first principles. The procedure of reflective equilibrium does not, by itself, exclude this possibility, however unlikely it may be. For in the course of achieving this state, it is possible that first principles should be formulated that seem so compelling that they lead us to revise all previous and subsequent judgments inconsistent with them. Reflective equilibrium requires only that the agent makes these revisions with conviction and confidence, and continues to affirm these principles when it comes to accepting their consequences in practice.

Furthermore, because our inquiry is philosophically motivated, we are interested in what conceptions people would affirm when they have achieved wide and not just narrow reflective equilibrium, an equilibrium that satisfies certain conditions of rationality. That is, adopting the role of observing moral theorists, we investigate what principles people would acknowledge and accept the consequences of when they have had an opportunity to consider other plausible conceptions and to assess their supporting grounds. Taking this process to the limit, one seeks the conception, or plurality of conceptions, that would survive the rational consideration of all feasible conceptions and all reasonable arguments for them. We cannot, of course, actually do this, but we can do what seems like the next best thing, namely, to characterize the structures of the predominant conceptions familiar to us from the philosophical tradition, and to work out the further refinements of these that strike us as most promising.

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The independence of moral theory from epistemology arises from the fact that the procedure of reflective equilibrium does not assume that there is one correct moral conception. It is, if you wish, a kind of psychology and does not presuppose the existence of objective moral truths. Even should everyone attain wide reflective equilibrium, many contrary moral conceptions may still be held. In fact, there are many possibilities. One conception may unanimously win out over all the rest and even suffice to limit quite narrowly our more concrete judgments. On the other hand, everyone may affirm opposing conceptions. Between these extremes a rather small number of conceptions may persist that stand to one another in various ways: perhaps each conception conflicts with the others and there is little or no basis for agreement; or again, they may be related something like the different geometries are related. That is, they may have some significant first principles in common, which define absolute morality, so to speak, by analogy with absolute geometry; whereas in other matters contrasting resolutions are adopted that characterize distinctive moralities, much as different choices of the axiom for parallels characterize different geometries. In the latter case, which I suspect is the most probable, one would like to know the consequences of the principles of absolute morality and whether these principles are rich enough to afford a constructive basis of mutual accommodation.

It is natural to suppose that a necessary condition for objective moral truths is that there be a sufficient agreement between the moral conceptions affirmed in wide reflective equilibrium, a state reached when people's moral convictions satisfy certain conditions of rationality. Whether this supposition is correct, and whether sufficient agreement obtains, we need not consider, since any such discussion would be premature. In the preface to the first edition of *Methods of Ethics*, Sidgwick explains that he wants to put aside the urgency we feel to discover the true method of determining what we ought to do; instead he wishes to expound, from a neutral position and as impartially as possible, the different methods found in the moral consciousness of humankind generally, and worked up into the familiar historical systems. Moral theory should now do the same, only on a broader front than Sidgwick attempted. Rational egoism, to which he gave much attention as a method of ethics, is not really a moral conception, but rather a challenge to all such conceptions, though no less interesting for that. Egoism aside, Sidgwick confined his comparative study for the most part to intuitionism and utilitarianism. He gave little attention to perfectionism or to the sort of conception represented by Kant, whose doctrine, I believe, he

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interprets much too narrowly; and so utilitarianism appeared superior almost by default. But these two moral conceptions, or methods of ethics, must also be included in the systematic comparisons essential to moral theory. Making these comparisons is a task, for the most part independent from the rest of philosophy, that we should be able to accomplish; and until it is further along, the problem of moral truth admits no definitive resolution. Sidgwick felt that progress in moral philosophy is held up by the desire to edify; it is also impeded by giving way to the impulse to answer questions one is not yet equipped to examine. In this case at least it seems that, if there is any relation of priority, it runs the other way, from moral theory to moral epistemology.

III

I shall now comment on the independence of moral theory from the theory of meaning. But I should say first that it is not my contention that the theory of meaning, or the study of the features of normative language, has nothing to contribute to moral philosophy. The numerous efforts in this direction since Moore's *Principia* were a natural trend, given the development of philosophy as a whole and the growth of the philosophy of language, and much has been achieved. I believe, however, that, from the standpoint of moral theory, considerations of meaning can at best provide certain necessary so-called formal conditions on the first principles of moral conceptions. Far more than this is required for the systematic comparisons of moral structures as can be seen from the questions that arise when we try to specify these formal conditions themselves. The theory of meaning proves of limited usefulness for moral theory even where it seems most relevant. A like fate befell Kant's similar effort to show that the form of the moral law is *a priori* by deriving it from the concept of a purely rational being. The categorical imperative often gives reasonable results, but it does so only because additional features, which are not part of the concept of a purely rational being, have been introduced.

The formal conditions are, I think, best viewed as simply very general properties that it seems natural to impose on moral conceptions for various reasons. The grounds may be a considered high-level conviction that any attractive conception must meet these stipulations; and certainly considerations of meaning may here enter in. Or one may hold that certain formal conditions are appropriate in view of the social role of moral conceptions and their place in human life. Another possibility is just to begin with a particular characterization of these conditions and to let their acceptance stand

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or fall with the way in which the theory subsequently works itself out. In any case, the different traditions of moral philosophy will doubtless interpret these higher order conditions in distinctive ways, since there are, for example, different interpretations of the social role of moral conceptions. A variety of possibilities need to be defined and the constraints that result compared and assessed. This calls for a rather detailed formulation of these general properties and their implications, and this investigation goes beyond questions of meaning.

To be more specific, consider the formal conditions of generality, universality, ordering, finality, and publicity.² Each of these can, most likely, be defined in different ways, and even though the variations may at first sight appear minor, the differences may prove significant. The most suitable definition is not just a question of meaning but of how the whole theory that results fits together. For example, some formal condition of ordering is reasonable in view of the social role of moral principles to settle conflicting claims. But what kind of ordering does one have in mind here? Presumably we reject as suitable orderings the results of trial of combat, or of following the precept: to each according to their threat advantage. But to what extent is an ordering to be affected by the accidents of history, the contingencies of social position, or finally by one's fortune in the natural lottery of abilities and talents? Attending solely to the concept of an ordering cannot settle these questions; a moral theory is required and at this point the contrast between conceptions may be revealed, as is, for example, the contrast between a Kantian and a libertarian view.

There are also technical questions here once we ask what logical properties orderings should have. Thus: should orderings be complete and transitive; or can we be content with orderings that are partial and sometimes intransitive? The answer depends in part on the range of cases we expect moral conceptions to apply to; the larger this class the greater the demands on moral principles. If we require principles to hold in all possible worlds, and so allow the domain to include all conceivable possibilities, then moral theory may be condemned to futility from the start. As yet we have not found satisfactory accounts of a quite limited range of traditional problems that arise everyday. Moral theory must be free to limit its domain as the current state of theory requires and plausible empirical

²The formal conditions are considered under these headings in *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 130-136.

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assumptions permit. Once we do this, it is obvious that our inquiry has gone beyond considerations of meaning.

Similar observations hold for publicity, which has an important place in a Kantian theory. Roughly, publicity requires that in assessing moral conceptions we take into account the consequences of their being publicly recognized. Everyone is presumed to know that others hold the corresponding principles and that this fact in turn is public knowledge, and so on: it is just as if these principles were the outcome of an agreement. There are, however, different degrees of publicity. The simplest case is where only the principles are public; but in addition one can require that the general beliefs about human nature and society, in the light of which the principles are argued for, should also be public, or at least supportable by methods of inquiry that are publicly accepted. Finally, publicly may be taken to mean that the full justification of a moral conception, as presented in its own terms, should be public. One way to apply this formal condition is to work out the consequences of a conception on the supposition that it defines an effective public moral constitution for a society in which its full justification is public knowledge. This leads to the ideal case of the well-ordered society corresponding to this conception. The study of such ideal cases should help us to understand and compare various structures. Sometimes when a conception cannot be publicly realized, we may want to say that it proves incoherent; in others, it may only lead to certain inconveniences that we had not anticipated. But certainly the publicity condition will not affect all conceptions in the same way; in this sense it will be selective.

Now publicity may appear an excessively strong condition and this prompts one to ask what can be said for it. First of all, consider its application to political principles. These apply to the constitution and basic institutions of society which normally involve, even when justified under favorable conditions, some machinery of legal coercion. These basic institutions also have major long-term effects and importantly shape the character and aims of the members of society. It seems fitting, then, that the fundamental terms of social cooperation should meet the requirements of publicity. For if institutions rely on coercive sanctions, however correctly regulated, the grounds and tendency of these sanctions should stand up to public scrutiny. When political principles satisfy this condition and social forms and individual actions are justified, everyone can fully justify their beliefs and conduct to everyone else assured that this public accounting itself will strengthen the public understanding. In this sense, nothing is hidden.

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The second consideration in support of publicity is connected with moral motivation. A moral conception incorporates a conception of the person and of the relations between persons. Those who are raised in a particular conception become in due course a certain kind of person and they express this conception in their actions and in their relations with one another. Thus a basic form of moral motivation is the desire to be and to be recognized by others as being a certain kind of person. Kant would specialize this to the desire to be a free and equal rational being and to be recognized as a law-making member of a kingdom of ends. Now let us suppose that certain principles and their justification do, in fact, articulate just such a conception of the person. Then, given our dependence on society, we could not be this sort of person unless institutions developed and encouraged our capacity so to act and others publicly to acknowledge its realization. Peoples' attaining this conception of the person would be the achievement of social cooperation; for success depends on social forms and mutual recognition. Certain moral conceptions, then, quite naturally go with some form of the publicity condition.

This is a natural place to introduce the notion of stability.³ We have just seen that a complete moral structure contains a conception of the person that provides the basis for an account of moral motivation: being a certain sort of person answers to and brings together the various wants and aspirations of the self, and enables people to act effectively from the principles and ideals that the moral conception articulates. We are naturally led to ask whether a moral conception is stable, that is, whether its principles generate their own support in a society, or social group, in which these principles are publicly realized. Recall that a society in which a moral conception is both public and consistently acted upon is said to be well-ordered by that conception. Thus the problem of stability is whether the well-ordered society corresponding to a particular conception is stable, or relatively more or less stable, than certain other conceptions. The comparative study of the well-ordered societies is, I believe, the central theoretical endeavor of moral theory: it presupposes a grasp of the various moral structures and their relation to our moral sensibility and natural inclinations. This endeavor bears some resemblance to the theory of general economic equilibrium. In both cases one is concerned with the workings of a theoretically defined social system, or part thereof, and trying to survey how its main elements fit together into an on-going scheme. One does not expect

³For the notion of stability in the sense understood here, see *A Theory of Justice*, pp. 454-458, 496-504.

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to obtain detailed conclusions that cover particular situations and practical cases; one looks for an overall view of how the larger structure operates and maintains itself. It is in the comparative study of well-ordered societies that the connections between moral theory and psychological and social theory are most evident.

At this point, we may note that publicity ties in with two practical limitations: the simplicity of principles and the amount of information needed for their sure and clear application. Simplicity arises from the fact that if a moral conception is to be public, there must be a limit to the complexity of its principles: one must be able to formulate these principles without too many exceptions and qualifying clauses; and the number of principles must be reasonably small and the priority rules surveyable. Other things equal, simpler and more perspicuous conceptions are preferable and beyond some point complexity exceeds the bounds set by publicity. As for information requirements, one needs less information to apply some principles than others, and, in addition, the fact that they have been applied correctly may also be easier to establish publicly. This may be because of the kinds of things the principles apply to, or the features they single out as relevant, or how far into the future they require us to make calculations that depend upon theoretical or detailed knowledge. Certainly all reasonable moral conceptions call for very considerable information, for they apply to our world and direct us to act in the light of existing circumstances. But not all conceptions make equal demands and some ask of us much less than others. If publicity is accepted as an important formal condition, the constraints of simplicity and limits on information must be reckoned with. This will prove extremely difficult but the problem seems unavoidable.

I have discussed the formal conditions of ordering and publicity because they so plainly illustrate the limitations of considerations of meaning. We should view these conditions as very general properties of moral conceptions and try to see how they mesh with moral structures as a whole and with their main parts. The formal conditions are likely to have a different force depending on the overall conception to which they belong. We have seen, for example, how publicity goes more naturally with some structures and conceptions of the person than others. Analogously, I believe that generality and universality have a different force in a teleological than in a deontological theory. Of course, one objection to focusing on accounts of meaning in examining formal conditions, or indeed, moral structures generally, is that it restricts inquiry much too narrowly. But equally serious, the various characterizations of these conditions are so

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intimately connected with the particular moral conception to which they belong that determinations of their meaning are not an independent basis for understanding these conceptions.

IV

I shall now take up the alleged dependence of moral philosophy on the philosophy of mind, as exemplified by the problem of personal identity. I should say, however, that my observations in this connection will be even more allusive than in the preceding two illustrations and can at best indicate a certain point of view concerning the significance of moral theory. I begin by stating briefly what I surmise to be the case.

First, the conclusions of the philosophy of mind regarding the question of personal identity do not provide grounds for accepting one of the leading moral conceptions rather than another. Whatever these conclusions are, intuitionism and utilitarianism, perfectionist and Kantian views, can each use a criterion of identity that accords with them. Thus while the philosophy of mind may establish conditions that any correct criterion must satisfy, none of the traditional doctrines are affected by these constraints, at least not so long as these doctrines are applied under the normal conditions of human life.

Second, as I have remarked, the various moral theories incorporate different conceptions and ideals of the person. As a consequence each may have a somewhat different use for a criterion of identity; moreover, there may be variations among these criteria, different views counting certain features of the person as more important than others. At the same time, however, all the criteria satisfy the conclusions of the philosophy of mind; and so the variations between them are accounted for not by this subject but by the distinctive principles and conceptions of the person embodied in the corresponding moral theories. The differences in emphasis arise from the fact that a criterion of identity is tailored to the requirements of a particular moral view. To this extent, the variations among the criteria are not antecedent to moral theory but explained by it.

Third, the feasibility of moral conceptions is settled largely by psychological and social theory, and by the theory of the corresponding well-ordered societies. The reasonableness of these conceptions, given that they are feasible, is then settled by their content: that is, by the kind of society their principles direct us to strive for, and by the kind of person they encourage us to be. On neither of these questions is the problem of personal identity, as a problem in the philosophy of mind, likely to have much to say.

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I shall now try to elaborate these conjectures. To fix ideas, let us accept the following theses about personal identity as established by the philosophy of mind. They represent, for the time being, the constraints that any sound criterion of identity must satisfy. First, one essential aspect of the person is mental and therefore a criterion of personal identity is necessarily defined in terms of continuities of character and aims, experience and memory, as well as by reference to a person's plan of life and the kind of explanations that hold for changes and shifts in this plan. A second essential aspect of the person is bodily: persons are always embodied and bodily continuity is a further necessary feature of a criterion of personal identity. Thus, in sum, persons are mental continuities expressed and embodied in a connected order of planned conduct through space and time.

I assume that these theses can be accepted by each of the traditional moral conceptions. To be sure, they are not beyond controversy; in particular, it is unclear whether bodily continuity is a necessary part of personal identity.⁴ But if we leave aside such hypothetical cases as fission and bodily transfer, cases that we use to explore criteria of identity, then the main reasons for thinking that these conditions will give the wrong results are theological. The doctrine of immortality of the soul leads us to deny that bodily continuity is required for personal identity. But even if within a secular framework bodily continuity should prove unnecessary, my surmise is that this would still not render one moral conception more reasonable than another.

However, to proceed: there are many aspects of persons that are important: for example, consciousness and self-consciousness, the capacity to reason and to use language, character and will, and so on. But what is particularly relevant about persons, from the standpoint of moral theory, is their ability to enter into and to maintain personal and social relationships, their capacity to have and to share certain experiences and to engage in certain characteristic activities, and their being able to develop a sense of right and justice, and virtuous dispositions generally. Moral conceptions define the relative values of these activities and experiences, and they specify an appropriate ordering for social and personal relationships. A criterion of identity is used in setting up a moral order; rights and duties are assigned to persons and social positions, and these in turn imply certain liabilities and responsibilities. Just as a criterion of identity

⁴See, for example, the perceptive essays by Bernard Williams in *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1973), especially the fourth essay, "The Self and the Future."

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for physical objects and for times and places is required to construct an objective order of physical things and events in space and time, so a public criterion of personal identity is required to characterize and to maintain a moral order. Yet moral conceptions regard persons differently and prize different aspects of their nature. So although every conception employs a criterion of identity that recognizes the results of the philosophy of mind, each may specialize its criterion to fit the requirements of a particular moral order and conception of the person. The comparative study of these matters belongs to moral theory and takes us beyond the philosophy of mind.

These remarks may be clarified by contrasting the need for a criterion of identity in a classical utilitarian as opposed to a Kantian theory. For simplicity I shall state this contrast in a somewhat stark manner. Suppose, following Sidgwick's presentation of the classical view, that there is but one ultimate good, agreeable consciousness or feeling, which rational persons recognize as such by introspection independently from all conditions and relations. Social institutions and the actions of individuals are right to the extent that they tend to maximize the net balance of ultimate good so understood. As often pointed out, one striking fact about this doctrine is that it gives no weight to the distribution of good among persons. Indeed, the conception of the person represented here is that of a container-person: persons are thought of as places where intrinsically valuable experiences occur, these experiences being counted as complete in themselves. Persons are, so to speak, holders for such experiences. It does not matter who has these experiences, or what is their sequential distribution among persons; these considerations are mere matters of time and place, and as such of no relevance. We are to focus on valuable experiences themselves and the only thing that counts is the net total held by all container-persons together.⁵

Now a utilitarian view, like any other, requires a criterion of personal identity for two distinct reasons. First, in order to maximize the balance of good, it must in practice take into account the causal and other natural relations that determine how the maximum is best achieved. One must keep track of the identities of individuals insofar as this is necessary to work out the consequences of various actions and institutions. If, for example, what happens to people at an earlier time affects their capacity for valuable experiences at a later time, we must be able to identify now those who have been

⁵See the valuable discussion by Derek Parfit, "Later Selves and Moral Principles," in *Philosophy and Personal Relations*, Alan Montefiore, ed. (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), esp. pp. 149-160.

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favorably or unfavorably affected earlier. The other requirements for a criterion of identity depend on the moral conception itself, and in this respect the classical utilitarian is not concerned with personal identities except insofar as this is necessary to estimate the total of valuable experiences. Assuming that no such experiences have a duration greater than a specified interval of time, one need not ask whether a person having a certain valuable experience in the present interval is the same person who had a certain valuable experience in a previous interval; for temporal sequence over intervals is no more relevant than distribution among persons within the same interval. The only reason for ascertaining identities is for purposes of estimating the net balance of agreeable consciousness and to avoid double-counting.

Next consider a Kantian view: we may suppose that it takes as fundamental certain first principles of right and justice that assign rights and liberties, liabilities and responsibilities to individuals and requires that basic institutions and social cooperation generally take a certain form, or satisfy certain constraints. There is no mention at all of maximizing the net sum of good, much less of the total of valuable experiences. Instead, various generalized means for advancing human ends are defined and these are required to be distributed in certain ways that are related to the contribution of individuals and designed to preserve the justice of basic institutions over time. The conception of the person involved in this view is that of autonomous persons who have certain fundamental interests that they seek to advance but whose highest-order interest is how all their other interests, including even fundamental ones, are shaped and regulated by social institutions. The first principles are, therefore, framed to secure certain basic equal liberties for advancing these interests and to establish a just background scheme within which the necessary means for doing so can be effectively produced and fairly shared. The ideal is that of persons who accept responsibility for their fundamental interests over the span of a life and who seek to satisfy them in ways that can be mutually acknowledged by others.

The need for a criterion of personal identity can be discussed under the same two headings as before. Under the first heading, a Kantian view, just like the utilitarian, must take into account the causal and other natural relations that determine how its principles are best applied. Without going into specific details, nothing very useful can be said about the contrast between the two views in this regard; so let us say that in this respect it is equally important for both to keep track of personal identities, even if the natural facts that are relevant are different in each case. But when we turn to the

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second heading, to the requirements arising from the kind of moral order that is enjoined, then the utilitarian conception has less need for a criterion of identity than a Kantian view; or perhaps better, it can get by with a weaker criterion of identity. For one thing, since it puts no value on the distribution of good, it does not have to worry about identities on this ground; whereas for a Kantian this is essential: the links of responsibility and contribution have to be traced through time and distribution suitably related to them. Moreover, the ideal of autonomous persons who take responsibility for their fundamental aims over the span of a life is an ideal that envisages a far greater period of time than the extension of the longest complete and valuable experience recognized by the utilitarian theory; and so we must conceive of identities as stretching over much longer intervals. And so in practice a Kantian view is more dependent on personal identities; it relies, so to speak, on a stronger criterion.

Now we agree, I assume, that persons are mental continuities embodied and expressed in a planned order of conduct through space and time. This thesis I take to be the result of a broadly empirical philosophy of mind. Our question is whether this conclusion favors a moral conception that relies on a weaker criterion of identity.⁶ For consider: mental continuities do not always last throughout the course of life; memories fade, hopes are broken; character and will, not to speak of plans and desires, change and sometimes rather suddenly. What constitutes the person is not seldom fragile and subject to disarray. One might think that, together with the conclusion that any criterion of personal identity is based ultimately on empirical regularities and connections, these facts support the utilitarian over a Kantian view. As we have seen, the former gives no weight to distribution or to long-term continuities in the lives of persons, and so there is no special reason to worry about the fragile nature of persons or of their identities. From the standpoint of maximizing the sum of agreeable consciousness, it might even prove optimistic to encourage memories to fade and characters to change. But for a Kantian view these facts may appear to pose a problem: it relies on a more comprehensive pattern of identities and its ideal of the person encourages stronger and longer-lasting continuities. Thus we are led to ask whether the conclusions of the philosophy of mind and the shifting and sometimes short-term character of mental connections favor the classical utilitarian theory.

The answer seems to me to depend entirely on the conditions

⁶I interpret Parfit to hold that it does. See footnote 5 above.

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that cause these discontinuities and on how they affect the feasibility of other moral conceptions. Suppose, for example, that a Kantian well-ordered society is possible and workable: its members can and generally do lead lives such that the necessary identifications can be made. Here I assume that the kind of lives that people can and do lead is importantly affected by the moral conception publicly realized in their society. What sorts of persons we are is shaped by how we think of ourselves and this in turn is influenced by the social forms we live under.

If a Kantian conception is feasible, then the fact that utilitarianism, or any other view, relies on a weaker criterion of identity, or presupposes less by way of longer-lasting continuities, is irrelevant. It would also be irrelevant should the continuities required for a Kantian scheme fail to exist in a utilitarian society. One can imagine people who are hedonistic and individualistic; their lives lack the connectedness and sense of longer purpose needed for a Kantian view to work. But that this may happen under certain conditions so far shows nothing about what is desirable from a moral point of view. There is no degree of connectedness that is natural or fixed; the actual continuities and sense of purpose in people's lives is relative to the socially achieved moral conception.

Thus the essential point is whether the well-ordered society corresponding to a moral conception generates in its members the necessary continuities and sense of purpose to maintain itself. We also have to take into account whether it is sufficiently stable, and the like. But a utilitarian view would be supported by the general possibility of discontinuities only if social theory showed that in the case of other conceptions the requisite connectedness could never be brought about.

There is, I think no reason to believe this. The different moral conceptions are probably each feasible by this test. And this confirms the conjecture that the problem of personal identity does not select between moral structures, nor does it explain the various uses they have for a criterion of identity. What is decisive is the content of the moral view and its roots in human sensibility. Further advance calls for a deeper understanding of moral structures and the conceptions of the person they incorporate, as well as a systematic comparative study of well-ordered societies.

V

I must now sum up briefly the main points. My aim has been to express a certain view towards moral philosophy by questioning the hierarchical arrangement of philosophical subjects. A relation of

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methodological priority does not hold, I believe, between the theory of meaning, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind on the one hand and moral philosophy on the other. To the contrary: a central part of moral philosophy is what I have called moral theory; it consists in the comparative study of moral conceptions, which is, in large part, independent. I first discussed the method of reflective equilibrium and suggested that the question as to the existence of objective moral truths seems to depend on the kind and extent of the agreement that would obtain among rational persons who have achieved, or sufficiently approached, wide reflective equilibrium. This illustrates the dependence of moral epistemology on moral theory. Next I noted some of the so-called formal conditions on moral structures and proposed that these conditions are best viewed simply as general and abstract properties of such structures. We should not confine our attention to conditions that we think can be accounted for by a theory of meaning, but should examine their force as elements of moral conceptions as a whole. Finally, I took up briefly the relation with the philosophy of mind as illustrated by the problem of personal identity and conjectured that all the main moral conceptions could use a criterion of identity that accords with the results of the philosophy of mind; and yet each of these conceptions may specialize this criterion in a different way to fit its conception of the moral order and of the person. I suggested that the philosophy of mind by itself may have little to say on these matters, and that it cannot help us to decide between moral conceptions.

I have urged, then, that moral theory is, in important respects, independent from certain philosophical subjects sometimes regarded as methodologically prior to it. But I do not care for independence too strictly understood; an idea I like better is that each part of philosophy should have its own subject matter and problems and yet, at the same time, stand directly or indirectly in relations of mutual dependence with the others. The fault of methodological hierarchies is not unlike the fault of political and social ones: they lead to a distortion of vision with a consequent misdirection of effort. In the case we have discussed, too many questions about the substantive structure of moral conceptions, and their comparative differences, are postponed. We exaggerate the dependence of moral philosophy, and in particular moral theory, on the rest of philosophy; and we expect too much from the theory of meaning, epistemology, and the philosophy of mind.

In conclusion, I am moved to repeat something I said near the beginning: namely, that just as the theory of meaning as we now know it depends on the development of logic from, let's say, Frege

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to Gödel, so the further advance of moral philosophy depends upon a deeper understanding of the structure of moral conceptions and of their connections with human sensibility; and in many respects, this inquiry, like the development of logic and the foundations of mathematics can proceed independently. We must not turn away from this task because much of it may appear to belong to psychology or social theory and not to philosophy. For the fact is that others are not prompted by philosophical inclination to pursue moral theory; yet this motivation is essential, for without it the inquiry has the wrong focus. All the main conceptions in the tradition of moral philosophy must be continually renewed: we must try to strengthen their formulation by noting the criticisms that are exchanged and by incorporating in each the advances of the others, so far as this is possible. In this endeavor the aim of those most attracted to a particular view should be not to confute but to perfect.

John Rawls
Harvard University