THE DEBATE ON IMPARTIALITY: AN INTRODUCTION

The Theme

Undoubtedly, impartiality has always been looked upon as one of the defining characteristics of right actions and morally good persons. In the meta-ethical literature of around the middle of the last century it even became morality’s most central characteristic. An appealing justification of this view of morality was given by G.J. Warnock: “[that] the ‘general object’ of morality, appreciation of which may enable us to understand the basis of moral evaluation, is to contribute to betterment – or non-deterioration – of the human predicament, primarily and essentially by seeking to counteract ‘limited sympathies’ and their potentially most damaging effects” (Warnock, 1971, p. 26). Becoming a moral person implied: learning to resist and control one’s always present self-regarding tendencies. Morality’s biggest enemy may be the pure egoist. But pure egoism is as rare as pure altruism. The average person has sympathy and concern, but only for a limited number of people – usually his family and friends. Therefore the proper business of morality is, in Warnock’s view, “… to expand our sympathies, or, better, to reduce the liability inherent in their natural tendency to be narrowly restricted” (p. 26). Next to self-interestedness then, favouritism and partiality are in this view the most widespread moral evils. Warnock and others with similar views on morality were influenced by Hobbes, Hume and Kant.

Impartiality can be promoted in different ways. Firstly, by ensuring that people acquire certain dispositions or virtues, such as fairness and non-discrimination. Secondly, by ensuring that they adopt certain principles or ‘action guides’ which lead them to act impartially. Thus, the importance ascribed to impartiality was highlighted not only in the view on moral virtues, but also in the definition and construction of what some authors called ‘the moral point of view’, i.e. the special point of view that had to be taken when considering moral issues. The concept of a moral point of view owed its rising popularity to Kurt Baier’s book with that title. For him, the moral point of view was that of an independent, impartial, objective, dispassionate, disinterested observer, a God’s-eye point of view (Baier, 1958, p. 201). Paul W. Taylor provided the most elaborate description of what it means to take a moral point of view, in contradistinction to a descriptive point of view as well as other normative points of view such as
that of prudence, law, religion, and art (Taylor, 1961). An other influential proponent of the concept of a moral point of view was William K. Frankena (Frankena, 1973a,b).

In the eyes of its proponents, the moral point of view did not only differ from other normative points of view such as self-interest (prudence), law, and religion. Taking the moral point of view also implied transcending the ideas and requirements of conventional morality or moralities. The moral point of view is rational, critical and universal. As Frankena stated, there are many moralities, but there is only one moral point of view, the moral point of view (Frankena, 1983).

The definitions proposed in the fifties and sixties of the last century often featured universality, rationality, impartiality and/or related terms like objectivity and impersonality as defining characteristics of morality and the moral point of view. To take the moral point of view meant to be willing to have one’s actions guided by action guides required by or acceptable to rational and well-informed persons, who possess particular attitudes such as impartiality and objectivity, and, according to some authors, also concern for others. To qualify as moral principles, principles (or rules) had at least to pass a procedural test that was meant to ensure their impartial character: the test of universalisability or a similar one such as reversibility. The test of universalisability owes its popularity to someone who did not belong to the inner circle of moral-point-of-view theorists, Richard Hare (Hare, 1952, 1962).

An important point in the debate between these theorists was whether moral principles, besides meeting the abovementioned formal requirements, should also have a particular material content such as human flourishing or the good of others than the agent himself (‘other-regardingness’). The latter view is defended, among others, by Frankena and W.D. Hudson (1970), the former by Hare.

To this list of proposed requirements another frequently recurring item has to be added, the special or even overriding importance of morality and its principles. Many authors endorsed the view that morality has special importance. Warnock remarks that “…the present suggestion [i.e. his view on the object of morality] fits well with the common idea that there is something peculiarly important about morality” (Warnock, 1971, p. 26). Some of them, e.g. Hare, argued that principles are only moral if, in case of conflict, they override all principles related to other points of view.

Let the above suffice to sketch the connection between morality and impartiality in definitions of morality, popular in the fifties and the sixties of the last century. Of course there were authors who criticised these conceptions even then. Most of them, like Philippa Foot (1954) and Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), belonged to the camp of the (neo-)Aristotelians. Not so much their criticism, but Bernard Williams’s attack in his article ‘Persons,