

Evaluating From a Point of View

James Rachels

[This essay originally appeared in the *Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 6 (1972), pp. 144-157.]

I

In recent years the concept of a point of view has come to play an important role in philosophical ethics. Writers such as Kurt Baier, William Frankena, Paul Taylor, Kai Nielsen, G.J. Warnock, and J.O. Urmson¹ have all urged a view of the nature of morality according to which, in making a moral judgment, what a person is doing is expressing a preference from within a certain point of view. Different accounts are given of just how “the moral point of view” is to be distinguished from other points of view,² but most of these writers – Baier, Frankena, Nielsen, and Warnock – say that it is distinguished at least in part by the fact that anyone taking this point of view is thereby committing himself to the impartial promotion of “the interests of everyone alike,” where no one’s interests (including those of the agent himself) are given more importance than anyone else’s interests. On this view, moral principles are easily and naturally contrasted with principles of prudence; the egoist, by definition, has no moral principles since he does not care about promoting “the interests of everyone alike.” As an egoist, he is only

¹ Kurt Baier, *The Moral Point of View* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1958), esp. ch. 8. William K. Frankena, “Recent Conceptions of Morality,” *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, edited by Hector-Neri Castaneda and George Nakhikian (Detroit, 1963), pp. 1-24. “The Concept of Morality,” *The Concept of Morality: University of Colorado Studies, Series in Philosophy No. 3* (Boulder, Colorado, 1967), pp. 1-22. Paul W. Taylor, *Normative Discourse* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1961), esp. pp. ix, 294-295, 303-305. Kai Nielsen, “Appraising Doing the Thing Done,” *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 57 (1960), pp. 749-759; “On Moral Truth,” *Studies in Moral Philosophy: American Philosophical Quarterly Monograph Series No. 1* (Oxford, 1968), pp.9-25. G.J. Warnock, *Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (London, 1967), ch. 5. J.O. Urmson, *The Emotive Theory of Ethics* (London, 1963), ch. 9.

² Frankena’s essays include detailed statements of the various possible accounts.

concerned with his own interests; thus his principles are merely principles of prudence and not moral principles.³ It is not that he is immoral but rather that he is amoral. Others, such as Taylor,⁴ disagree with this characterization.

In this paper I shall be concerned not so much with the purported content of “the moral point of view” as with the more basic idea underlying this analysis, namely the idea that *moral judgments may be construed as judgments made from within a point of view*. If this basic idea is wrong- if moral judgments are not point-of-view judgments- then there will be no point in arguing over the content of the moral point of view, for there will be no such thing as the moral point of view.

One of my purposes here is to show that in fact moral judgments may not be construed as judgments made from within a point of view, but that, on the contrary, when a person makes a moral judgment or decision what he typically does is very different from what a person does who makes a judgment or decision strictly from within a set point of view. However, this is not my first task. Moral evaluations are evaluations of only one sort; and a theory of moral judgment is at best only one part of a complete theory of evaluation. Thus Taylor and Frankena⁵ have set forth a comprehensive theory according to which *every* evaluation is made from one point of view or another. Taylor says that “the universe of normative discourse” divides up into “many subordinate universes of discourse”:

³ The facile opposition of “morality” to “prudence” is effectively criticized by W. D. Falk in “Morality, Self, and Others,” *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, pp. 25-68. Reprinted in *Ethics*, edited by Judith J. Thomson and Gerald Dworkin (New York, 1968), pp.349-390; and *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory*, edited by Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp. 360-390.

⁴ “The Ethnocentric Fallacy,” *The Monist*, vol. 47 (1963), pp. 563-584.

⁵ Taylor, *Normative Discourse*; and Frankena, “On Saying the Ethical Thing,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, vol. 39 (1965-1966), pp. 21-42. “On Saying the Ethical Thing” is reprinted in *Philosophy Today No. 1*, edited by Jerry H. Gill (New York, 1968), pp. 250-278. George Pitcher also subscribes to the view that all evaluations are from points of view: see his review of Urmson in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 79 (1970), pp. 586-592.

Moral discourse, for example, may be distinguished from aesthetic discourse....In addition to moral and aesthetic discourse there are religious discourse, intellectual or logical discourse, political, economic, and legal discourse, the discourse of custom or etiquette, and many other kinds of discourse, all of which consist, at least in part, in the making and justifying of evaluations and prescriptions and, consequently, belong to the universe of normative discourse.⁶

These “subordinate universes of discourse” are distinguished from one another by the “rules of relevance” which identify the kinds of reasons to which one may appeal in justifying evaluations falling within that subordinate universe.

Corresponding to each of these sets of rules of relevance is a particular *kind* of value judgment and a particular *kind* of prescription. Thus there are moral judgments and moral prescriptions, aesthetic judgments and aesthetic prescriptions, and so on. Furthermore, each subordinate universe of discourse sets the framework of a *point of view* from which evaluations and prescriptions can be made. A moral judgment or prescription is one made from the moral point of view, an aesthetic judgment or prescription is one made from the aesthetic point of view, and so on for the other kinds of evaluations or prescriptions.⁷

And Frankena, who acknowledges a debt to Taylor, says:

In short, in making a normative judgment, besides voicing our partiality, we at least suggest that there are good reasons for a certain attitude or action, and we usually have in mind more or less clearly a certain kind of reason, that is, we are taking a point of view and claiming that one who is rational from that point of view would or would not have that attitude or perform that action. ...one cannot make a first-hand normative judgment of any kind unless one is taking, at least hypothetically, some aesthetic or practical point

⁶ *Normative Discourse*, p. ix.

⁷ *Ibid.*

of view (not simply one of belief or disbelief, *et cetera*), and is claiming to be rational within it.⁸

Thus they both defend what I shall call the “General Thesis,” namely that

Evaluations are expressions of attitude (or prescriptions, or statements of preference, or what-have-you) *from within some point of view*.

For present purposes the differences between expressions of attitude, prescriptions, statements of preference, and so on, will not matter; what will be at issue here is the part played by the notion of a “point of view.”

Anyone who accepts the General Thesis, as do Taylor and Frankena, must accept as a corollary the less general thesis that *moral* evaluations are made from a point of view. However, the reverse is not true: the particular thesis about moral judgments can be defended without embracing the General Thesis about all value judgments – Urmson, in fact, does this.

My plan is as follows. First I will elaborate a bit on the General Thesis; specifically, I will outline some of the principal theoretical advantages that might be gained if it is true. Then I will ask what understanding of the notion of “having a point of view” is required to deliver these advantages; and it will turn out to be a perfectly commonsensical one. Then I will give an argument to show that, on this understanding of what it means to have a point of view, the General Thesis is false. Finally, I will show how a similar argument can be used against the particular thesis that moral judgments are point-of-view judgments.

II

Like many other philosophical views, the General Thesis gets its initial attractiveness from its plausibility in describing certain sorts of cases. Consider, for example, the case of a farmer having a bad year. He has planned his crops and has worked hard to make them grow, but all his efforts are being thwarted for lack of rain. Now things are at the critical point; if it doesn't rain soon the crops will be lost. From his point of view, then, it would be a good thing if it were

⁸ “On Saying the Ethical Thing,” pp. 37, 39.

to rain. The interests he has merely in virtue of being a farmer dictate this. Of course, he may have other interests which clash with his interests as a farmer; for example, he may want to go fishing and rain might spoil these plans. But regardless of this, his interests as a farmer are clear: he needs rain. So when a researcher at a nearby university offers to try to make rain by a new method of cloud-seeding, he accepts the offer happily.

However, there is a Hollywood producer making a movie in the area, and he objects. His script calls for outdoor scenes in sunny weather. Lots of people have invested in his film and he has important responsibilities to them, not to mention his own desire to do his job as well as possible and to make a maximum profit himself. So he is committed to a filming schedule that will finish the job within the shortest possible time. Therefore, from his point of view, rain would be disastrous.

The principal argument in favor of the General Thesis is that, if it is accepted, we will be able to give plausible solutions to some of the main problems which have always troubled ethical theorists. I shall use the example of the farmer and the movie producer to illustrate, very briefly, what these solutions would be:

(1) Disagreement Over Evaluations

What are we to say when rational people disagree in their evaluations? Are such disagreements simply a reflection of the irreconcilably different attitudes which people have, or are they open to rational adjudication and settlement? It was a notorious deficiency of traditional interest theories of value that disagreement over evaluations was rendered *impossible* – that is, if evaluations are interpreted as statements of the speaker's attitudes, then when Peter says "x is good" he is merely saying "I (Peter) like x," and when Paul says "x is bad" he is merely saying "I (Paul) dislike x"; and since there is no inconsistency between these two statements, there is no disagreement between Peter and Paul. The emotive theory, by stressing the distinction between disagreement *in* attitudes and disagreement *about* attitudes, allowed for disagreement over evaluations but left the disagreement impossible to rationally resolve.⁹

⁹ Cf. C.L. Stevenson, "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," *Mind*, vol. 46 (1937); reprinted in C.L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), pp. 10-31; in *Readings in Contemporary Ethical Theory*, pp. 44-60; and in numerous other anthologies.

If we accept the General Thesis we can give a much more intuitively acceptable account of such disagreement and the possibility of resolving it by rational means.¹⁰ The farmer and the movie producer take exactly opposite attitudes toward the same hypothetical situation: the farmer thinks it would be good if the researcher caused it to rain, and the producer thinks it would be terrible. But this is because they have different points of view – the farmer is assessing things from the point of view of one whose crops will fail without rain, and the producer is assessing things from the point of view of one who needs to complete a movie with outdoor sequences filmed in sunny weather. Each is being rational from within his own point of view, and so long as neither man steps outside his own point of view their disagreement cannot be reconciled. (This is not to say that either the farmer or the producer is necessarily selfish or unmindful of the needs of the other. Either man might recognize the conflict of interests and even concede that the other's interests are more important. Nevertheless, it would remain that from the *farmer's* point of view rain would be a good thing, while from the *producer's* point of view it would be bad.) This seems just the right sort of thing to say about this case.

On the other hand, there are cases of disagreement over evaluations that *can* be adjudicated by rational means, and here too a reference to the agents' point of view will help us to see why. Suppose two farmers disagree over which kind of fertilizer is best for a certain crop. Since they share the same point of view, their disagreement only concerns what is best from *within that point of view*, and this sort of dispute can be settled simply by appealing to the appropriate facts, in this case the facts as to which fertilizer best produces the desired effects on the crops. If one of the farmers disagreed with an ecologist, who takes a different point of view, over which fertilizer ought to be used, then once again the disagreement might not be possible to resolve.

So, by introducing the idea that evaluations are made from points of view, we can explain why disagreements are rationally resolvable in some cases but not in others. Where there is a shared point of view, the dispute may be settled; but where different points of view are taken, the dispute may resist all attempts at reconciliation.

(2) *The Relevance of Reasons to Evaluations*

¹⁰ Cf. Frankena, "On Saying the Ethical Thing," pp. 39-40.

Evaluations may be supported by reasons; but how do we know which reasons support which evaluations? A principal complaint against the emotive theory was that according to it the only criterion was psychological – a reason supports an evaluation just to the extent that the thought of the reason causes or sustains the attitude expressed in the evaluation. On this view (it was said) *any* fact could, in principle, provide a reason for *any* evaluation: if a person were so psychologically constituted that the thought of sooty air prompted him to denounce Beethoven, then “The air is sooty” would become a reason for the judgment that Beethoven’s music is poor.

The General Thesis points the way toward the needed criterion of relevance. Whether a consideration counts as a reason for or against an evaluation simply depends on the point of view from which the evaluation is made. The farmer, in support of his feeling that rain would be a good thing, would point out that without rain his crops will die. This is important from his point of view, but it is irrelevant to the producer’s point of view. What matters to the producer is that if it rains filming will have to stop and the delay will throw him off schedule. And this reason for the producer’s judgment is, in turn, irrelevant to the farmer; so the reasons which each man has for his evaluation mean nothing to the other. From the farmer’s point of view one set of considerations is relevant; and from the producer’s point of view a different set is relevant. Thus Taylor says that points of view are distinguished from one another by their “rules of relevance.”

(3) The Truth and Verification of Evaluations

We want to know whether evaluations can be true or false in any meaningful sense, and if so, how we can go about proving which ones are true and which ones false. Most of the emotivists¹¹ argued that, since evaluations are more closely akin to exclamations and commands than to statements of fact, it is misleading to say that they are true or false. And, if they are not true or false, it follows at once that they cannot be *proved* true or false.

However, once we remember that evaluations are made from within points of view, and that these points of view provide criteria for identifying reasons for or against evaluations, things look very different. An evaluation may be seen to be true if it is rationally warranted (that is, if there are decisive reasons in its favor) from within the appropriate point of view. Thus Baier says of moral judgments, “Our moral convictions are true if they can be seen to be required or

¹¹ Stevenson is an important exception: see *Facts and Values*, pp. 214-220.

acceptable from the moral point of view.”¹² Similarly, the farmer’s judgment is true from his point of view, and the producer’s judgment is true from his point of view.

And we can also see what sense it makes to speak of proving an evaluation correct or incorrect. From within his own point of view the producer could prove that rain would be bad just by citing the reasons already mentioned. (From his side the farmer could do the same thing.) If anyone understands the producer’s situation, and shares his point of view, he will have to agree that rain would be bad. If he does not agree, then, assuming that he has no information hidden from us, he can safely be dismissed as stupid or irrational. We can reasonably question the producer’s judgment only by taking some other point of view; but even if we decide that from some other point of view rain is desirable, we still haven’t proved him wrong in his original judgment, which was made from his own point of view.

(4) Deriving “Ought” From “Is”

Finally, by accepting a view of the nature of evaluation based on the General Thesis, we can shed some light on the business about deriving “ought” from “is.”¹³ We can show that there is in a certain sense a rational connection between the facts which constitute reasons for an evaluation and the evaluation: those facts, *together with* the agent’s point of view, logically dictate his evaluations. From within the producer’s point of view, for example, the move from “Rain would cause a delay in production” to “Rain would be bad” is logically necessary; it would be irrational for him to think otherwise.

Such, in barest outline, are the virtues of the General Thesis. If it is accepted, much is to be gained in the way of philosophical enlightenment; lots of hoary old problems will be solved at last. The solutions turn directly on the employment of the concept of a point of view: it is the fact that evaluations are made from points of view that permits these moves to be made, and if any evaluation were not made from within a point of view, none of the above remarks would be applicable to it. But, according to those who defend the General Thesis, all evaluations *are* made

¹² *The Moral Point of View*, pp. 183-184. For an extended defense of this proposal, see Nielsen, “On Moral Truth.”

¹³ Cf. Frankena, “On Saying the Ethical Thing,” p. 39.

from one point of view or another, so we need not worry. I think, however, that a little anxiety is in order.

III

Before we can properly evaluate the General Thesis, we need an account of what it means to have a point of view. I am not going to provide a complete account, but only as much as will be necessary for the subsequent argument.

There is one sense of “having a point of view” in which it is a truism to say that every evaluation is from a point of view. That is the sense in which an assessment is *someone’s* assessment, and made on the basis of *someone’s* knowledge and beliefs. Thus we might say that Tom’s evaluation is from his own point of view in order to emphasize that in making the evaluation he is exercising his own independent judgment, founded on *his* beliefs, *etc.*, rather than merely parroting someone else. Here, having a point of view is the same as having a personal opinion. But this is clearly not the sense of “having a point of view” at work in the General Thesis, for on this understanding of the notion no one could ever be wrong about what is good or bad from his own point of view. In the sense of the phrase in which we are interested, the farmer *could* be wrong about what is good or bad from his own point of view; for example, he could mistakenly believe that a certain fertilizer is best for his crops, when that fertilizer is in fact demonstrably inferior to other kinds.

The idea of a farmer’s point of view depends not on the conception of farmers as people who make independently arrived-at judgments, but on the conception of farmers as people with certain typical sorts of *interests* – specifically, as people who plant, cultivate, harvest, and market crops. Therefore, anything that hinders the planting, cultivation, harvesting, or marketing of crops is bad from the farmer’s point of view, while anything that facilitates this process is good from the farmer’s point of view, regardless of the correctness or incorrectness of particular judgments made by individual farmers. Furthermore, although farmers are identified as a group by the fact that they have these interests, once they are singled out as a group they may have other common interests that have nothing to do with farming, and the “farmer’s point of view” will include the promotion of those interests as well. For example, a tax law that gives farmers a lower rate is a good thing from the farmer’s point of view, even though it has nothing to do with

the accomplishment of the farmer's business as a farmer. The same can be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for movie producers, consumers, democrats, Russians, music-lovers, soldiers, and so on.

The concept of an individual's point of view – for example, Dick's point of view – raises no distinctive problems. If Dick is identified as a member of a group such as the group of farmers, he will have the interests which go with membership in that group. But of course an individual will usually have a much more complex set of interests than just those which he has in virtue of his group affiliations; in addition, he will have a combination of goals, ambitions, hopes, and desires that is uniquely his own. To say that something is good or bad from Dick's point of view, then, will be to say that it is conducive to or destructive of those interests, goals, *etc.*, whatever they might be.

Therefore, the following analysis suggests itself: *To make an evaluation from within a certain point of view is to adopt a certain set of interests and to base one's judgment on whether or not those interests are promoted.* This seems true to our commonsense understanding of what it means to have a point of view, and it is compatible with the account given by those who defend the General Thesis.¹⁴ However, the main thing to be said in its favor is that it is necessary if the General Thesis is to yield the philosophical benefits outlined in section II above: the remarks made there about disagreement over evaluations, the relevance of reasons, truth and verification, and the derivation of "ought" from "is" all depended on the assumption that, in taking a point of view, a person is adopting a certain set of interests as the ones to be promoted.

¹⁴ Taylor says that "Taking a certain point of view is nothing but adopting certain canons of reasoning as the framework within which value judgments are to be justified; the canons of reasoning define the point of view. When we verify and validate our judgments from that point of view, we cite reasons which are good (and *a fortiori* relevant) according to the particular canons which define that point of view. We have already said that a value judgment is moral judgment if it is made from a moral point of view. This means precisely that the judge or evaluator has adopted a set of rules of relevance and valid inference that recognize only certain reasons as relevant and good." (*Normative Discourse*, p. 109) I assume that "rules of relevance" may be paired one-to-one with interests: for example, one would accept the reason "It would destroy the crops" as relevant to "It shouldn't be done" (for any value of "it") if and only if one were concerned to protect the crops.

Therefore, the notion of “having a point of view” as it occurs in the General Thesis must be interpreted along these lines if it is to be of any philosophical interest.

There is a good deal more that needs to be said about the concept of a point of view, but I will defer further discussion of it until after I have given the argument which I think shows the Taylor-Frankena General Thesis to be false. That is what I will do now.

IV

There are several different ways in which a set of interests can figure into a person’s evaluations. A person may, like the farmer in our example, have a set of predetermined goals and interests that are firmly fixed before he begins to deliberate about what would be beneficial and what would be harmful. These goals and interests may never be called into question; and the only object of his deliberation may be the question of how they can best be pursued and promoted.

A second type of case would be those in which the question being raised is not “*How* may such-and-such interests be promoted?” but rather “*Should* such-and-such interests be promoted?” Suppose the movie producer were to become plagued with doubts about the fundamental legitimacy of his vocation: he might think, “Movies, after all, are worthless things; the claims about movies being an ‘art form’ are a lot of claptrap; it is wrong for actors to be paid twenty times more than firemen or schoolteachers; the whole system of values on which the movie industry is based is corrupt.” (I do not think these charges are all true; the point is just that he could believe them.) If the producer did entertain this sort of doubt, he would be calling his whole point of view as a movie producer, and all the interests it represents, into question. He could not resolve this doubt from *within* that point of view, because it is the point of view itself that is at issue.

A third type of evaluation is made in response to the question of *which* set of (conflicting) interests is to be promoted in a particular case. Suppose we called in a referee to adjudicate the dispute between the farmer and the producer over whether the clouds are to be seeded for rain. His job would be to weigh the one set of interests against the other, as impartially as possible, and to decide in a fair minded way which ought to be favored over the other. Now the question before the referee is not whether the producer’s (or the farmer’s) interests are ever worth serving;

although if he did think either of them essentially unworthy it would certainly influence his judgment. His problem is rather to choose between the two sets of interests *in this case*, where, even though they both may be legitimate interests worthy of respect, they conflict and therefore cannot both be satisfied.

What is wrong with the General Thesis – and consequently with the theory of evaluation based on it – is that it fits only the first of these three types of evaluations. If we think of cases in which the agent has a fixed set of interests which he does not question, and asks only *how* those interests may be served, then it is natural to regard the forthcoming evaluation as made from within the point of view defined by those interests. But if he asks *whether* those interests should be promoted, then he is stepping outside that point of view, and his evaluation cannot – logically cannot – be made from within it. To adapt a point of Wittgenstein's, to try to settle the merits of taking a point of view by saying that the attitudes prescribed by that point of view would be good ones to have *from within it* is like reading the newspaper in order to discover whether the newspaper is reliable.¹⁵ The same can be said for the question of *which* set of interests is to be preferred over another, in case of conflict: from within the point of view defined by either set of interests, any answer would be viciously question-begging; an honest appraisal can be made only by standing outside both.

It might be suggested, in defense of the General Thesis, that even though we cannot judge the merits of a point of view from within that point of view itself, nonetheless we can and do make such judgments from within *other* points of view. So the judgment "Point of view A should (or should not) be taken," even if it is not made from point of view A, is made from point of view B or C. Similarly, the question of which point of view overrides which other, in cases of conflict, is settled only by appeal to some third point of view: if point of view A requires one action, for example, and point of view B requires another, then we must turn to point of view C or D to settle the matter. (More obscurely, it might be said that not all points of view on the same "level," that what we have is a "hierarchy" of points of view, some of which set priorities among the others.)

This is a plausible line of defense, but, I think, it cannot succeed. We can, of course, evaluate the merits of one point of view from the perspective of another; and we can bring in a third point of view to resolve a conflict between the dictates of two others. But we can also make

¹⁵ *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953), I, 265.

evaluations “all things considered,” *with all relevant points of view taken into account and with each one given its due weight*. Consider again the referee brought in to mediate the dispute between the farmer and the movie producer. As with all mediators, we expect him to be fair, impartial, and free of special interests which would bias his judgment. Suppose he were a researcher anxious to put the new cloud seeding technique to a practical test: this would give him a “third point of view,” distinct from both the farmer’s and the producer’s points of view, which could be his basis for deciding the issue. But we do not *want* a third point of view intruding here; this would merely add a party to the dispute, not settle it. The fact that the researcher does have this point of view, rather than enabling him to act as a referee, disqualifies him. The condition of impartiality, which a competent mediator must satisfy, rules out those with a distinctive point of view of their own.

We cannot make judgments “all things considered” from within a point of view because points of view always rule out some potentially important considerations as irrelevant. As Taylor says, points of view are tied to “rules of relevance” (I would say that what is relevant depends on the interests being assumed) and this means not only that certain sorts of considerations will be seen as relevant, but also that others will be seen as irrelevant. We have already observed that from the farmer’s point of view the fate of the producer’s project is simply not a relevant consideration. Yet if we are to try to decide the issue between them, all things considered, we must consider both their interests plus the interests of anyone else who would be affected. There is no *a priori* limit on what may be taken into account.¹⁶

At this point it may be protested that the impartial referee *does* have a point of view, namely the point of view taken by one who sets aside (at least temporarily) his own special

¹⁶ Of course it is difficult to say just what is involved in making evaluative judgments “all things considered,” and here I am only arguing the negative point that it does not involve taking a point of view. Perhaps a start in the right direction would be to say that what is best, all things considered, is what a *competent judge* (as defined by John Rawls) would intuitively approve. See John Rawls, “Outline of a Decision Procedure for Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 66 (1957), pp. 177-197; reprinted in *Ethics*, pp. 48-70. Rawls’ definition of competence does not refer to any special attitudes or interests on the part of the judge, and hence his intuitive judgments need not proceed from any special point of view but from his overall feeling for what is important and what is not.

interests and concerns himself only with what would be fair or equitable for all concerned parties. Now this may be an accurate description of the spirit in which the competent referee approaches his task; the issue, however, is whether we should say that, in doing this, he is *taking a point of view* that will be the basis for his evaluation. I think not. This would stretch the ordinary notion of “having a point of view” to the verge of triviality. The ordinary notion, as I have argued, is tied to having a set of interests which one is committed to pursue. But here there *is no* special set of interests being taken for granted or given privileged status; thus, if we stretch the notion to the point of including this case as a case of evaluating from a point of view, we are retaining a favored terminology but depriving it of its meaning. Moreover, if we include this as a “point of view” alongside the others that have already been mentioned, we can no longer appeal to the General Thesis for solutions to the four problems as outlined in section II above, since the usefulness of the Thesis in the treatment of those problems depends directly on the association of points of view with sets of interests. Therefore, to count this as a case of “taking a point of view” would both trivialize the General Thesis and deprive it of its philosophical usefulness; while not to count it is to admit that the General Thesis is false.

V

Many who would reject the General Thesis nevertheless regard *moral* judgments as point-of-view judgments and speak unhesitatingly of “the moral point of view.” I shall argue now that even this more modest thesis is false and that there is no such thing as the moral point of view. I shall not be arguing that there is no difference between moral judgments other sorts of evaluative judgments, for surely there is a difference: that Leopold and Loeb did an evil thing is a moral judgment, but it is not a moral judgment that the roast needs more salt. My contention is just that whatever the difference between moral evaluations and others might be, it cannot be that moral evaluations are made from a peculiar point of view.

If there were such a thing as the moral point of view, then we could construe any moral judgment as a judgment about what is good or bad, right or wrong, *etc.*, from within that point of view. The question “Is A the morally right thing to do?” would always be equivalent to “Is A the right thing to do from the moral point of view?” And, since we only have a point of view when we have a set of interests which we are committed to promote, the latter question resolves into

“Would doing A promote this set of interests (whatever they may be)?” On Baier’s account, for example, the moral point of view is the point of view we take when we evaluate things according to whether they are “for the good of everyone alike.”¹⁷ Thus the question of whether an action is morally right simply *is* the question of whether it is for the good of everyone alike. In the following argument I use an example suggested by Baier’s view, but the argument does not depend on it. It is intended to count equally against any view which regards moral judgments as judgments made exclusively from a certain point of view, no matter how the “content” of that point of view is specified.

(i) Let Φ stand for any set of interests which might be thought to provide the necessary “content” of the moral point of view.

[For example, following Baier and the others mentioned in section I above, let Φ be “the good of everyone alike.” The Φ ish (moral) point of view would then be the point of view taken by the agent who is concerned for the good of everyone alike.]

(ii) Now imagine a case in which, from the Φ ish point of view, I should do a certain act. Realizing that the Φ ish point of view does dictate this act, I might still ask whether, all things considered, I should follow the dictates of the Φ ish point of view in the particular case at hand. This will be an open question (even if the answer is Yes) because the Φ ish point of view is now seen as one point of view among many, and it is not necessarily true that I should always follow its direction when there is a conflict.

[Suppose Smith is a conventionally good man who in normal circumstances would never think of lying, stealing, or hurting other people. He works as a bank teller and has a perfect record of honesty. But now, through no fault of his own, he is in a desperate financial situation and needs money badly. He has a chance to steal what he needs, and he is sure he can do so without getting caught. From the Φ ish point of view, he shouldn’t do it (it isn’t in the general interests for bank tellers to steal funds); but from the point of view of Smith’s own self-interest, he should. Smith asks himself which of these points of

¹⁷ *The Moral Point of View*, pp. 200-201.

view should prevail, all things considered, in this case? Should he take the money or not?]

(iii) Now (a) the question just raised is a moral question and the answer given will be a moral judgment; and (b) this question cannot be answered from within the Φ ish point of view. I say that it is a moral question not because I have a theory according to which it must be, but because, if Φ is a set of interests the promotion of which is morally important, then it so obviously is a moral question that any theory which says otherwise must be mistaken. And, I say that this question cannot be answered from within the Φ ish point of view because it is a question about whether to follow the dictates of that point of view, asked in full awareness of what that dictate would be. I have belabored this sort of point above, so I will not repeat that discussion here.

(iv) Therefore, we have a moral judgment in the offing that cannot be construed as a judgment about what is right or wrong from within the Φ ish (moral) point of view. Consequently, there is no such thing as the moral point of view.

Let me emphasize again that this argument is not tied to any particular view about what the “moral point of view” consists in. The crucial point is that for any set of interests, if promoting those interests is a matter of moral concern, then the judgment that one ought (or ought not), all things considered, to do what would promote those interests in a specific case, is a moral judgment. And it is not made from the point of view of one who is already committed to advance those interests, but by one who is deliberating whether to do so. So the “point of view” model just does not fit the case.

It will do no good to object that in answering Smith’s question, and others of the type raised in (ii), we are not making moral judgments but only deciding whether to place ourselves within or without the framework of morality, as we might decide whether or not to play a game. For it is already granted that “the good of everyone alike” should be promoted. The problem is not whether Smith should give this any weight in his deliberations, but only whether, in a particular case where there are other important considerations, its weight is decisive. To raise this question is not to doubt the general duty to promote the general welfare, nor is it to reject one’s role as a moral agent. Only in the attempt to defend philosophical preconceptions would we say otherwise.

In section IV, I argued that the General Thesis is false because the point-of-view model assumes a relation between interests and evaluations that obtains in only one sort of case, namely the case in which evaluations are made on the basis of fixed sets of interests that are not themselves called into question. In other cases the relation may be different; evaluations may be made about *whether* interests are worthy of promotion, or about *which* interests are to be promoted in cases of conflict. The present argument is similar: if it is sound, it is because *moral* judgments are sometimes made in the latter sorts of cases.

VI

My arguments have, for the most part, been negative; I have tried to show why the point-of-view model is inadequate as a basis for analyzing either evaluations in general or moral judgments in particular. However, there are some positive results for our understanding of point-of-view evaluations which, in conclusion, may be summarized as follows. (1) Points of view which provide the basis for evaluations must be associated with sets of interests; so that making an evaluation from a point of view is a matter of assuming the appropriate interests and judging whether or not the action (object, event, *etc.*) contributes to their satisfaction. (2) The interests associated with a point of view may themselves be appraised, either (a) whether they should be promoted at all, or (b) whether they have priority over other interests in cases of conflict. Here the evaluation may or may not be from a point of view; if it is, it must be from a different point of view than the one associated with the set of interests under consideration. But if the judgment is made “all things considered,” in the spirit of impartial assessment, it is not made from any point of view at all. (3) Finally, for those evaluations which *are* made from points of view, there is no reason why the discussion of the nature of disagreement over evaluations, the truth and verification of evaluations, *etc.*, in section II, need not stand. We cannot generalize those points as valid for all evaluations, since not all evaluations are made from points of view; but this only confirms what we should have expected anyway, that those matters are too complicated for any such easy generalization.¹⁸

¹⁸ I am grateful to Professors J. Martin Ryle and Mats Furberg for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.