

What kind of perspectivism?

American Philosophical Association Meeting in Seattle, April 12, 2007

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Perspectivism about obligation: Epistemic circumstances affect our obligations.

Anti-perspectivism about obligation: Epistemic circumstances do not affect our obligations.

Zimmerman's version of perspectivism:

The prospective view: An option is obligatory for an agent iff it is prospectively best, given the body of evidence that the agent presently has availed himself of.

Two worries with the prospective view:

- I. Spelling out perspectivism in terms of *value* poses a number of problems that can be avoided by spelling it out in terms of *reasons* (as I propose in Kiesewetter 2017, Ch. 8).
- II. Assuming that obligations are always constrained by the agent's *actual present* evidence poses a number of problems that can be avoided by focusing on a hypothetically specified body of evidence (as I propose in Kiesewetter 2011).

I. VALUES OR REASONS?

Anti-perspectivism, value approach: An option is obligatory iff it is objectively best.

Perspectivism, value approach: An option is obligatory iff it satisfies some *epistemic function* of what is objectively best (e.g., iff it is believed to be/probably/prospectively best).

Perspectivism, reason approach: R constitutes an (obligation-contributing) reason for A, only if R is part of A's evidence.

Anti-perspectivism, reason approach: Whether R constitutes an (obligation-contributing) reason for A does not depend on whether R is part of A's evidence.

Advantages of the reason approach:

1. *Generality:* The reason approach, but not the value approach, seems in the position to provide a unified, comprehensible account of the relevance of epistemic circumstances *in different normative domains*, including deliberation about what one ought to do all things considered (Kiesewetter 2011) or epistemic deliberation (McHugh and Way 2017).
2. *Neutrality:* In contrast to the reason approach, the value approach is useful only on the assumption of substantial moral views about the relation between the right and the good.

According to Zimmerman, all traditional moral theories, including Kantianism and virtue ethics, make the following three assumptions:

- (i) "The options we face have a certain deontic status" (p. 1-2), i.e. they are either right or wrong, and if they are uniquely right, then they are obligatory.
- (ii) "There is something that matters morally, in virtue of which our options have the deontic status that they have" (p. 2), e.g. pleasure or universalizability.
- (iii) An option is obligatory iff it is "actually best in terms of what matters morally" (p. 2).

Zimmerman seems to think that (i) and (ii) cannot reasonably be denied. The only way to reject the objective view (iii) is by substituting it with some epistemic variant.

But is (ii) really neutral?

- *Not* if we understand it as claiming that options have their deontic status in virtue of some evaluative truth about what matters, for this would presuppose that the right is determined by the good.
- So (ii) is neutral only if it says no more than that options have their deontic status in virtue of some other properties, where these properties may be described in wholly non-evaluative terms.

However: on this understanding of (ii), (iii) becomes trivially true, and the value approach no longer presents a useful distinction:

- Take any two theories T and T*, where according to T, an option is obligatory iff it is best in terms of X, and according to T* an option is obligatory iff it can be represented as some specific epistemic function of what is best in terms of X (example: T= objective act-utilitarianism, T*= decision-theoretic act-utilitarianism, X= pleasure).
- Zimmerman assumes: T and T* have the *same* conception of what matters morally, namely X, and they disagree about how X relates to one's obligations (iii).
- But if "what matters morally" is just whatever it is in virtue of which our options have their deontic status, then T and T* cannot be said to have the same conception of what matters morally, and it is difficult to see how (iii) can be denied.

Conclusion: The value approach presents a useful distinction only on assumptions that are not neutral between views that take the good to be more fundamental than the right and those that don't.

3. *Pretheoretical appropriateness:* In contrast to the reason approach, the value approach does not capture the pretheoretical distinction between views that accept and those that reject the relevance of epistemic circumstances.

The Jackson case: A= complete cure (but 50% risk of death), B= partial cure (without risk), C= death (but 50% chance of complete cure)

- *Pretheoretical distinction:* Perspectivists claim that B is obligatory, anti-perspectivists claim that A is obligatory.
- *Problem:* On the assumption of (plausible construals of) Kantianism, rule consequentialism or virtue ethics, Zimmerman's objective view entails that B is obligatory. (Example: "Other things equal, if B has the best prospect for my patient's well-being, I will choose B" seems universalizable, and giving B can be said to be best in terms of universalizability).
- *Conclusion:* Unless we presuppose act-consequentialism, the value approach does not capture the pretheoretical distinction.

4. *Argument soundness:* It follows that Zimmerman's argument against the objective view goes through only if we assume a very substantial moral view (basically: act-consequentialism).

- Why? Because the argument assumes that the objective view entails that giving B is wrong, which is plausibly not true on a number of deontological views.

- Zimmerman acknowledges this, but he believes that a Jackson case can be mounted against such views. All we need is the following structure: A or C is best in terms of what matters, while the other is worst, and B is much better than the worst.
- But this assumes that options have their deontic status is virtue of a gradable rather than binary notion, which is not true for Kantianism or rule consequentialism.
- It also assume that it is possible for us to be in the epistemic situation to know no more than that an option is either best or worst. This is far from obvious on conceptions (like Kant's), according to which an option's obligatoriness is detectable *a priori*.
- *Conclusion:* I'm not convinced that a Jackson case can be mounted against a number of relevant versions of the objective view.

II. WHICH BODY OF EVIDENCE?

Jack. Jack knows that A is the cure. Jill asks him: "What ought I to do?" Why would Jack's telling Jill that she ought to give A constitute good advice?

Problematic answers:

- (i) Because he is morally justified to lie to Jill (Zimmerman 2008).
- (ii) Because advisers and morally conscientious deliberators are concerned with different 'ought' propositions (cf. Björnsson and Finlay 2010).
- (iii) Because epistemic circumstances are irrelevant to our obligations (Graham 2010).

The problem of advice: How can we account for the fact that advisers can base their advice on information that is better than the agent's, without assuming that they (i) speak falsely or (ii) talk past the agent, and without (iii) violating Zimmerman's constraint #2?

Constraint #2: Conscientiousness is incompatible with intentional wrongdoing.

A proposal for solution (cf. Kiesewetter 2011 and 2017, Ch. 8):

Synchronic reason statement: At t , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t .

Diachronic reason statement: At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 .

Synchronic evidence constraint (SEC): At t , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t , only if at t , A's evidence includes R.

General evidence constraint (GEC): At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 , only if A's evidence at t_2 would include R if A conformed to her decisive reasons at every t from t_1 to t_2 .

Thesis: The problem of advice can be solved by understanding perspectivism in terms of (GEC).

Note: (GEC) is not ad hoc – it can be derived from (SEC) and:

General account: At t_1 , R is a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 iff (i) at t_1 , R is the case (as are background conditions C_i , ..., and C_n), and (ii) if A conformed to her decisive reasons at every t from t_1 to t_2 , then at t_2 , R would be a reason for A to ϕ at t_2 (partly because of C_i , ..., and C_n).

Zimmerman's new view (2014, 82–87):

Jill's question "What ought I to do?" is ambiguous between:

1. What ought_{now} I to do_{later}?
2. What ought_{later} I to do_{later}?
3. What would it be the case that I ought_{later} to do_{later} if at every time *t* between now and later *we* did what *we* ought_t to do_t?

Thesis: The problem of advice can be solved by interpreting Jill along the lines of (3).

Two questions:

- a) Does this interpretation solve the problem of advice?
- b) Is it a legitimate interpretation of Jill's question?

Answer to the first question: No, because it fails to accommodate condition (iii), by being incompatible with Zimmerman's constraint #2.

Jackass. Jill knows that Jack knows which of A or C is the curing drug. Jill asks Jack for advice: "What ought I to do?" Unfortunately, however, Jack is being an idiot. He's unwilling to share his information with Jill and just shrugs his shoulders.

- In *Jackass*, moral conscientiousness dictates giving B. But if we interpret Jill's question along the lines of (3), she would have to conclude that giving B is definitely wrong.

To avoid this problem, Zimmerman needs to substitute (4) for (3):

4. What would it be the case that I ought_{later} to do_{later} if at every time *t* between now and later *I* did what *I* ought_t to do_t?

Second question: Why should a complex counterfactual question like (4) be a legitimate interpretation of the question "What ought I to do?"

- A plausible answer: Because to ask (4) is to ask the same as to ask (1) (as entailed by my account).
- But: Zimmerman cannot give this answer, because he insists that present (diachronic) obligations are constrained by present evidence.

Three final points:

1. Zimmerman's only reason for his interpretation seems to be that it solves a problem for his view. But this is ad hoc. We need at least *some* independent reason to accept it.
2. Zimmerman's solution de facto multiplies senses of 'ought' and has unacceptable implications about when people change the subject.
3. Zimmerman has never offered any argument for the claim that diachronic obligations are constrained by present evidence. Nor has anyone else.

References

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