Contra - The Moral Point of View

Henry D. Aiken

Brandeis University

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HENRY D. AIKEN
Professor of Philosophy
Brandeis University
I. A PRELIMINARY STATEMENT OF ONE PHILOSOPHER’S PHILOSOPHICAL POINT OF VIEW

In my own philosophical writings, I have found it useful on many occasions to defend logically weak theses. As I conceive this principle, a thesis is tolerably weak only if one can hold to it without doing violence to other principles in the fields in question. The main reason for adhering to such a precept, for it is only that, is in order to help us to ensure that mood of unstudied calm which is perhaps merely another way of referring to wisdom. As will be seen, I am somewhat old fashioned; I still believe that the business of philosophy is the pursuit of wisdom, though what wisdom amounts to is a philosophical problem of the first order. Why should one seek any form of wisdom? What good does it do? Well, for philosophical, as well as for other human purposes, it leaves us free to reflect upon our human problems without falling asleep: one cannot think straight about anything, if one is subject to what David Hume called the violent passions. Such, a principle of weakness, as I shall henceforth call it, should, of course, be weakly held. There are exceptions to every rule, and this is one of them.

The main point for stressing the principle of weakness at the outset is plain: it helps to save truth and labor. Why? Only, I think, because it disposes us to avoid definitive, hard, strong rules or principles, in terms of which others have tried, usually without success, to formulate the necessary and sufficient conditions of some ideal, form of thought, discourse, action, or life, which at any given time, they may have in view. Strongly, and hence violently held, any point of view is bound to appear absolute. And with William James, I say “Damn the absolute!”

A word of caution is now in order. In this essay, I shall try to abide by the principle of weakness in the following examination of what some philosophers have called “the moral point of view”, and in what many others have called “the principle, or principles, of morals”. I shall claim that the concept of morals, or morality, is not a completely open one. A completely open concept, in my view, doesn’t make sense. For a completely open concept would be indistinguishable from any other concept whatever. A completely open concept, in fact, is no concept at all. In many cases, and particularly in the case of morality, necessary conditions can and must be found. We come in sight of them when we find that a statement, including above all, a statement of principle appears, as we ponder it more closely, not simply false, but paradoxical. Thus most of us, I should hope, would want to say, after only a moment’s hesitation, that it is false that, despite Kant, honesty is always the best policy. Generally speaking, most reasonable moral agents have learned, sometimes by bitter experience, that honesty is usually the best policy, or else a very good policy, even though it may be necessary on occasion to tell lies. Were someone to say that adultery is always the best policy, we would have to say “no”. Sometimes adultery is justifiable, as all but absolutists in morals or religion will, at this late date, usually admit. As Aristotle puts it, moral principles are true “only for the most part”.

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In this essay, I argue against the widespread view, still as popular among philosophers as it has been in the past, that there is, or should be, one and only one thing that answers to the phrase "the moral point of view". Accordingly, I contend that there is no closed set of principle of morals and that morality is not a wholly distinguishable institution or discipline. Or, which comes to the same thing, I shall contend that "the moral point of view" is, in practice, an empty phrase.

This I assert from a logical point of view. (It is worth noting, in passing, that Quine calls his early volume of papers "From a Logical Point of View", and not "From the Logical Point of View".) And I imagine that from what I know of his later writings, he would question the viability of something called "the logical point of view". But, of course, there is more to it than that. For, from a moral or from a psychological point of view, I hope to show that those who seriously commit themselves to the doctrine of "the moral point of view", become incapacitated for every-day moral deliberations, decisions and choices. Toward the close of this essay, I shall argue, in fact, that those who take the moral point of view earnestly fall ineluctably into skepticism. Indeed, they become involved in a kind of hermeneutic circle. They hope by interpretation to bring us back to a better understanding of true religion and true morality. But as they continually pursue their interpretations, and pile them up, one upon the other, they lead themselves farther and farther away from practical moral reflections and decisions. We must break the circle. Analysis and interpretation are unavoidable. But we are also men and women of affairs, and we have other things to do in the world save endlessly pursue our philosophical investigations. In short, it is not the part of wisdom to think too much about it.

II. SOME VIEWS OF MORALITY NOT ADVANCED IN THIS ESSAY

Before attempting to show why the so-called moral point of view cannot be sustained, let me now indicate summarily, and without argument, some attitudes toward moral activities of all sorts with which I have no sympathy. It is essential to specify a few of them before proceeding. The reason is that exponents of "the moral point of view" commonly argue that its abandonment necessarily commits its adversaries to some form of ethical relativism, skepticism or, more ultimately, nihilism. I have no very apt label for the point of which I defend. Perhaps the following phrase may suggest the drift of the point of view toward morals, and other subjects, which I wish to defend. Construed narrowly, the point of view I have in mind may be called, in ethics and elsewhere, "pluralistic objectivism".

Let me now say something about some of the theses in philosophy for which I am not arguing.

First of all, I am not suggesting that there are no moral principles. Secondly, I am not even denying that there are principles of morals, or better, moral principles. I am denying only that such principles constitute something called "the principles of morals". Thirdly, I am not suggesting either that morality is non-cognitive or that moral principles and judgments are merely emotive. In my view, all genuine moral discourse, including moral principles, is corrigible, and hence cognitive. Later I shall argue that, as a matter of principle, corrigibility is merely the other side of the coin of cognitiveness, in ethics and elsewhere. Absolute incorrigibility, in my view, is merely a form of irrationality. Fourthly, in speaking of rationality I mean nothing more than reasonableness. For my part, a reasonable person is a rational one. Nowhere do I hold that all, or most,
well-tested moral principles are without justification. On this score, my position is weak: our moral principles, by and large, should be regarded as innocent until proved guilty, but of course, when they are held in good faith by ordinary persons of good will. Fifthly, I am not defending any form of moral complacency. Common sense, in morality, as elsewhere, is not a kind of anti-philosophical poor man's divinity. So I am not representing the widespread view that it is not worthwhile to study morality and the principles and ideals pertaining to it. Nor am I suggesting that moral philosophy is a mistake or based upon a mistake as Prichard is sometimes taken to be saying. After all, Prichard was doing moral philosophy, and doing it extremely well, in his famous essay “Is Moral Philosophy Based Upon a Mistake?” Without the help of better, though always corrigible, moral reflection, moral theory is helpless before the extravagant claims of those who extol “the moral point of view”.

III. SOME MAIN HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY VERSIONS OF THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW

The reader will doubtless want to know in advance some of the main moral theories which I oppose in this paper. For purposes of orientation, therefore, the following list may be of use.

The main classical forms of the doctrine in question derive historically from the Stoic doctrine of natural law. The influence of Stoicism is evident, I think, in such works as St. Thomas Aquinas' Treatise on Law, in Locke's Second Treatise on Civil Government, and in our own Declaration of Independence. Most notably, however, what is now called “the moral point of view” is to be found in an extreme form in the ethics of Kant.

Among the great moral philosophies of more recent times, utilitarianism, particularly in its Benthamite formulation, clearly represents, in the so-called Principle of Utility, a version of “the moral point of view”. In fact, Bentham holds the principle of utility to be the one and only supreme governing principle of morals, and in this respect, if in no other, his position is precisely the same as Kant's.

Among contemporary representatives of the doctrine, it was Kurt Baier, of course, who gave the doctrine its name in his book, The Moral Point of View. Let me praise Baier's work here, for its clarity and sweep, even though I don't discuss it much in these pages. In my view, by all odds the most important, the subtlest, and the most stimulating of all contemporary writers who have defended the moral point of view is William Frankena.

Here I shall not include the two major moral intuitionists, Ross and Prichard, since as I read them, they not only do not subscribe to the moral point of view, but both of them, in fact, and on principle, oppose it. More recently, John Rawls is undoubtedly the most famous advocate of a version of the doctrine in his work A Theory of Justice. It should be added that most, although not all, of Rawls' critics also take the moral point of view. So far as I can see they differ from him only in regard to the principle(s) of justice which they take to be basic. So the disputes between them and Rawls, so far as this essay is concerned, may be regarded largely as a closet quarrel.

In the rest of this paper I shall devote my own attention primarily to William Frankena, my old friend and most friendly philosophical adversary.

It is now time that something should be said about my own predecessors.
Among classic moral philosophers which have opposed the point of view in question, the greatest of all, to my mind, is David Hume. Throughout my whole philosophical career, Hume has been my own exemplum of what a moral philosopher should strive to be. I wrote my own Ph.D. dissertation on Hume’s moral and political philosophy, the other on his Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion. The second introduction is brief, but it shows my own sense of the originality of Hume’s second greatest work. But it is in Book III of A Treatise of Human Nature that his enormous power as a moral philosopher is developed in extenso.

In our own time, probably the most distinguished American opponent of the moral point of view is C. L. Stevenson, to whose memory this essay is dedicated. I shall say little here about Stevenson’s so-called “emotive theory” of ethics, though it should be remembered that he himself came to reject the theory of emotive meaning as it applies to ethics.

In my view, three earlier American philosophers have also defended what I have called “objective pluralism”. These are William James, George Santayana and John Dewey. The latter, be it noted, greatly influenced Stevenson. All of them have a good deal in common with Hume’s common sense liberalism; and one can find it running in various ways through their writings.

Not surprisingly, a good deal of support for my approach to the philosophical problems of morals may be found in writings of the English intuitionists, both early and late. Here, three powerful contributors to the tradition of intuitionism deserve mention.

The first, of course, is G. E. Moore. Moore, who gave “the naturalistic fallacy” its name, was perhaps the first moral philosopher in recent times to see why there can be no such thing as the one and only set of principles of morals. And it was Moore who first used, explicitly, the so-called open question argument in showing the errors inherent, not only in empiricist versions of ethical naturalism, including Benthamite utilitarianism, but also those associated with Kantian formalistic rationalism and with metaphysical ethical theories which identify “goodness” with “being” or “reality”. Moore’s fundamental mistake, as Prichard has shown, consisted in his assumption that the fundamental ethical term is “good”, and that such other terms as “right” and “ought” are definable in relation to, or else in terms of it. As everyone knows, Moore regards “good” and “ought to be” as synonyms. He holds, also, that “right action” can be defined, without loss of meaning, as “action conducive to the greatest good”. He takes the same view of any action of which it may be said that it “ought to be performed”. What Moore failed to see is that the open question may significantly be raised with respect to any proposition of any action which is, or is believed to be, conductive to something called “the greatest good”. Let us suppose that it would be to the greatest good, whether in the long run, or in the foreseeable future that Henry Aiken should stop writing essays against the moral point of view. Nevertheless, regardless of one’s criterion for judging what is good, it still may be asked, as I myself have repeatedly done, “But after all, and upon sober second thought, isn’t it quite possible that Henry Aiken ought still to continue writing moral philosophy”? What principles of morals absolutely forbid it? Not justice, surely. Benevolence then? General utility? The answers to these questions remain unclear. And they remain so at both ends: the principles themselves are too loose and too many to make it in
the least certain which applies most securely to this particular case or situation. Moreover, the case itself involves many uncertainties, not at the fringes only, but at the center. Who is Henry Aiken, what is he, here and now? Questions upon questions multiply in such profusion that one is tempted to flip a coin, which, it must be confessed, has its virtue in circumstances where a decision on such a basis, for such a reason, if no other principle, or rule, obtrudes itself decisively. More to the point is the possibility that I simply ought to go on making the effort to refute the doctrine of “the moral point of view”, come hell or high water; because, so to say, it is the most important thing in the circumstances for me to do. And, I am bound to add, much the same would hold, were Frankena or some other exponent of “the moral point of view”, to ask himself whether he ought to get on with his own philosophical job of work.

The line I am taking strikes me as characteristic of Prichard. He does not, of course, deny that we should abandon moral principles as action guides, though this reading of the essay has sometimes occurred to other readers. What he does say is that no such principle, or group of principles, ever provide air-tight reasons for doing this thing, or performing this action rather than that. One can ask, if one is so minded, “But ought I to do this --?” And one can always answer “Yes” (or “No”) even when one can find no compelling reason whatever for doing or not doing it: “The sense of obligation...is absolutely underivative or immediate.” (Prichard, M. O. p.7). More clearly, “the sense of obligation to do this thing is immediate”. It comes when it comes, not with perfect assurance, no doubt, but at any rate with sufficient assurance. To employ Prichard’s own word, we “appreciate” that this is the right thing to do, the thing we ought to do. Or, to employ another word, which I borrow from Aristotle (and Kant), we judge that we ought to do this thing or that. You may say, if you like, that in so doing we are erecting judgment into a principle. Very well. But then the principle of judgment is nothing else than the principle which permits, or requires that, having given as much time as we can afford, we simply do what our own consciences tell us to do.

I have not the space here to examine in any detail Prichard’s discussion of the “two preliminaries” which “may be necessary” in deciding what we ought to do, here and now. Reasonably enough, Prichard points out that we may have to consider more fully than we have done hitherto, the probable consequences of a proposed action, or line of action. And of course, we have also to bring into play our sense of those moral rules, or principles, which have, or appear to have, a bearing upon the case at hand. Thus, for example, if someone has done us a kindness, not entirely out of a desire to please, but also from a sense of what moral sentiment requires, then, in my book, we owe him or her a corresponding debt of gratitude, which we are bound to discharge, other things being equal, in an appropriate situation. And, if the situation is appropriate, we should, to say the least, offer him or her our thanks and good wishes. This is not a mere matter of common courtesy, though courtesy has its moral implications: it is a matter of obligation. We ought, again, other things being equal, and so we are obliged to consider whether we should show him our gratitude. In short, as Prichard would admit, or say, we may have to decide whether what we should do here and now is to be decided solely in virtue of our relationship to the individual in question or whether some other factor in the situation requires that something else be done or not done. What would that something else be? We do not have to put a name on it, and perhaps we are unable to find an appropriate name, and, hence, a corresponding moral rule of principle.
Moral diversity, then, is a fact of life. It cannot be gainsaid by talk about “the moral point of view”, “the principles of morals”, or what, ideally, we ought to accept as the “whole duty of man”.

Let me emphasize, at once, that I take no satisfaction in recognizing that ultimate, or penultimate, moral disagreements about matters of principle exist, which play hob with the philosophical doctrine of the moral point of view. My main point here is much the same as Prichard’s and, now let me add, that of Sir David Ross, who is the other great intuitionist I wish to enlist as an ally in my crusade against the doctrine that there is a definitive, closed set of basic moral principles, binding, once and for all, upon every moral human being whatever. Ross is more famous than Prichard as an intuitionist of what may be called “the Oxford School” of the first third of the present century. Nevertheless, his account of what he calls “prima facie duties” (and rights) is a permanent contribution to the progress of moral philosophy. What is so impressive about these great ethicists is that, unlike Moore, they are completely free of the objectionable epistemological and metaphysical fairy tales which afflicted Moore. They make it quite clear that so-called intuitionism is not an outmoded form of moral theorizing but, on the contrary, one permanent and natural way of telling what needs to be said about the moral life as experienced by ordinary persons. Hume, no doubt about it, is a greater philosopher than Ross and Prichard. And so is William James. But they can be assimilated into the philosophical traditions of Hume and James, and let me add, Santayana. It is in that tradition that this monograph belongs.

Before closing this indispensable section on positions which I shall be opposing in the section that follows, let me now go back to Frankena and explain a bit more fully why I choose him as my principle adversary in this essay. My reasons are essentially three: Frankena’s classic early essay, “The Naturalistic Fallacy” is without doubt the strongest attack upon it and the open question argument in existence. Since first reading it, I have known, beyond peradventure, who my principle adversary would be and having reread it recently, for the tenth time, I am sure of the truth of this claim as I was at the time. Bluntly, this monograph would never have been undertaken, or even conceived, without Frankena’s paper. It is a pearl of great price, as more recent exponents of the doctrines ranged here under the heading of “the moral point of view” well know. Secondly, and for reasons which, even now, I only partly understand, Frankena seems to have instinctively recognized my own philosophical writings, and perhaps my conversations with him over the years, as one of his primary goads, and guide, in his never-ending battle against my “pluralistic objectivism”. Any close reading of his book Perspective in Moral Philosophy will bear me out. But I think my friend will not object if I add that he himself has said as much to me more than once in our many discussions of the problems of ethics over several decades. He has also said the same thing, more than once, in our correspondence. Just the other day, I received a letter from him in which he said, in effect, that very often he has felt my philosophical eye upon him as he has composed some of his more recent articles and monographs, including above all, the splendid essay “The Principles of Morals”, which, along with “The Naturalistic Fallacy”, supplies the basic text for my own thinking throughout this piece. There remains a third, and more important reason for choosing Frankena’s work as my primary text. Although he has done his best work hitherto in his essays, and though he is, like myself, as essayist to
the manor born, Frankena is a systematic thinker, and there can be no doubt that, even without his *Carus Lectures*, his collected essays explain his account of what the so-called moral point of view really is. It exists, and so far as I know, there is nothing in the contemporary literature in defense of the moral point of view to compare to it.

IV. THE MAIN CONTENTIONS OF THE MORAL POINT OF VIEW AS REPRESENTED BY WILLIAM FRANKENA

There are two fundamental ways of thinking about morality and moralities Frankena tells us. One is the “sociological” (or, as I like to say “out house”) way. The other is the “moral”, “ethical” (or, again as I would put it “in house”) way. In the former case, we may speak unproblematically about “the morality of the Chinese”, “ancient morality”, or more simply “a moral code”. (These are Frankena’s examples.) In the latter case, we are not simply asserting something about someone’s (or group’s) moral code but, on the contrary, we are asserting (or applying) propositions from some point of view which we take to be representative of “the moral law”, “the principles of morality”, “what morality requires”, or more simply, “true morality”. (Again, these are Frankena’s examples.)

Frankena and I are concerned primarily about the latter. To put it in another way, we are concerned only about those who represent the point of view in question, those, that is to say, who “belong”.

It may be added here, for purposes of clarification, that the “sociological” way of thinking about morality, or morals, is usually considered “inactive”. That is to say, it carries with it no moral commitments of any sort, *pro* or *con*. It is inactive in the same way that statements about other people’s manners of dress, ways of building their houses, and so on, are so. Thus, if I should say that the Chinese usually build houses with flat roofs, I would be speaking, not morally, but sociologically and hence inactively. But if I should say that the morally good person follows the principle of utility (in one of its interpretations) in making his or her moral judgments, I would be speaking morally and hence actively.

In order to clarify what is meant by Frankena and myself in speaking of active moral judgments or statements, I shall introduce his useful term “action guide”. Now, to be sure, there are some who have not supposed that moral judgments or statements, including statements of principle, such as the principle of utility, are intentionally, or formally, to be regarded as action guides. Following Moore, they have commonly been regarded as “naturalists”. Examples that come readily to mind are Ralph Barton Perry and, somewhat more problematically, John Dewey. Perry explicitly, and Dewey less clearly and consistently, have usually contended that moral, or ethical, or “value” judgments are simply statements of fact, in the same way that the statement that some people are cross-eyed are so. In their view, as Perry used to put it, we take value judgments seriously only because we are interested in values. So the connection in this view is purely “psychological”. And Dewey, on occasion, has said precisely the same thing though, as usual, his remarks are less easy to interpret. But it is not only the so-called naturalists who have stated or implied that ethical judgments are inactive. The same is true of such intuitionists as Moore. When Moore asserted that the contemplation of beautiful objects or acts of kindness are intrinsically good, he contended that such acts or rather,
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statements about them, are merely factual, and hence not to be taken, logically, as action guides. Many others have also taken the same view of the matter.

However, despite appearances to the contrary, most of the greatest philosophers, past and present, have regarded moral judgments, including judgments of principle, as necessarily (or logically) action guides and they have generally assumed, or argued, that when we assert, for example, that happiness is the only thing that is good for its own sake, we are thereby committing ourselves to the pursuit of happiness. Aristotle is an important case in point. Hume, quite plainly, is another and the same is true of Kant and, despite Moore, J. S. Mill.

Here qualification must be made. This will be seen to be of great importance later on. Hume, for example, has often, although as I have argued many times, mistakenly been taken to be an emotivist, in the same way that A. J. Ayer and C. L. Stevenson have been taken to be, or have themselves asserted that they are emotivists. The issue between Frankena and myself does not concern emotivism and the emotivists. Neither of us has ever regarded himself as an emotivist, or regarded the other as an emotivist. In my case, despite my everlasting arguments in paper after paper, against emotivism, including Stevenson's own earlier version of the emotive theory, he himself, in a review of my book Reason and Conduct, gave it a rather flattering compliment. Why? Because in his view, and despite my protestations, I was an emotivist of sorts. Some, though not many have regarded my views as, in some sense, "non-cognitivist". Why? Only, I think, because I have always regarded moral judgments as guides to action rather than as straight-forward factual statements. Frankena, however, has never been thought of as an emotivist, though his new talk about action guides might have disposed Stevenson to regard even him as an emotivist! So let us drop the question of emotivism, and the question whether Frankena and I are, or are not, emotivists, for the time being.

We now come to the central topic. Frankena contends not only that there are necessary principles of morals, but also that there is one single set of them which is both necessary and sufficient. I do not. In my view there are indeed moral principles. I have called them, in Reason and Conduct, "preceptive principles". And I am now prepared to admit that within a certain group such principles may be so ingrained, and so "common-sensical" that they are regarded as the principles of morals -- but only for that group, whether its members know it or not. They are preceptive, in my opinion, because they are neither constitutive nor, finally, strictly institutional rules, necessary to the identity of the institution -- in this case the so-called institution of "morality". But this takes us right back to the beginning. And there is no need, at this stage, to do this. So the issue between Frankena and me is now fairly clearly joined.

In passing, it is worthwhile to say something about the question whether the issue between Frankena and me is an ontological or metaphysical issue, or merely a "logical" or "linguistic" one. I am prepared to take it both ways. Following Wittgenstein, I do indeed believe that moral utterances are "forms of words". But, again following him, I also regard them without hesitation, as articulations of "forms of life". And the articulation of a form of life is the articulation of something that is real, has being; put it any way you like. The only point that needs reemphasis here, is that morality, in whatever way you case to take it, is that reality is not limited to any one kind of being. I am not a follower of Parmenides and neither is Frankena. What I am denying, and Frankena is clearly asserting, is that there is anything in reality represented, or expressed, by the phrase "the moral point of view" or "the principles of
morals”. More specifically, I am denying that there is anything at all in this or any other possible world corresponding to what a Dutch dictionary quoted by Frankena, calls, “the totality of the norms that should govern the moral life”. Frankena reformulates this definition in other terms, which need not detain us here, but he essentially agrees with it.

It is, of course, a completely empty claim to assert that there are necessary and sufficient conditions definitive of the moral point of view, or the principles of morals, unless one can say precisely what they are. And so, for the time being, I shall waive the question, which seems to me utterly absurd, whether there is anything at all corresponding to the totality of norms that should govern the moral life.

More interesting, and more important, is the fact that exponents of the moral point of view do not themselves agree about more than a handful of such conditions. But they do agree, certainly, about some of them. Let us consider a minimal list. First, of course, are the logical, or linguistic, conditions of consistency and generality. But these hold also, for the most part, of other realms of discourse and reality. So, leaving the emotivists aside, we may say confidently that all moral philosophers accept them as a matter of course. Secondly, and far more importantly, exponents of the moral point of view or, again, the principles of morals, insist that there are certain distinctive moral, or ethical, conditions of morality, which are not true or necessary of other basic institutions such as science, art, or religion. (Again, let me remind the reader that I am doubtful whether sharp distinctions of any sort can be made between these or any other so-called “institutions”. But let that pass.) The first of these distinctive conditions of morality, it is agreed, is that of practicability. Let us now consider this condition in some detail.

First it must be said that the condition of practicability may be taken in two ways. As Kant put it, morality belongs to the domain of the practical, rather than merely theoretical or speculative reason. A principle is a practical principle to Kant, as well as for Frankena and me, because it is meant to guide action and, therefore, our deliberations, and our judgments on all levels. But, as Kant also said, “ought implies can”. And this principle may be construed in several ways. Here, I shall assume that it means that no one can be bound by any principle (of morals) unless he can in conscience accept it. Here, as I pointed out in Reason and Conduct, Kant faces the whole question of moral autonomy which, be it said at once, is not obviously the same question as that of the autonomy of morals. The question of moral autonomy is the question concerning the autonomy of individual moral agents, the autonomy, that is, of their consciences. The question concerning the autonomy of morals, or morality, returns us at once back to the question concerning the autonomy of the institution of morality, not to mention the autonomy of other institutions.

Now Frankena argues, again like Kant, that if X is a principle of morals, then he ought to accept it, and that he can do so, if he will. Usually this is taken to mean that any rational person, not somehow morally defective, ought to accept it, and that he would recognize that he ought to do so. But here we face the highly important question of normality, and it is hardly necessary for me here to point out that it is not a clear one.

But there is still another implication of Kant’s maxim, “ought implies can” which needs comment.

Now if I ought to accept X, then this implies clearly, that in principle, I can indeed adhere to it, carry it out, be guided by it, or take it as an action guide, in
ordinary circumstances. The point is simply this: if ought is limited by can, so can may be bended by ought. If I try hard enough to keep from bearing false witness, then I can do it -- at least within limits, which are not here in question. The point is that: the pressure of my will may modify, or bend, the limits of what I can do in the circumstances. So the maxim that “ought implies can” has two sides, or aspects, which are not usually observed by most moral philosophers. And that will do, I think, for this central feature of the maxim. It needs only to be added that Frankena has nothing to say about it.

Let us now turn to another principle (a second principle, by my present count) which seems innocuous to most moral philosophers, and especially those who take the moral point of view. In fact, all of them, to my knowledge, regard it as a mere corollary of the consistency principle. This is the so-called principle of universalizability. In the Bible, it is known as The Golden Rule. Kant’s version, however, is the one that requires our attention here. And it is necessary to state it, at least in its first formulation, fairly precisely. In the Grundlegung it goes like this: Act in such a way that the maxim of your action may be willed to be a universal law of nature. In the Second Critique, however, it is stated much better: Act in such a way that the maxim of your action may be willed to be the principle of a universal legislation. The improvement needs little comment. We are talking here not of laws of nature, save in the sense in which the Stoics, Locke and others have talked of them: that is to say, of laws, or principles, of morals themselves. In Locke’s case, for example, the natural law which confers upon us the rights of life, liberty and property, are clearly not physical but rather moral laws. Locke himself plainly took it for granted that the right to life is a moral right, and the principle that formulates it is a moral principle. It governs the conduct of most persons in a state of nature. But it also serves as the basis of the contract which a group of individuals enter into in forming a politically organized society. So, in essence, Locke is in agreement with the formulation proposed by Kant in the Second Critique, though of course he said nothing, to my knowledge, about the question of universalizability at all.

But is the universalizability principle an essential principle of morals, inherent in the very conception of it? Frankena, like Kant, holds that it is. I do not. Nor do I care in the least whether it is regarded as a “formal” or merely as an essential “material principle”. I do not assume, beyond question, that my moral principles, or yours, or anyone else’s are universalizable, whether formally or materially. I am not even sure that it would be right of me to universalize, or try to universalize most, or perhaps even any, of my moral principles or precepts. Even consistency has been spoken of, not without point by Emerson, as “The hobgoblin of little minds”. We may try to be consistent, but it does not follow that we must be so. It is not even clear that we can be consistent, in all or most instances, even if we try. Anyway, I can think of situations in which I would be very reluctant to try to universalize my own precepts. Let me give an example. One of my precepts is this: I (or we) should act in such a way that I (or we) has to respect the right to habeus corpus. But I am not at all sure that I would be prepared to universalize it, certainly not without qualification. In my view, every sensible moral principle, or imperative, has built into it an “unless” clause, which says, in effect, that it should be observed ceterus paribus or other things equal. But things are rarely equal. How can we know when they are equal save in a very general way? In the case of habeus corpus, there are many things to be considered, and the pros and cons in most cases can be and have been argued
endlessly. Consider for example, Lincoln’s famous (or infamous) suspension of that right during the first ninety days after the outbreak of the Civil War. It has been argued that, in the circumstances, he was justified, since there was no time to take up every individual case, one at a time, and that, as we know, the wheels of justice move very slowly indeed. But it has also been argued, as I myself have done, that the right to habeus corpus, although no sacred, is a right, not only within our conception of just law, but also to justice itself, morally as well as legally. I do not say that it may never be suspended. I say only that it should not be suspended as a rule. And I admit that there have been many circumstances when there has not been time to be too scrupulous about its observance. So, in brief, I am not prepared to universalize habeus corpus, however, important I regard it.

It is now time to make a distinction between universalizability and generalizability, and I am certainly prepared to generalize. As a general rule, it seems to me, habeus corpus is unexceptionable. Generally speaking, I believe that it is wrong to trespass, in any serious way, upon other people’s property -- if they do not have too much of it, as some do. So I am ready to generalize. But I am not willing to universalize. And I must let it go at that.

Now we must turn to principles which are usually admitted to be substantive as well as formal. That is to say, they affect our conduct in very material ways. And it cannot be doubted that those who take the moral point of view are not by any means agreed among themselves about them. Consider, again, utilitarianism and, for present purposes, I shan’t worry which one is taken. Why? Well, the answer is obvious. Many philosophers, to go no further, reject utilitarianism, and even utilitarians disagree radically whether the principle of utility is a principle concerned with the greatest happiness or, on the contrary, with the least suffering. Or else they have insisted that least suffering is not the same thing as least pain. Suffering, I myself believe, is far more fundamental, as a moral concern, than happiness. Happiness, despite Jefferson, is still not a right, even if the pursuit of it is a right. Reduce suffering strikes me as something close to a first moral commandment or principle. Increase happiness, not to mention pursue it, does not.

Other philosophers who have rejected the principle of utility have spoken of a principle of universal benevolence. And that, surely, is a substantive principle. Nor does it matter, for our purposes, whether it be directed to the reduction of suffering or the increase of happiness. Probably it is directed to both. And Frankena, explicitly, has adopted it. However, Frankena has held that in addition to benevolence, there must be a principle of justice, which is different from it. For present purposes, it is enough to say that Frankena, both in his Ethics and in his essay on “The Principles of Morality“, concedes that they are not the same, and that neither can be derived from the other. So he, and he is not alone, holds that there are at least two basic material or substantive principles of morals. He goes no farther: that is to say he holds that there are two, and only two, such principles.

But, while he holds that they are consistent with one another, he does not show this. It is not enough, to my mind, simply to assert that, in principle, they must not conflict. He must prove, in some practical sense, that they do not. But he does not do this.

Let us now consider some ways of avoiding conflict between them. Well, it is obvious that one could do so merely by showing that one of them, it doesn’t matter here which, is a corollary of the other. And this Frankena does not do.
Nor does he think that it can be done. Other alternatives, supplied in the first instance by Rawls, come to mind. Thus, following Rawls, one might seek to establish a certain priority principle. Or, since it comes to the same thing, one might seek to establish a certain principle of hierarchy between benevolence and justice. While Rawls himself is undoubtedly a benevolenist in some large sense of the term, his two basic principles, as everyone knows, are his so-called "liberty principle" and his so-called "principle of difference". But we are not here concerned with Rawls. Our concern is with justice and benevolence as Frankena, and behind him perhaps, Hume, conceive them. Now Hume is of no help here. For although Hume, for the most part, would probably give the nod to benevolence, Frankena does not. So he is left with a possibility of conflict which he nowhere adequately resolves.

V. SOME EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROBLEMS

1. The Problem of Simplicity

We have now to consider the question of simplicity as an epistemological principle. It has been vigorously defended by William James in "The Sentiment of Rationality". It has been more recently defended by W. V. Quine in Word and Object. Both philosophers regard it, not simply as a labor-saving device, although that fact is not without importance, but as a principle of human knowledge itself in all spheres, including science, ethics, education, law, etc.

What can be said for this contention? Let me say at the outset that I agree with it up to a point and I believe that the above-mentioned philosophers also agree with it only up to a point. Other things equal, which again, they rarely are, the simpler theory has usually though not always, been preferred to those which are less simple, as regards its truth claims. Examples come readily to mind. The Copernican theory is preferred to the Ptolemaic on grounds of simplicity. I spare the reader other examples.

2. The Problem of Intuitionism Again

We have next to consider the question of whether intuitions, in ethics or elsewhere, can ever be finally eliminated. Again, I do not think so, and I doubt whether, in the end, the previous authors mentioned above think so, although of this I am uncertain.

Why do we prefer, if we do, simpler theories to those that are more complex? I should argue that, in the end, we do so intuitively. It is not written into the heavens that simple theories are truer than those that are more complex. In the end, we must resort to intuition. And that, for the present, is all that I have to say on that subject.

3. The Problem of Uncertainty

Frankena is committed, in principle, to the thesis that the moral point of view is, for all practical purposes anyway, certain. This is what he means in speaking of "true morality". But I am bound to say that one can scarcely believe this. Uncertainty about virtually anything seems clearly part of the human condition itself. The great merit of David Hume is his commitment, despite all appearances to the contrary, to fallibilism. In this, of course, William James is follower, though he develops his radical pluralism in somewhat different ways. However, if we must commit ourselves to fallibilism, realism, pluralism and the rest, then pretty plainly we must also commit ourselves, in effect, to a principle
of uncertainty though, of course, it also is one among many. Uncertainty enters into every sphere of human activity and existence. It enters into metaphysics, theory of knowledge, ethics, politics, law, whatever.

4. The Question of Common Sense
Here I do not mean to invoke the name of Thomas Reid, although he is a more interesting thinker that those who do not read his writings know and in these days, very few read Reid. Who does follow a principle of common sense? Well, I can think of a good many: Hume, Peirce, James, many others. To reject common sense in order to go in search of transcendental deductions, as Kant does, in order to justify them, or some of them, is also to reject common sense itself. We must start with common sense and we must come back in the end to it. F. H. Bradley's pleasantry is apropos here: "Philosophy is a finding of bad reasons for what every ordinary person believes on instinct". Bradley thereby proclaims himself, despite all appearances to the contrary, to understand this reality. Philosophy as the pursuit of wisdom, is at the same time a pursuit of the fundamental common sense about the conduct of life, not for ourselves, as individuals, only for everyone else that concerns us. And that is that.

5. The Questions of De Facto Versus Normative Agreement
Frankena tells us that the concern of ethics is concern not with de facto but normative agreements, both linguistically and morally. And he goes so far as to claim this both historically and across cultures everywhere. His contention, in short, is that he is not concerned with how we in fact do use the language of morals but only with the question how we ought to use it. In short, he means to tell us that philosophers ought to be concerned only with questions about how we ought to talk about right and wrong or what we ought to do. How is this possible? How in the world can he go about accomplishing such an end? To my mind, the very project seems ridiculous.

All the same, Frankena’s disputes with me, as well as with other philosophers including Moore, have always been disagreements which assumed that we were at least talking about the ordinary uses or meanings of such words as “good”, “right”, and “ought”. His dispute with Moore in “The Naturalistic Fallacy” concerns the possibility of defining “good” in at least one of its ordinary senses. Only recently has he switched, and I do not fully understand why. Of course, there is some normative element in all employments of words. That is why we have dictionaries. But we assume that, most of the time, most of us understand one another. And this we cannot do unless we speak a common tongue which we use in the same way and take for granted that we are, for the time being, using correctly.

This issue, by the way, has nothing whatever to do with Malcolm’s old contention that ordinary language is correct language (following Moore). I, for my part, want no part of such a thesis. Ordinary language, to be sure, is our mother tongue, and we learn more specialized languages and expressions only by stages, as we need to do so. But the language of the calculus, although a specialized language which not everyone knows or cares to learn, is a very common ordinary language. The same is true of many words. Let me give an example or two. “Carnadine” is not a very ordinary word, though you will find it in the dictionary. It is a rather special word, used by Shakespeare for a rather special purpose in a play, and very few uninstructed persons understand it. The same is true of “labyrinthine” and many others. But the point is plain.
The question of substantive ethical agreement as well as ethical disagreement is our central concern. Frankena does seem to think that there is, or should be, fundamental agreement about basic ethical principles. And he does hold that this is true, not only historically but across all cultures from east to west and from north to south. I shall simply put this question to him: How does he know? Indeed, how can he know? Even if he is right, I cannot see that he has shown in the least that everyone, really, subscribes to something called “true morality”, as he calls it. The ordinary language of morals, and the ordinary uses of ethical terms, varies enormously. And it has evolved historically. Let me give one or two examples. Take the word “virtue”. “Virtue” was a common term, well understood by the Greeks and the topic of many of Hume’s discussions in the Treatise. Hume is centrally concerned, as we know, with the important distinction between the “natural virtues” and the “artificial virtues”. Was he talking about an “excellence” as the Greeks were? I doubt it. Or, rather, he was not talking about excellences as we ordinarily understand them in applying them, as we do, to common household applications. Indeed, the very term “virtuous” seems slightly idiotic as in Sir Toby Pelche’s taunting question to Malvolio in Twelfth Night when he says, “Dost thou think, Malvolio that because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?” Virtue, indeed.

I am not against virtue, mind you. I am only saying that ordinary people in our time are rather dismayed by the question whether a man or woman is virtuous. Usually they have sex in mind. An adulterer, in the minds of some, is not virtuous. Why? Not because he is without excellence or a decent person. He is not virtuous because he declines to observe certain customs which a great many people consider to be outmoded.

One must conclude then, that there is little, if any, agreement whether linguistic or non-linguistic, whether historical or cross-cultural, whether factual or normative about the moral point of view, taken as a representation of something called “true morality”. This will have to do, for the time being, as our discussion of the epistemological problems that have concerned us in this section.

VI. CONCERNING THE OPEN QUESTION

Frankena says in “The Principles of Morality” that my writings in ethics may be construed, in effect, as one prolonged brooding upon the “open question argument”. But, as I have said before, I do not raise it in Moore’s form. Like Prichard, I am concerned less with the question about the meaning of good, and more with those which have to do with the questions about the meaning of right and, more particularly, ought and its close cognates, obliged and obligation. In a certain way it does not appear to me to matter whether the question “But is it good?” can be closed in the case of good, for good is a weasel word, if ever there was one. Moreover, so far as morals are concerned, “right” and “ought” are the fundamental terms to be reckoned with.

Now, however, let me say something about how I take the drift of the open question argument. Of course it is not proof that ethical terms are indefinable. I, like most persons of common sense, have a use for the term “synonymous”. Unlike Quine and others, I have not since my youth, ever supposed that it could be demonstrated that two terms are ever exactly synonymous, at least in ordinary languages. Synonymy is a matter of degree: some terms are closely synonymous, others less so. The point does not need laboring here. The open question argument, once for all, is not a proof in any strict sense and I have
nevr claimed it to be one. The open question should be viewed in the manner of an unclosed induction. Let us give one or two examples. One can always ask whether one ought to keep a promise, or whether he ought to pay his debts, or do justice, in any form, to another. And, of course, one can always reply "Yes, certainly, he ought to do so". My point is simply that, while the open question proves nothing, it has a good deal of plausibility when understood as an induction. Whenever one stops asking the open question, because he is tired of raising it for the time being, he can always go on raising it, from case to case, when his spirits revive. Thus, so far as I can see, the open question has great inductive force, and it is only as an induction that I 'care to raise it about any term whatever.

In this form, it seems to me, contrary to Frankena, to have immense power. I no longer simply brood over it. I believe it and use it and will use it throughout this paper, as a fairly conclusive argument against the moral point of view in all forms whatever. I also have used it elsewhere, against such illusions as the religious point of view, the scientific point of view, the political and legal points of view, indeed, against any point of view which is called "the X point of view". I can best make the point in this way: there is no such thing as "the obligatory view". There are obligations and duties, of course. But there is nothing that answers to the phrase "the obligatory point of view". So for the time being, I decline, once for all, to brood over the point of view, in any shape or form at all.

VII. CONCERNING INSTITUTIONS

In the opening sentences of Frankena's "The Principles of Morality", we find this sentence: "We often speak of morality as a human or social enterprise or institution more or less coordinate with art, education, law and science -- for example, when we ask how morality is related to law or to religion, or when we talk about the moral sphere as contrasted with the legal or scientific ones." Anyone would be a fool, of course, if he denied that there are institutions, and it is no part of my purpose to argue with Frankena over this. What I do argue is that there is any such institution as the institution of science, which some may consider to have the best claim, in this age of institutionalized science, when most scientists are simply "organization men", to be regarded as something that answers to the phrase "the institution of science". But I think that all activities in science, whether physical or social, are open-ended institutions and I believe that most reflective scientists would agree with me. But I shall stick here to something called "the institution of art". Now, of course, there is a great deal of institutionalized art. No doubt about that. But art is not an institution at all. Is music, or poetry, or painting, or sculpture an institution? Even to raise such a question seems ridiculous on the face of it. Do Mozart and Berg belong to something called the institution of music? Do Donatello and Henry Moore belong to the institution of sculpture? Such questions, I think, are idiotic. Perhaps Frankena might reply that I am taking him too literally. He also uses the term "enterprise" as more or less equivalent in meaning to "institution". But I cannot think of a single entity on earth that corresponds to the phrase "the enterprise of X".

Institutions, as I contend, are very open ended. They evolve, sometimes in such revolutionary ways that it is difficult or impossible to recognize them as having any institutional connections with one another whatever. Did Galileo belong to, or conceive himself as belonging to, an institution of physics? The
question answers itself.

Let us not belabor the point any longer. Institutions and enterprises can no longer be firmly distinguished from one another. Science blurs into art, education blurs into government, morality into religion. And so on into the night. Hence, I say without hesitation that there is no such thing as the institution of morality as distinct from that of religion or science or art.

Frankena and his allies gain nothing and lose much by claiming that the moral point of view represents an institution. Instead of strengthening their case, they weaken it drastically by accepting it, even if only by analogy. So that will have to do about the question whether morality is an institution distinct from all others.

VIII. THE PRESSURES OF MORAL DOUBT

Now we come close to the heart of our problems concerning the moral point of view. And I shall need to quote Frankena in extensio in order to make this point of view as clear as possible.

Frankena says this: “I am holding that when a person says, ‘Morality requires $P$, ’ he means by ‘morality’ true morality in the sense of ‘the action-guide that fulfills the conditions for being a moral one and is rationally justified from the moral point of view, or ‘the moral action-guide to which all those who are fully rational will eventually agree’. And he is in some way implying that he is both taking the moral point of view and subscribing to $P$. He is, however, not saying or implying that he actually subscribes to the true morality, since he may not know what this is (he claims that $P$ belongs to it, but he does not know that it does). Yet he is not speaking as an outsider or spectator either, one who is not subscribing to any moral action-guide, but only to come to some belief or fact about himself or the society around him. He subscribes to true morality in intent or promise, just as in doing science one subscribes in intent or promise to the findings of science, whatever they turn out to be, or much as Socrates subscribed to the ‘laws’ of Athens, whatever they might turn out to be, by the mere fact of this remaining there. In this sense, ‘the principles of morality’ are something to be discovered (or possibly ‘revealed’) not something to be created, invented, or decided on by a sheer act of ‘decision’ or ‘commitment’ on one’s own part as so many seem to think nowadays. Thus I rejected the notion that when one refers to ‘the principles of morality’ one is simply referring to principles that one accepts as basic or proposes to adopt by some kind of fiat, though I do want to say that when one uses such phrases, one is then and there subscribing to the principle one refers to.”

Frankena’s statement, as usual, is carefully worded and well guarded against obvious criticisms. Here we may mainly confine our attention to his example about Socrates subscribing to the ‘laws’ of Athens, whatever they might turn out to be, by the mere fact of him remaining there. This strikes me as incredible. As a kind of myth it is of great interest, but as the representation of someone who takes the moral point of view, such as Frankena himself, I simply cannot believe it. It is like buying a pig in a poke. Just imagine what the real Socrates would have done had the laws of Athens prescribed that he should die by taking hemlock, despite the alternative of exile, which was available to him! Or, rather, imagine what he would have done had the laws of Athens prescribed that every male should cut off his testicles, or that every eldest son should be strangled at birth. I swear that he would not have subscribed to, let alone obey, such
dreadful laws. I am morally certain, and I mean morally certain, that he would have done his best to change such hideous laws, or else that he would have gone into exile voluntarily. It is really incredible to me that Frankena could use such an example, or suppose that it might support, let alone embody, the moral point of view.

Unfortunately, we cannot quite let it go at that, although I should like to do so. He says that those who subscribe to true morality meet the criteria for being moral and are rationally justified from the moral point of view. But what are those criteria? He has indeed mentioned a number of them, as we know, but he has not shown that they are necessary and sufficient, that they do not meet individually or collectively the open question argument and, above all, he does not show that they do not conflict, at least in the case of justice and benevolence. I cannot believe that he means what he says. But let us go on. And here is the kicker. Frankena says that anyone is not saying or implying that he actually subscribes to the true morality, since he may not know what it is. Well, what in the name of God is he actually subscribing to? I cannot answer this question and I see no answer to it in the passage which we have been discussing or anywhere else in the whole body of his writings. So I must conclude that the passage is either a tissue of inconsistencies or that Frankena simply does not realize what he is saying.

Let me go a few steps further. The Socratic faith in true morality is meaningless, I think, because it is totally deprived, according to the account given, of any knowledge whatever of the fundamental principles of true morality. And a faith in a set of basic action guides which are not, by hypothesis, known to be true as well as necessary and sufficient. This is a faith without any object whatever. There simply can be no faith without some knowledge. Or, rather, a faith that is based on no knowledge whatever is an irrational faith and not merely a form or anti-rationalism. I myself am an anti-rationalist, but with irrationalism I want nothing whatever to do. And I am sure that this is no less true of Hume, and many others that we need not name here.

IX. C.S. PEIRCE’S EXAMPLE OF A GREAT COMMUNITY

It strikes me that there is a very close example between Frankena’s faith in the true morality, the principles of morals, or the moral point of view, and C. S. Peirce’s and Josiah Royce’s conception of the great community.

Now Peirce holds that inquiry, which answers, as he puts it, to “the irritation of doubt”, naturally results and has generally resulted in the past, in disagreement. And this is true, not only in science, but in ethics and in every other form of inquiry. But in the fullness of time, so he thinks, there will be a unification, or convergence, of opinion on the part of all conscientious inquirers on all subjects of importance, and especially on all fundamental principles. “In the fullness of time”. What does this mean? I think it means nothing at all, especially from a pragmatic point of view, such as Peirce’s. As someone said jokingly, “in the fullness of time we will all be dead”. But this goes merely to show that we can do nothing with such a notion, can make nothing of it, practically speaking. How, conceivably, could such guide the concrete inquiries of scientists? The question answers itself. It could not. Is there any
methodological principles of science, or of any other discipline that employs it in any serious way? If there is, I have never heard of it. Peirce is here making a leap of faith at least as paradoxical and absurd as that advocated by Kierkegaard or Nietzsche, or any other existentialist known to me. I do not say that such a leap of faith is, in some remote sense, meaningless. What I do contend is that it is so paradoxical and so absurd that I, for one, can make nothing of it.

As in the case of Socrates, I cannot understand anyone who can commit himself by an act of faith which is not based securely upon knowledge. There can be no inquiry without faith, but there also can be no faith without knowledge. But they are also locked indissolubly in any other form of inquiry. We may hope, by stages, to reach general agreement about this theory or that. But we must always pause before going on and reconsider, take second thought, and general agreement does not amount to universal or total agreement.

So we must conclude, I contend, that the example of something called the great community in which all inquiries finally reach agreement in the fulness of time is, pragmatically, meaningless. It is of no help whatever to those who defend the moral point of view. On the contrary, it merely serves to underline its own vacuousness.

**X. THE FINAL PARADOX**

Those who, like Frankena, are exponents of the moral point of view must hold that there are necessary and sufficient conditions, or principles, of the institution or activity of morality. But, short of the fulness of time, they can never supply them, fully and definitively. The whole notion of the moral point of view reminds me of Kant's conceptions of "ideas of reason". Such ideas, he teaches, invariably lead us into paradox. They are bare "ideas" not forms of knowledge. Kant is, certainly, reluctant to give up the argument from design for the existence of God, but he does believe also that the argument depends upon the causal argument and that, in turn, upon the ontological. This is not the space to discuss the proofs for the existence of God, though I myself do think that they can make sense of a sort, if we do not take them as more then suggestions of our notions of what a God of the monotheistic sort might be like, at least by analogy. But the analogies are always weak and, in the end, can be usefully employed, even by a monotheist, only as intimations.

My conclusion, therefore, must be that the hard rationalism that governs the thought of Frankena and others, invariably leads to skepticism, or worse.

The doctrine of the moral point of view then, cannot, as we have tried to show, withstand the pressures of moral doubt. It has just the reverse effect upon a careful thinker that those who defend the moral point of view intend. And this is humantly, and not merely philosophically, a calamity and a tragedy. It sets us chasing butterflies, wills of the wisp. It is, indeed, a human and philosophic nightmare which, when we awake, leaves us prostrate. So I must say then: give up the search for the moral point of view and the principles of morals. Give them up for the sake of your own conduct of life. Be a finitist, a pluralist. Retain your faith that there is such a thing as the principle of moral objectivity. There are only principles of objectivity, of serious second thought, and they do not add up to any one principle which can be called the principle of objectivity. For there is no such principle.
XI. CONCLUSIONS

It is time that I try to state explicitly my own general conclusions about our subject.

First, let us adopt what may be called a principle of modesty. By this I mean that we should be more, far more modest about our claims about moral principles or precepts than those who defend the moral point of view have been. They are, and are intended to serve as action guides. I certainly agree with Frankena about this, though neither of us can claim any originality on this score. From the time of Aristotle on, as we have seen, most of the great moral philosophers have always regarded moral principles as guides to action. Hume did so, and so did Kant and the rest.

Secondly, so I contend, let us accept a principle of diversity or plurality in ethics and elsewhere. Pluralism is not incompatible with objectivism, in ethics as elsewhere. Let us, in fact, adopt something like what Peirce himself called critical common sense. Critical common sense, to be sure. Common sense, when unwashed, is only a starting point. But common sense is always subject to piece-meal critique. And such criticisms of common sense must be made in the name of common sense, and they must attempt to guide common sense to something better, more refined, more sensible. But they must do so in the name of common sense. Peirce, as we have seen, departed radically from common sense, and also from critical common sense, when he adopted the empty notion of the great community. There is, from a common sense point of view, no definitive concluding result to be reached or hoped for. Revision is endless. And that is all that I have to say on this principle of critical common sense or critical common sensism.

We should, to be sure, accept a principle of objectivity, in morals, as elsewhere. Moral principles, like all others, are corrigible principles that, in the light of experience, have proved better warranted than others. We should, all the same, give up the notion that there is any single line of justification in ethics, religion, or science. There are many forms of justification, and there are times where the demand for further justifications gets us nowhere. Let us not fall into the really dispiriting trap of trying to prove, definitively, what everybody tends to believe on instinct. The right to believe, in fact, is a right simply to tend to believe, and to improve our beliefs, piece by piece. Above all, we should renounce absolutely definitive first principles of any sort. No principle is definitive and we waste our human and philosophical resources in searching for definitive principles.

Now let me say: a last word or two about truth. Here also I should propose a principle of objective pluralism in regard to truth and its cognates. Here, my leader is not Hume, but James. Truth is truth, no doubt. But this tells us nothing. Or nothing more than say, business is business, or honesty is as honesty does. There is no definitive principle, or definition of truth. Fundamentally this concept should be understood pragmatically, in both senses of the term. To say that X is true is indeed equivalent to saying X. The point is that the "is true" clause is merely reemphatic; it adds nothing, semantically, to the statement itself.

But this is not all. Truth is not the same thing, and does not answer the same criteria in every sphere. In science, it answers to one non-definitive set of criteria in science, to another in ethics, and another in religion. There is no such thing, so to say, as the truth point of view. What counts for truth in science, does not
Contra "The Moral Point of View"

definitively count for truth in ethics, and what counts for truth in science and
ethics does not count for truth in religion and so on. We conduct our lives in
many ways, within many interacting institutions and forms of activity. And they
may, on occasion, conflict with one another. This fact, for fact it surely is, must
never be forgotten. I am certainly no Hegelian, though I have learned from Hegel
a great deal and owe much to him. But his dialectic is not in the least a definitive
principle of dialectics, nor can it be called the dialectical point of view or the
principle of dialectics. There are many ways of thinking dialectical, and Hegel’s
way is only one. And some activities have no telos or end at all. As Kant himself,
that radical exponent of the moral point of view, has taught us in his Critique of
Aesthetic Judgment, the conception of creation or creativity, whether taken
religiously or artistically, or both, there are things we do which have no end or
purpose at all. They are purposive, but not purposeful. They are known for what
they are, and are pronounced good only after they are finished. Any little idea
that may start us off in the writing of a story or a poem must never be confused
with what the creator brings off.

An analogous point is made by Plato in his words about eros. Eros, as distinct
from a technē or (in his sense) art, has no end whatever. It is the energy, or love,
which energizes any art, supports it, gives it reality, as a way of doing something.
Eros is, thus, a principle of creativity, and is scarcely more than another name
for it. It is, that is to say, purposive but not purposeful. And there we must now
leave the problem of truth and the truth point of view, as I have called it.

Lastly, we must not assume that there is such a thing as the principle of
harmony, or consistency, or compositibility, all of which, by the way, we should
have included among the necessary and sufficient conditions of the moral point
of view as Frankena conceives it. Does harmony take precedence over conflict?
Yes and no. Eternal conflict in any sphere would be disastrous, and suicidal to us
all. And the same, of course, is true of violence. We yearn for harmony, just as
we yearn for peace, for which it may be regarded here as just another name. But
not at any price. And conflict, in ethics as elsewhere, is the mother of invention,
or rather, creation. We are, as human beings, progressive beings, or should try to
be, as Mill pointed out. But progress comes about frequently as a result of
conflict, paradox, and their overcoming. So we must accept, as finite beings, the
fact that there is no one principle of harmony or peace, which is the highest of
all.

What is the upshot of this essay? Well, I think it can be given a label if one is
wanted, as I have said. I call it “objective pluralism” though “objective
relativism” would do, if the terms relative and relativistic had not been so
damnably pejorated. What does this come to? It comes, in closing, to the
philosophy that there are points of view, and frequently good ones, in nearly
every sphere. But there is nothing that answers to the phrase “the point of
view”. There we have it. Our thinking, whether as philosophers, who love
wisdom, should be endlessly pluralistic. It should proceed, in most situations in a
piecemeal, precedential manner. This does not mean that we should proceed
timidly or make too much of modesty. For sometimes we must resort to
revolution, politically and also scientifically. But few of us are geniuses. And we
do best, in most cases, to follow the example of the common law, and abjure
something that might be called the revolutionary point of view. That would
indeed be a disaster. We must try to be reasonably open minded and open ended,
in all of our activities. In sum, open minded we should be, but not too open.
Common sense forbids open-mindedness when erected into a first principle, or the first principle of study or inquiry. We should search for criteria, but never fall in love with them. We should be ready to revise, to revamp, to restate, and to re-inquire again and again.

There is one further position that needs more discussion before we conclude this essay on the moral point of view. In Section VI. of “The Principles of Morality”, Frankena considers an “eighth” position which, from his perspectives on morality, seems to count against the doctrine which he preaches. This is the view that the principles of morals P is a practice of morality because it is commanded by God.

As he says, those who hold what he calls a voluntaristic conception of the relationship between God and the principles of morals argue that the latter are such because God commands us to obey them. And those who hold that God commands them because He takes the moral point of view, he calls “intellectualists”. It is obvious that Frankena thinks that voluntarism is incompatible with the purity and perfection and distinctness of the moral point of view. He therefore argues, a bit abruptly as it seems to me, for “intellectualism”. That is to say, it is correct to say that God commands us to follow the moral point of view because it is, independently, known to be what it is. And, correspondingly, it is radically mistaken to take the opposing view.

Right is right, and that’s that, God or no God.

What shall we say about this contention? Well, it is plain from what has already been said that it strikes me as idiotic. I have argued at length that there is no such thing as the institution of morality and no such thing as the institution of religion, and that if we take the view of the religious mood as, at bottom, merely the sense of the presence of the holy is scarcely more than an augmentation of the sense of the ethical (though to be sure it is not so confined), and the ethical hardly more than a diminution of somewhat diminished, or less emphatic sense of the religious. The older I get, the less do I care to make sharp distinctions which Frankena and his allies, seem to think necessary to protect the moral point of view’s uniqueness. Kant, of course, made a great to-do about the distinction between a good and a holy will, and Frankena is merely following Kant in this regard.

But this is not all. For Frankena, whether or not he is still a practicing Calvinist (which I have never asked him), still takes a Calvinistic view of God. God is a commander; He is a bloke who gives orders to “His people”. I find Calvinism, in this respect, at least religiously repulsive. More, I find it idolatrous. I know, to be sure, that some Calvinists take the term “commandment” to be merely figurative, and for all I know, so does Frankena. But he does not say so, and his conception, as stated, is that God is, in the first instance anyway, a great law-giver. Accordingly, he is committed, by his words, to think that religion is primarily ethical in its intention, and that true religion is directed mainly to the support of ethics.

To my mind, it is the myth of creation which is the sublime thing in the Torah, not the Ten Commandments. The myth of creation is not idolatrous; just the contrary. But the myth of God as the essential giver of the law is, as I have said, idolatrous. When He pronounced the world “good” on the Sabbath Day, He meant the whole of it, not just the sense of right and wrong (which, of course, is not mentioned in the first part of Genesis). As Frankena well knows, He meant that the beautiful if holy, and in fact the whole life of the mind,
whether human or divine. What is not, or cannot be holy, even though, as we know, people can and do worship false gods. The sense of the holy may be misdirected, in the same sense that the dutiful may be.

But there is still another aspect of the matter which I discussed in my essay on “The Concept of Moral Objectivity”. This concerns the question whether we should hold that morality itself is autonomous or, rather, that moral agents should be so regarded. And I took the view then, as I still do, that I want nothing to do with the doctrine of the autonomy of morals, precisely because (although I did not there put it in just this way) a defense of the autonomy of morals is merely another defense of the uniqueness of the moral point of view, which at this late date, requires no further criticism from me.

The doctrine of the autonomy of morality, which is merely another way of talking about the uniqueness of the principle(s) of morals, as I have just said, simply will not do. Moreover, it is, in my opinion, though I shall not pause to argue the matter now, really inconsistent with the conception of a morally free will.

Am I defending “voluntarism” then? The answer is “No!” Religious voluntarism won’t do, and for the reasons that I have already given.

One concluding word on the matter that divides Frankena’s views both about religion and ethics needs mention. From what I have said, it is plain that I cannot possibly be a voluntarist because I do not care a rap about the existence of God, as He is viewed by most monotheists. Here, I may take a leaf out of Hilary Putnam’s hilarious story about the hunter who goes out shooting chicken parts and then going home and stitching them together so that he can have a roast chicken. Frankly, it is the parts that concern me and I don’t much care how, or whether they are stitched together to make one great capon, or very much about how it is roasted, though I don’t like chicken rare and I don’t like it burned to death. Why should we worry too much about the unity or, for that matter, the trinity of Divine Being? I am not sure that we should care much, not only whether we are polytheists, or monists. I like the Catholic erection of Mary into the position of such eminence that it seems at times that Catholicism, at least in the eyes of some of its members, is a kind of quadrinity. In fact, as I said once before, in my introduction to my edition to Hume’s Dialogues, I share his sympathy with polytheism, as long as it is not taken too seriously which, so far as I can see, the Greek polytheists did not. I prefer it to monotheism. But it is really theism that I wish to repudiate. God, or at any rate, the word “God”, as commonly understood, is dead. And let Him, or it, stay dead. It is the sense of Divine Being, and its presence that matters from my religious point of view.

A final word about Jonathan Edwards, whose work on the Freedom of the Will Frankena once edited. Some of my readers may recall Edwards’ lovely notion of the “consent to being”. I am not learned about Edwards’ works, although I do consider him a most impressive, as well as beautiful writer. Nor do I in the least know whether or not Edwards meant to advocate the consent to being as such and/or the consent to all things. If he did mean this, then he, too, is mistaken in much the same way that St. Augustine was. For then he is plagued, as Augustine was, by the haunting question: “When then is evil?” No, I do not consent to being as such; nor do I consent to all being. But if Edwards meant, simply to say, consent to Divine Being, then I am his man. But notice that Edwards does not say consent to The Being, only consent to being. So consent to the being, even if we call it the Divine Being, won’t do. For to talk of
the Divine Being is theism all over again and, as I have said, theism is, or should be, dead, from any religious point of view with which I should care to be associated.

Is Judaism, when all is said and done, theistic, not to say, monotheistic? I think not. For Judaism tells us that we should not even pronounce the name of the holy of holies. And I would agree, but for one thing. The phrase “the holy of holies” is a trap of the sort which I want destroyed, once and for all. Anyway, I have nothing more to say about this aspect of the subject. The quarrel between religious intellectualism and religious voluntarism is a foolish quarrel both from a religious and from a moral point of view. And I want no part of it. But enough is enough.