

In "Friedman on Impartiality and Practicality," Howard McGary responded to a few of Friedman's points on the impracticality of impartiality. He responded briefly in three points.

In his first point, McGary challenges one of Friedman's reading of an impartialist position, that attaining impartiality requires empathizing with the views of others. I have not read Hare's work, so I cannot comment in depth on his criticism. When considering the Hare's universalizability requirement that one must consider matters from someone else's point of view, Friedman stated that "This requirement calls, in effect, for empathy with others" (650, emphasis mine.) In her descriptions of Hare's work she never used the word "empathy," and her "in effect" seems to indicate that this is her reading of Hare, not Hare's stated position.

When considering the view of another who has been morally wronged, particularly if the wrong is extreme and has lasting consequences, it seems to me that empathy may be part of the response of the impartial observer, but I am not sure it is in fact required. Friedman recognized that when we lack familiarity with another's experiences, "empathy has little foothold" (650.) One can consider the plight of another who has been wronged and understand his desire for justice without necessarily engaging an empathic response. My response at the moment is that Friedman may have somewhat overstated the requirement of empathy, and McGary's criticism may have some traction; overall it seems a minor point. Friedman's two criticisms of universalizability, that what we know of others underdescribes their views and that the motives or preferences of another may be alien or despised (651) still seem to carry some weight without the requirement of empathy.

McGary's second point questioned the sufficiency of her focus on eliminating particular forms of partiality. He challenged her lack of providing criteria for determining which biases should be eliminated and for determining which biases remain. He specifically argued that "her reliance on interpersonal and public dialogue" to find and eliminate the appropriate biases is insufficient to achieve her desired goals. This point is very similar to my criticism on her work (at the time I had not read McGary.) Here I find McGary's criticism seriously undermines Friedman's argument. It seems to me that there is a sort of implicit privileging of the sort of cultural discourse Friedman has in mind, whatever it might be, without seeming to understand that another culture may actually exacerbate the bias problem by refusing to recognize a bias that Friedman considers essential to eliminate, whether on race, gender, social class, or other.

Finally, McGary argued that if her criticisms of universalistic and contractual impartiality obtain, and if his criticism of her position obtains, then Friedman "may be forced to question the very idea of a knowable objective morality" (658.) From my very limited reading of Friedman so far, it is not clear to me that she actually would seek or accept the notion of a knowable objective morality; she did reject the use of "objective" as referring to something external to the mind as not pertinent to her discussion (646.) Here McGary may be somewhat misreading Friedman's view. However that may be, to the extent that his challenges to her arguments hold, then Friedman needs to fill in aspects of her argument to strengthen it.

McGary, Howard. (1989.) "The Impracticality of Partiality." *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 86, No.11 (Nov., 1989,) pp. 657-658.

*This is adapted from a series of responses I wrote for an independent study in analytic ethics of partiality and consequentialism.*

Share this page: