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Reply to Commentary on “Ethical Argumentation, Objectivity, and Bias”

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This reply responds to the comments Mehta sent to me before the OSSA 11 conference and presented at our session.

In his first comment, Mehta says I show that according to Shafer-Landau, Parfit, and Singer partiality need not be unfair. He asks whether I mean to move from there to the claim that partiality really need not be unfair, and if so how. I don’t have an argument to offer here (and if I had, it wouldn’t be an argument from authority). Rather, I find the pro-partiality examples these philosophers give compelling intuitively – hence non-inferentially.

Mehta’s second comment concerns my point that when we decide how to act on object-given value-based reasons, our evaluation will express our mental states and will thus be subject-given. I need to provide more detail than I do in my paper, and I am grateful to Mehta for making this clear. He thinks that my claim is true but trivial. He says: “[c]on sider any mind-independent fact p. The belief that p will be trivially mind-dependent.” I agree. But the relevant question in relation to a Parfit-type theory of practical reasons is whether, if some aim of mine is, or is not, good or worth achieving, this is a mind-independent fact. And this question is close to what Mehta calls “the interesting question about some fact p” – namely, is p mind-dependent or mind-independent? Mehta asks what philosophical conclusion I mean to draw from my point. Here is my answer. A Parfit-type theory of practical reasons does not, in and of itself, establish that the values on which object-given value-based reasons are based really are objective in the sense of being mind-independent; rather, it leaves open the non-trivial subjectivist possibility that values are wholly attitudinal, and this is brought to mind by reflecting on the fact that the application of such a theory requires an evaluation which, as Mehta rightly says, is trivially mind-dependent.

According to Mehta, I suggest that “ethics contains a defeasible presumption of impartiality.” What I say is that even if there are cases in which morality permits partiality, there are surely many cases in which morality requires impartiality. I then say that one way to accommodate cases of these different kinds would be to hold that the moral point of view is defined partly by a defeasible presumption of impartiality. This wording allows for the possibility of there being other ways of accommodating cases in which morality permits (or requires) partiality and cases in which it requires impartiality. One such way might be something like the possibility Mehta mentions, namely the view that ethics “just brackets one important set of partial considerations,” by requiring one “to show preference to one’s family and friends” in contexts in which it would be (in Mehta’s phrase) “apparently an ethical failing” not to do so. This approach would leave space for the view that impartiality is required in contexts in which partiality (whether of this kind or another kind) would be unfair or otherwise morally objectionable.