

24.231 Ethics – Handout 7 Harman, “What Is Moral Relativism?”

Three Kinds of Moral Relativism

Normative Moral Relativism: Different people, as agents, can be subject to different ultimate moral requirements. More formally:

There can be two people *A* and *B* and a moral demand *D* such that

- (1) *A* is subject to *D*
- (2) *B* is not subject to *D*
- (3) *B* is subject to some moral demands
- (4) There is no demand *D'* to which *A* and *B* are both subject which accounts for (1) and (2) given the differences in situation between *A* and *B*.

Moral Judgment Relativism: All moral judgments make implicit reference to the speaker or some other person or to some group or to one or another set of moral standards, etc...

Examples? Subjectivism...

Meta-Ethical Relativism: There can be conflicting moral judgments about a particular case that are both fully correct.

Harman notes that none of these relativist theses entail the others: we could hold any one of them while rejecting the other two.

Harman's examples: *Emotivists*, he says, might accept meta-ethical relativism while rejecting normative relativism and moral judgment relativism; *existentialists*, who think that people are subject only to the principles that they themselves accept, accept normative relativism, but reject meta-ethical and moral judgment relativism; and *relativistic ideal observer theorists* can accept moral judgment relativism while rejecting meta-ethical and normative relativism.

Harman himself wants to accept versions of all three relativist theses.

Three Objections to Moral Relativism

An objection to normative moral relativism

Something must explain why *A* is subject to some moral demand *D* when *B* is not, for this surely cannot just be an arbitrary fact. But if some principle explains the difference (e.g., the principle, which underlies existentialism, that each person should act in accordance with the basic principles she accepts), isn't that then some more fundamental principle, *D'*, that accounts for the different demands on *A* and *B*? So doesn't this show there is no coherent version of normative moral relativism, as we've defined it, after all?

An objection to moral judgment relativism

Moral judgment relativism implausibly implies that what appear to be genuine moral disagreements are not really disagreements.

An objection to meta-ethical relativism

One version of meta-ethical relativism claims that two genuinely conflicting, not borderline-case moral judgments can both be *true*. For example, it could be true that abortion is wrong, and true that abortion is not wrong. But that can't be right – it violates the law of non-contradiction! Abortion can't be both wrong and not wrong!

Another version of meta-ethical relativism claims that two genuinely conflicting moral judgments might both be *justified*. What might this mean? Perhaps it means we should be judgment relativists *about justification*, and conclude that to say a moral judgment is justified is, implicitly, to say it is justified *for* the person who makes it. *A* is justified-for-*A* in saying “abortion is wrong” and *B* is justified-for-*B* in saying “abortion is not wrong.” But, Harman says, that seems to fall prey to the same worry as moral judgment relativism: when two people disagree about the morality of abortion, they will also disagree about whether the judgment that abortion is wrong is justified. But this account makes real disagreement about this matter impossible.

Harman's Argument for Moral Relativism

Very roughly:

- (1) A moral demand applies to a person only if it is rational for her to accept that demand.
- (2) It can be rational for different people to accept different demands ‘all the way down.’

Therefore

- (3) Different moral demands can apply to different people ‘all the way down.’

Assumption (1) reflects a particular view of reasons: roughly, that we can have reason to do something only if we could have reasoned our way to doing it. If we always have reason to comply with any moral demands that apply to us, then they can apply to us only if we could have reasoned our way towards complying with them. Does this assumption rest on confusing justifying and motivating reasons? Is it plausible?

Assumption (2) reflects a view about what our ability to reason our way towards some decision depends on: does what we can reason our way towards doing depend on what are commitments are going in? And if it does, does that mean that we wouldn't all reason our way to the same decisions, even if we were reasoning perfectly?

Whether we find either assumption plausible will depend a lot on what we think counts as reasoning well. Are the standards of rationality all *procedural* – a matter of consistency and coherence? If yes, is assumption (1), and the view of reasons that underlies it, still plausible? If no, is assumption (2) still plausible?

Harman is mainly defending a version of *normative moral relativism*. But he says his version of relativism entails *moral judgment relativism* about moral judgments made by relativists, who make moral judgments in relation to a morality they accept, and presuppose the same morality is accepted by their audience and the agents referred to in the judgment. And he says his version of relativism also entails *meta-ethical relativism* about the judgments made by *non-relativists*: relativists will count a moral judgment made by a non-relativist as right whenever the corresponding relativistic moral judgment is right made in relation to the morality accepted by the person making that judgment; and two really conflicting non-relativistic moral judgments might both be right in this sense.

But Harman argues that his version of relativism avoids all three objections that appeared to threaten the three relativist theses:

His relativism avoids the worry raised about normative judgment relativism, because it allows that there is a principle that explains why a demand may apply to *A* but not to *B*, but that principle is *not a moral principle* – it's a principle of rationality.

His relativism *partially* avoids the worry raised by moral judgment relativism, because it explains how people employing moral judgments relativistically can nonetheless be taken to genuinely disagree – when they presuppose that they are making judgments in relation to the same relevant moral demands. But Harman's view has the significant disadvantage that it must (perhaps implausibly) characterize many non-relativistic moral judgments as misuses of moral language.

And his relativism may avoid the worry raised about meta-ethical relativism – that it violates the law of non-contradiction. This is because when his relativism labels two conflicting non-relativistic judgments as both correct, that “correctness” in this case does not entail literal *truth*. For a non-relativistic judgment to count as correct, according to Harman, is just for the corresponding relativistic judgment to be true when it's made in relation to the morality of the speaker. And when two non-relativistic judgments conflict, the corresponding relativistic judgments might not conflict, even when they are both true.

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