Moral Relativism and 
Moral Objectivity

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As one would expect this is an interesting book, although also a slightly quirky one. In it Harman defends a version of moral relativism, and Thomson defends a version of its apparent opposite, a thesis of moral objectivity. Then each has a go at the other. Arguably, this is the best part of the book: I think that each makes serious inroads into the other’s paper, and I doubt if I can do better in a short space. So my comments will be relatively unsystematic.

It is notoriously hard to say what is intended by moral relativism. And I for one think it ought to be notoriously hard to say what is intended by moral objectivity, or moral absolutism. If my own work in ethics has any value, it makes these things even harder. For my figure, the quasi-realist, has the uncomfortable habit of taking to his bosom sayings that might have been thought to be the private property of realists or absolutists, yet without abandoning his expressivist starting point. Thomson, it seems to me, is a little insensitive to the threat this position poses. At any rate, she is content to define her objectivism in quite simple terms: it is possible to find out that some moral sentences are true.

I certainly believe this. After all, as Wittgenstein, Ramsey, and Frege all remind us ‘p’ is true means p. Are there moral examples where it is possible to find out p? Certainly. It is possible to find out that Bill behaved wickedly. It wasn’t an accident: he deliberately placed the spider in Mary’s bed for mischief. That is wicked enough, in my book, and I hope in yours (if not, substitute a rattlesnake). I don’t think anybody sensible denies that we can find this kind of thing out, and certainly not Harman. Perhaps then this kind of example is not supposed to count. But why not? One can hear some moral philosophers saying that we have only found out what Bill did, but that is not the same as finding out that he behaved wickedly. We haven’t thereby found out that it is wicked to place spiders in peoples’ beds for mischief. This is changing the subject, but in any case we can imagine someone finding that out as well, if she stood in moral space somewhere so odd that she needed to: she could come to realize how much it distresses the victim, and then how
immature and unimaginative it is hold that it is quite OK to place spiders in peoples’ beds for mischief.

Perhaps that is not supposed to be ‘finding out’ in the sense intended. But then we need to know what sense was intended, and Thomson does not tell us. One suggestion would be that the wickedness about which we find out must hook up causally to our opinion. It must be what makes us have the opinion we do. But after long and careful discussion, Thomson sets herself against the view that moral facts explain non-moral facts like our having the opinions we do (pp. 69–91). She holds that moral facts are epiphenomenal (p. 123). So the kind of finding out I just described seems quite in order.

Of course, as an expressivist, I have a certain gloss on these cases: I hold that the finding out is done from within a moral framework, and to have a moral framework is fundamentally to have a set of practical attitudes, (and sometimes emotions, desires and policies). Thomson assaults expressivism, for instance with the Frege-Geach problem, but I shall not here repeat the ways in which I think such assaults can be deflected. She makes a number of important points about the difficulty of elaborating the thesis that morality is essentially a matter of attitude. I can believe, for instance, that Alice ought to give Bert a banana without hoping that she will, or caring whether she does. I need not be involved in the situation, in order to have the belief. But in turn she has to admit that it would be ‘a very odd thing’ if all of a man’s moral beliefs were disconnected from motivation entirely (p. 123). What I think she does not face squarely is the question of why, on her view, this would be at all an odd thing. If moral facts are epiphenomenal, would it not be entirely natural for beliefs in them to be epiphenomenal as well? If something makes no difference, isn’t this like saying that it doesn’t matter? Or at best, that it only matters because we accord importance to it—taking up a stance or attitude?

And here I would like here to venture one remark of wide application. Thomson is among the large number of philosophers who scarcely ever describes emotion and attitude without calling them ‘mere’ emotion and attitude, like this: ‘being in the state we call having a moral belief is merely having a favourable or unfavourable attitude’ (p. 99). She is thoroughly against the idea that morality is a ‘mere sea of attitudes’ (p. 206). What is that ‘mere’ doing? Wittgenstein wrote that in the beginning was the deed. And deeds, most people suppose, require a partnership of beliefs and attitudes (or cousins like desires or emotions) to explain them. Why is one side of the partnership ‘mere’? You cannot do without it, not without merely ceasing to act and live! All the same, people think like this: on the side of Apollo and light we have belief, truth, representation, knowledge. On the side of Dionysus and the dark there are passion, lust, desire, impulses, arousals, sentiments, attitudes, postures. Pricking, prodding, tossing, and swamping, these badly need governing, and morality, surely, has to belong to the government.
If you put on a highly-paid suit and go to Washington to explain liberal values or whatever, you don’t want to admit that all you have in your pocket are (mere) attitudes. Some writers are even anxious to show that they don’t have mere culture or imagination on their side, either, and indeed they may unfortunately be right. Modern Kantianism is of course the most elaborate attempt to avoid facing the unpleasant truth, but inevitably it bottoms out in (mere) concern for humanity, or respect for the law—dispositions and attitudes, visceral, female, fleshy creatures of Dionysus at the bottom of the pure Apollonian well. I on the other hand find nothing ‘mere’ about the network of attitudes that determine how we live! If your attitude to me is one of contempt and disdain, or if you desire me dead, am I supposed to console myself by reflecting that these are merely attitudes and desires?

I suppose however that I do find something mere about belief in facts that have no consequences.

Harman’s relativism is proposed not as an account of what people intend or mean when they use moral language, but as an account of the actual truth-conditions of what they say. The analogy here is with people talking about motion: they may not mean or intend to say anything relativistic, but any facts about motion are relational. So his preferred formulation is like this: for the purpose of assigning truth-conditions a judgment of the form it would be morally wrong of P to D has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form in relation to moral framework M it would be morally wrong of P to D. (p. 39). There are various ways in which the key notions here could be taken. But on the face of it, the proposal is indeed open to Thomson’s devastating objection that, far from sharing truth-conditions, the two italicized sentences stand in no sort of equivalence at all. For the second will typically be a truth or falsity of logic, while the first is not. That is, as Thomson shows in a meticulous discussion (pp. 188–96) the most natural construction of a moral framework would be that it is something like a set of moral commitments, which will either include or yield that it is wrong of P to D, in which case the second italicized sentence is logically true, or will not, in which case it is logically false. Furthermore without further specifications of M it is clear that I can hold many truths of the second kind without holding any of the first. In relation to any number of moral frameworks, it may be wrong to skip church, but I hold that it is permissible all the same. We need that M is ‘salient’, which here has to mean that it is the moral framework that the person putting forward the moral wrongness of P’s deed accepts. But then, what is it to accept a moral framework? Not, surely, the same as to accept a yet further relativized logical truth of the form ‘in relation to M*, M’. The right answer is that to accept a moral framework is to have a set of attitudes or dispositions or policies that the framework articulates.

Harman’s mistake, surely, is to displace the subject’s moral framework from something that is presupposed or used in the activities of moralizing, to
something that is to be mentioned in an account of what would make true the speaker’s remarks. But this is no more plausible, or necessary, here than in other cases: when I judge any proposition to be true, I will be presupposing or using a tacit set of epistemological principles, but it does not follow, and it is not typically true, that the truth-conditions of my judgement contains reference to those principles.

Thomson also takes issue with another component of Harman’s relativism, namely the idea that a moral judgement becomes inapplicable to an agent if the agent has no wants or desires on which it can ‘bite’. So, for instance, it is inappropriate to say that Hitler did what he ought not to do if there are no wants or desires in Hitler’s psychology that could motivate him to do otherwise. I think that again Thomson has the right of it: in her example, a subject behaves as a rotten thief, and is one, regardless of whether she has any wants or desires that conflict with being a rotten thief. I have always been puzzled why anyone should hold that moral judgement is inapplicable to anyone who is bad enough. Hitler’s character was certainly one to cause comment, so why not moral comment? Possibly Harman is overly influenced by the ‘justification’ principle he quotes from David Wong, that ‘one should not interfere with the ends of others unless one can justify the interference to be acceptable to them were they fully rational and informed of all the relevant circumstances’. But this cannot quite be it, because a fully rational and informed Hitler who is nevertheless brimful of bad desires can surely be stopped, even if according to Harman he cannot be judged.

When he introduces the figure he calls the quasi-absolutist (p. 34) Harman may be taken to suggest that I hold an ‘as if’ philosophy. He implies that quasi-absolutism is re-badged quasi-realism, and describes the figure as a moral relativist who adopts a way of talking ‘as if’ there were moral absolutes. I am sorry to say that I do not accept this way of putting it. Insofar as the terms make sense to me, I am not a moral relativist (I don’t accept Harman’s relational account of the truth-conditions of moral judgments, and in fact doubt whether any relativistic construction is coherent) and I am a moral absolutist (I hold, for example, that it is wrong to kick dogs for fun whether you want to or not, and that it would have been wrong whatever anyone had thought about it). I do not recognize my position as one of talking ‘as if’ there were values, rights and duties, when ‘really’ there are none (see, for example, my Essays in Quasi Realism, pp. 55–58). I hold that there are values, rights, and duties. And I am pleased to have this opportunity to express such healthy attitudes, which I hope you share.

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