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Expressivist Relativism?

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Thomson and Harman do not adopt formally opposed debater’s positions. Thomson’s “thesis of moral objectivity” claims that it is possible “to find out about some moral sentences that they are true.” And Harman defines moral relativism as holding that, for the purposes of assigning “objective truth conditions,” all moral judgments must be interpreted relativistically. So Harman doesn’t doubt that we can discover moral truths. His position is that a moral judgment is true in virtue of “objective truth conditions” only when it is interpreted relativistically.

Something more like a debate heats up in Part III, when Harman and Thomson respond to each other’s essays. Indeed, one of the real satisfactions of this volume is to see how two of the sharpest philosophical minds around deal with each other’s ideas—carefully, critically, constructively, and fairly. Since I am charged similarly to deal with Harman’s, it is also somewhat daunting. No doubt it will be obvious in what ways the comments that follow are indebted to Judith Thomson’s trenchant insights.

Readers of Harman’s earlier writings will recall that his initial defense of moral relativism (in his 1975 Philosophical Review paper) was confined to “inner” judgments concerning what a person morally ought to do or what it would be wrong of her not to do. Harman argued that inner judgments imply that the person they are true of has reasons to do what they demand. And he further claimed that all reasons for acting “have their source in [the agent’s] goals, desires, and intentions.” So he concluded that the truth of inner judgments depends on their subjects’ having the relevant “motivating attitudes.”

But this was not all that Harman thought inner judgments imply. When we say that someone morally shouldn’t have done something, we endorse the practical reasons that we imply exist and imply also that the audience we are addressing endorses them as well. The best explanation for these data, Harman argued, is that morality is conventional. Inner moral judgments presuppose an implicit agreement about principles of conduct, an agreement to which we who make them, the agents we judge, and the audience we address are all party. What makes these judgments true, moreover, is not some absolute moral truth, such as Hobbes’s third law of nature, “that men perform their
covenants made.” Morality is conventional all the way down. All moral ‘ought to do’s must be interpreted relatively to some agreement that speaker, audience, and subject are assumed to share. And moral obligations are made binding, they give agents reasons, through the reciprocal intentions in which these agreements consist. So conceived, morality is an extension of politics, the result of a bargaining process in which some principle is agreed, not by an inquiry into what it should be, but through interest-based threats and offers, seeking common ground.

In Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity, Harman is after a broader form of relativism. His earlier arguments about inner judgments were consistent with absolutism with respect to other moral claims. Perhaps we can’t say that Hitler ought not to have undertaken the Holocaust unless we suppose he shared some relevant principle, but Harman allowed that we might still say that he was evil without this implication. The latter judgment exhibits no “agent relativity,” as Harman here calls it. For all his earlier arguments showed, they might be true absolutely.

Moreover, as Thomson points out, even agent relativity is consistent with absolute moral truth. (211) It might be true absolutely that what an agent morally ought to do depends on the agreements to which he or she is party. Agent relativity differs from “critic relativity,” relativity to the critic’s values. (62) Of course, when Harman claimed that in inner moral judgments we endorse the reasons for acting that we imply exist (and imply that our audience does so also), he was suggesting that inner judgments exhibit a kind of critic relativity as well. But unlike agent relativity, Harman offered no argument that such critic relativity is reflected in the truth conditions rather than the pragmatics of inner judgments. Nor did he argue for any form of critic relativity more generally.

Here, however, Harman defines the moral relativism he wishes to defend as follows:

For the purposes of assigning objective 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. Similarly for other moral judgments. (43)

Harman is careful to stress that this is not an account of what people mean by their moral judgments. Rather, it is an interpretation of what their moral judgments would have to mean if they are to be objectively true.

Harman’s running analogy is with judgments about motion and mass. Since Einstein, we have known that there are no absolute facts about mass and motion, that these can only be specified in relation to some spacetime framework. Of course, when, before Einstein, people talked about mass and motion, their judgments may not have been relativistic. Nor are many people’s judgments now. But when we consider what truth there was (or is) to
these judgments, we translate them into some specific spacetime framework and figure from there.

So it is, Harman argues, with moral judgments (with a wrinkle I will mention in a minute). When we want to assess a moral judgment for truth, we translate it into some "moral framework," and proceed from there. Frequently, this will be our own moral framework, but it may also be that of the person who made the judgment, or its audience, or the person of whom the judgment was made. As with spacetime frameworks, no moral framework is privileged. The objective truth conditions for all moral judgments are relativistic all the way down. Moral relativism is like motion relativism.

To assess this analogy, we need to know more about what a "moral framework" or a "moral system of coordinates" is. By these, Harman says he means a "set of values," "moral standards," or "principles" ("a certain moral point of view"), which might be understood "on the model of the laws of one or another state," where the laws together with the "facts of the case" determine whether something is legal or not. (13, 17)

We can begin to raise a question about this analogy if we consider disagreements concerning motion and morals, respectively, and how we settle them. Suppose we independently ask two persons, A and B, whether another person, C, is moving or not. The first person, A, is standing next to a road as C, traveling on a bus, passes by her. The second person, B, is seated next to C on the bus. A’s and B’s answers may seem to conflict. A may say that C was moving, since C was moving past her. Similarly, B may say that C was not moving, since C was stationary in relation to him. Suppose we then point out their respective perspectives to A and B and ask them whether they really disagree. Quite likely, they will be willing to interpret their judgments as implicitly relative to their respective spacetime coordinates and conclude that they don’t really disagree after all.

But consider a moral disagreement between two individuals with two different "moral systems of coordinates." Suppose that two individuals differ about what obligations people have to help those in need. A believes that there is a (substantial) duty to help others, while B believes there is none, although he thinks there is a duty not to harm. Moreover, suppose that this difference results from a difference in "moral framework." It is not that A and B accept the same standards but draw different conclusions from these because they differ on the "facts of the case." Their disagreement is in fundamental, rather than just in derived, moral judgment.

Harman agrees that such disagreements are possible, even common. Indeed, he thinks that an important consideration in favor of moral relativism is its ability to explain the persistence of fundamental ethical disagreements. Suppose that we point out their differing moral coordinates to A and B. Is this likely to lead them to conclude that they don’t really disagree? They both now agree that refusing to help someone with significant needs at small cost
is wrong relative to A’s moral framework and that it is not wrong relative to B’s. But they may well still disagree about whether, as they might say, it is wrong period.

Already we should suspect a disanalogy between motion and morals, one that derives, I believe, from a difference between spatio-temporal and moral “frameworks” and our relations to these. We might put this difference by saying that while we occupy different spatio-temporal coordinates, we accept different moral coordinates. The reason ethical disagreements outstrip knowledge of moral coordinates in a way that is unlikely in the motion case is that in the moral example A doesn’t simply believe that not helping those in need is wrong in relation to his values, principles, and norms. Rather, he accepts those values and norms and, in doing so, thinks that going counter to them is wrong period. And contrariwise for B. Hence the remaining disagreement.

In the motion case, however, A and B have no such relation to their spatio-temporal positions, so there need be no remaining disagreement. Of course, either might be an absolutist about motion and believe that his coordinates are optimal for tracking it. But no such belief (even imaginatively) is part of what it is to occupy a spatio-temporal perspective and see things from that perspective.

Harman allows that “pure moral relativism” does not permit people with different moral frameworks to express moral disagreements. (33) However, he believes that a relativist can solve this problem by adopting an expressivist or “quasi-absolutist” account of such disagreements. When A and B, accepting different frameworks, say, respectively, that refusing to help those in need is wrong and not wrong, period, their speaking as though there are absolute moral truths can be seen as a projective expression of their having (accepting) different values and norms. And, he argues, so long as their use of quasi-absolutist (QA) terminology, or their use of moral terms in quasi-absolutist ways, meets certain conditions (e.g., that the person using it accepts “x is WRONG (absolutely wrong), if and only if X is wrong in relation to the morality relevantly associated with my current values”), a moral relativist can use QA terminology to express moral disagreements in a way that a purely relativist semantics would not allow.

This leads to a wrinkle in Harman’s statement of moral relativism. A quasi-absolutist expressivist may accept a semantical theory according to which it is possible for the quasi-absolutist moral claims that express a person’s basic moral framework to come out true. But if this is so, it won’t do to define moral relativism as the view that, for the purpose of assigning truth conditions, moral judgments must be interpreted relativistically. Rather, moral relativism must hold that the latter is necessary to assign objective truth conditions.

How should we regard the moral relativist’s embrace of expressivism or quasi-absolutism? How are we to place Harman’s position in what we might
have thought was a debate between expressivists and relativists? If A and B’s fundamental disagreement is to be understood in expressivist terms, then it is hard to see why our usual use of ‘wrong’ would not be so accounted also. If quasi-absolutism is the best account of fundamental moral disagreement, it is because it is the best account of fundamental moral judgment. Of course, Harman doesn’t claim that relativistic interpretations of moral judgments capture their meaning. His claim is that only relativistic moral judgments have objective truth conditions. But that claim is already fully accepted by expressivists and quasi-absolutists. They have no reason to deny that there are objective truth conditions for judgments about something’s moral status relative to a set of moral coordinates. (See, e.g., Gibbard on descriptive predicates, such as ‘N-required,’ that go with a system of norms, the acceptance of which normative judgments express; Wise Choices, Apt Feelings, p. 87) And expressivists also believe, of course, that moral judgments lack objective truth conditions in Harman’s sense. Once expressivism is accepted as a semantical account of basic moral judgment, it is hard to see how the resulting position will differ overall from expressivism in any respect expressivists care about.

Harman seems to see this problem when he asks whether his quasi-absolutist strategy “means we can simply forget about relative moral judgments.” (43–44) His answer is that we can’t because “quasi-absolutist moral judgments are best seen as a projection of relative moral judgments.” I don’t understand this answer. Why aren’t quasi-absolutist moral judgments projections, not of relative moral judgments, but, as Harman also says, of “attitudes,” in particular, the attitudes involved in having (accepting) values, principles, and norms that comprise a moral framework?

In closing, I would like to mention some issues concerning how to square a quasi-absolutist account of fundamental ethical judgment with a conventionalist view of morality. Disagreement in moral coordinates leads to bargaining over conventions that can guide inner judgments. Strictly speaking, according to Harman, before an agreement exists, A will be unable to judge truly that it would be wrong of others to fail to help those in need. But A can still judge that it would be bad for this obligation not to be recognized. And B can disagree, holding that this would be a good thing.

Suppose, then, that a compromise is struck somewhere between A’s and B’s positions, say, that there is some obligation to help those in need, at low agent-cost. A convention arises in which each intends to follow the rule provided others do. As with any bargain, however, people may accept the convention only as a modus vivendi without treating the rule as a norm they accept. We might imagine, for example, that what B really thinks, even after the bargaining process, is that it is not wrong to refuse help to others, although he is prepared to follow this rule so long as others are to get along. Where, then, are we to fit the agreed upon rule within the system of B’s
moral coordinates? He accepts the deal, and intends, consequently, to follow the rule so long as others do. But he does not accept the rule as a norm in the sense that would be sincerely expressed by his saying that refusing help is wrong.

Another reflection of this phenomenon is Harman’s claim that, since the bargaining leading to conventions is frequently self-interested, appeals to self-interest “ought to count as a perfectly acceptable form of moral argument.” (30) Suppose, however, that someone agrees with a convention, say, a rule requiring mutual aid, for entirely self-interested reasons. This gives the person some relevant attitude to express when he makes inner judgments in accordance with the rule. The problem is that it is of the wrong kind. The attraction of a quasi-absolutist account of fundamental ethical judgment is precisely that such judgments present themselves as absolute. And they can do so only if they express attitudes that do not present themselves as person-relative. But if A and B acknowledge only self-interested reasons for the convention, then their judgments in accordance with that rule will not present themselves as absolute.