Précis of Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity

Précis of Part One

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1 Relativism

In my view, moral right and wrong are relative to one or another moral framework, where there are various quite different moral frameworks, none of which is objectively more correct than the others. The relativity of moral right and wrong to a moral framework is comparable to the relativity of motion and mass to a spatio-temporal framework and the relativity of legal rights and duties to a legal system.

1.1 Not a theory of meaning

When Einstein introduced his theory of relativity with its implication that mass is relative to a spatio-temporal framework, he was not theorizing about what people mean by mass. Similarly, moral relativism makes no claim about what people mean by morally right and morally wrong. In either case, the claim is about how things are (or aren’t) not a claim about meaning.

1.2 Truth conditions of moral judgments

Before Einstein, judgements about mass were not intended as relative judgments. Must we then accept an error theory and count all those judgments false? Only if we adopt an overly simple view of the relation between meaning and truth conditions. A more plausible view counts (most) such judgments true to the extent that the corresponding relational judgments are true in relation to a spatio-temporal frameworks that are conspicuous to the people making the judgments.

Similarly, we moral relativists need not adopt an error theory about the judgments of those whose moral judgments presuppose moral absolutism.

Instead of counting all such judgments false, we can evaluate them as we would evaluate the corresponding relativistic judgments in relation to moral frameworks conspicuous to the people making those judgments. That is, we can adopt the following principle:

For the purposes 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*. Similarly for other moral judgments.

1.3 Actual moral diversity as an argument against moral absolutism

No substantive central core of morality is universally recognized in all societies. Societies without an institution of private property do not have rules against stealing and it is trivial to say that all societies that recognize private property have rules against stealing (because having such rules is a necessary condition of recognizing private property). Although every society may have a rule against killing, societies differ concerning who cannot be killed. Any universally accepted principle must verge on triviality, saying, for example, that one must not kill or harm members of a certain group, namely, the group of people one must not kill or harm.

Even within a single contemporary society, such as the United States, there are intractable differences in moral opinion as regards eating meat, permitting abortion, the relative value of cultural artifacts as compared with human life, the extent to which people ought to be prepared to help others less well off than themselves, whether killing is worse than letting someone die, and the relative importance of liberty versus equality in assessing the justice of social arrangements.

It is hard to see how to account for all such moral disagreements in terms of differences in situation or beliefs about nonmoral facts. Many of these disagreements seem to rest instead on basic differences in moral outlook.

Moral absolutists may respond that some people are simply not well placed to discover the right answers to moral questions. Moral relativists, on the other hand, see an analogy with the ancient dispute about whether the earth moves. It may seem (to some people) that there are objective nonrelative facts about moral right and wrong just as it may seem to some people that there are objective nonrelative facts about motion or mass. In the latter case, one particular system of coordinates is so salient that it seems to have a special status; facts about motion or mass in relation to the salient system of coordinates are treated as nonrelational facts. Similarly, the system

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2 I am indebted to Nicholas Sturgeon for this suggestion.
of moral coordinates that is determined by a person’s own values can be so salient that it can seem to have a special status; facts about what is right or wrong in relation to that system of coordinates can be misidentified as objective nonrelational facts.

1.4 Moral frameworks

A moral framework is a system of moral coordinates—a set of values, standards, and principles conceived on the model of the laws of one or another state. Whether something is right or wrong in relation to a given moral framework is determined by the system together with the facts of the case in something like the way in which whether something is illegal in a given jurisdiction is determined by the laws of that jurisdiction together with the facts of the case.

The moral framework or system of moral coordinates that is determined by the actual values, standards, and principles a particular person accepts cannot be simply identified with that person’s actual values, standards, and principles, just as a legal system cannot be simply identified with existing legislation, the record or prior court decisions, and the principles currently accepted by judges. Otherwise a person could never be mistaken about moral issues in relation to his or her moral framework, legislation could not be unconstitutional, and judges could not be mistaken in the legal principles they accept or the decisions they reach.

Among moral relativists, there is no single agreed on answer to how a person’s actual values determine the relevant moral framework just as there as no single agreed on answer as to how existing legislation, prior court decisions, and accepted legal principles determine what the law is in a particular jurisdiction. One idea identifies the moral system determined by a given person’s values with a system of corrected values. Despite disagreements on exactly how values are to be corrected, moral relativists agree that the corrected values for different people can diverge in significant ways.

Furthermore, relativists deny that the persistence of basic moral disagreement is due simply to some people being better placed to discover the moral truth—the absolutist explanation of the persistence of such disagreement. To a relativist, that is like saying that people in one particular spatio-temporal framework are better placed than other people to discover what the objectively correct spatio-temporal framework is.

2 Moral Disputes and Moral Agreements

People care about what they value and moral disagreements can involve conflicts in affective attitude whether or not they involve conflicts in belief. Resolution of such conflicts may involve bargaining, as when people bargain over the price of a house or what the wage rate is to be. We argue with others
not only by showing how features of their moral frameworks should lead them in certain directions, we also give them practical reasons to modify their moral understandings. Most people’s values reflect conventions that are maintained by continual tacit bargaining and adjustment.

Aspects of ordinary moral views can be explained by supposing that morality arises from such bargaining. Animals will have a lesser moral status than people because animals cannot participate in negotiations. Ordinary morality treats harming as a more significant wrong than failing to help someone because current morality is a compromise between better off people who have most of the resources needed to help others and worse off people needing most of the help.

Often what may look like a simple dispute as to the implications of previously accepted moral principles is really an instance of moral bargaining. Members of disadvantaged groups argue that considerations of fairness support certain conclusions even if these considerations have not been previously understood as supporting those conclusions. Conservatives reject this sort of argument. Here I suggest the disadvantaged are usefully interpreted as expressing dissatisfaction with the current consensus and are threatening to withdraw support unless the consensus is modified in certain ways. The conservatives are threatening not to go along with any such change and are invoking worries about what it would be like to abandon any sort of moral consensus altogether.

3 Quasi-Absolutism

If it is possible to introduce what I will call a quasi-absolutist way of using moral language, a serious difficulty arises concerning how to formulate moral relativism.

Emotivism supposes that certain moral judgments might be used to express affective attitudes rather than beliefs. Imperativism supposes that certain moral judgments might be treated as disguised imperatives. It is controversial whether such proposals can be extended to complex judgements such as “It is morally wrong to encourage someone to do something that is morally wrong.” Hare suggests that such a judgment might express a disposition to accept an implication from any general imperative of the form “Don’t ever F!” to “Don’t ever encourage someone to F!” Blackburn suggests that something like Hare’s strategy might make it possible to appeal only to ingredients that are acceptable to a moral relativist in order to construct a way of using moral terminology that mimics an absolutist’s usage of moral terms.

The central assumption behind such quasi-absolutism (as I will call it, echoing Blackburn’s “quasi-realism”) is that words can be given meaning by being given a use. I do not know whether this assumption is correct but will suppose that it is for the sake of argument.

3.1 How to use quasi-absolutist terminology

In order to avoid equivocation, let us use all capital letters for the quasi-abolutist moral terminology (QA terminology). Suppose that Veronica and Archie are moral relativists who know that their moral frameworks differ in that it is wrong to raise animals for food is wrong in relation to Veronica’s morality but not in relation to Archie’s. Then the first point of usage is that Veronica and Archie are to be able to express their disagreement in affective attitude using the QA terminology. Veronica can say that raising animals for food is WRONG, expressing her opposition to the practice, whereas Archie can say that this is not WRONG.

More precisely, let us stipulate that QA terminology is always used to express attitudes toward moral standards. Veronica expresses her approval of moral standards that would prohibit the practice; Archie expresses approval of standards that do not prohibit it. (Of course, expressing approval in this way is not the same as talking about it.)

But this is not yet fully to specify the way the expression WRONG is to be used. Here are some additional stipulations.

1. The term is syntactically appropriate in all contexts in which the term morally wrong can be used in English.

2. A moral relativist who uses the term WRONG should be willing to say something using that term in an extensional context, if, and only if, he or she is willing to assert the corresponding relativistic judgment, replacing WRONG with wrong used in relation to the moral framework associated with his or her values.

3. This equivalence does not hold for uses of the term WRONG in psychological contexts such as, “Archie and I do not disagree about whether raising animals for food is wrong in relation to my values.” In fact, Veronica can describe her disagreement with Archie as a disagreement about whether raising animals for food is WRONG, and Archie can agree with that description of their disagreement.

4. Notice that, because of point 2, speakers who use this terminology recognize standard logical implications among remarks using that terminology.
These suggestions appear to provide a moral relativist with sufficient instruction for using the QA terminology in many contexts.

3.2 Truth conditions and the characterization of moral relativism

Judgments made with the QA terminology can be treated as having truth conditions, as long as these conditions are stated using that same terminology. Veronica and Archie can agree that “Raising animals for food is WRONG” is true if and only if raising animals for food is WRONG.

This raises a difficulty for our earlier account of truth conditions.

For the purposes 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*. Similarly for other moral judgments.

If the quasi-absolutist usage is correct, the moral relativist must acknowledge that an ordinary judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, can be assigned truth conditions as follows: the judgment is true if and only if it would be WRONG of P to D. Similarly, the moral relativist can allow for such moral facts as the nonrelative fact that it would be WRONG of P to D.

Furthermore, it looks as if a moral absolutist’s usage of moral terminology satisfies the conditions of usage for the QA terminology. This makes it unclear how moral relativism is to be distinguished from moral absolutism, if the QA terminology is available.

If we must accept the QA terminology, then I suggest that there will be a sense of the term objective in which the relativist holds that there are no objective nonrelative facts about moral right and wrong and the absolutist holds that there are objective nonrelative facts about moral right and wrong.

I cannot define the relevant sense of objective, but I can try to explain it as follows. A relativist about motion supposes that there are various possible spatio-temporal frameworks, none of which is objectively privileged. The moral relativist supposes that there are various moral frameworks, none of which is objectively privileged. If the relativist uses the QA terminology to say that raising animals for food is WRONG, the relativist may suppose that this remark has truth conditions, and indeed, is true. But the relativist also supposes that these truth conditions are subjective rather than objective. If the relativist thought these were objective truth conditions, so that the remark was objectively true, the relativist would be committed to thinking that there was after all a morality that was objectively privileged.
In order to respond to moral relativism it is insufficient to say that a particular moral framework is privileged in the sense that it is the one that correctly captures what is RIGHT and WRONG. That would be like responding to relativism about motion by claiming that a certain spatio-temporal framework is privileged in the sense that it is the one that correctly captures when things are really in MOTION and when they are not. One needs to show that there is an objectively privileged framework.

If the QA terminology makes sense, the issue of moral relativism must be conceived as an issue about objectivity or objective truth, not just an issue about truth.

3.3 If we have QA terminology, do we need relative moral judgments?

If we have the QA terminology, used in the suggested way, can moral relativists simply drop the relativistic terminology in favor of the QA terminology? No, because the stipulations given for using the QA terminology refer to the relativistic terminology.

4 Non-universality of Practical Reasons and Judgments about Outsiders

4.1 Two kinds of Moral Reasons

Some people (egoists) are not motivated by rules against stealing or injury to others without being ignorant of relevant facts and without committing any error in logic or scientific method. Such people are perhaps not objectively irrational or unreasonable. But the term unreasonable can be used as a normative term to express a moral judgment. There is a sense of the term in which those who believe in not harming others might call someone who does not care about others unreasonable.⁵

If the QA terminology makes sense, we can extend it to UNREASONABLE and we can speak of someone’s REASONS, in contrast with their objective reasons. Moral relativists say there are no moral demands that all rational agents have compelling objective reasons to follow, reasons of the sort that carry weight with the agent, or would carry weight apart from objective defects in the agent, failure to follow or objectively appreciate some argument or other reasoning, and lack of objective information. Relativists who use the QA terminology might hold nevertheless that everyone has significant moral demands that all rational agents have compelling REASONS to follow.

4.2 Tolerance

A particular moral relativist might accept something like what Wong calls the justification principle, “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 relevant circumstances. To do otherwise is to fail to treat them with the respect due rational beings.”

Consider in particular a moral vegetarian who accepts Wong’s justification principle, also accepts moral relativism, and agrees that moral vegetarianism represents values that can be rejected without objective mistake of fact or reasoning. This vegetarian would have some reason to tolerate nonvegetarians.

There is a complication because of the possible distinction just mentioned between objective reasons and REASONS. If a QA notion of REASONS makes sense, we can presumably also distinguish between objective justifications and JUSTIFICATIONS, where a JUSTIFICATION is an argument that it would be UNREASONABLE to reject. How then should we understand Wong’s justification principle? Does it require not interfering with someone unless we can present an objective justification or does it merely require presenting a JUSTIFICATION. The latter principle need not imply much in the way of tolerance. Clearly, there are two principles, one stronger, one weaker. Some people might accept the stronger principle, some only the weaker principle.

4.3 Judgments about moral reasons

A related point arises concerning judgments about an agent that imply the agent has reasons to do something. For example, some but perhaps not all speakers of English use the expression P ought morally to D in such a way that it implies that P has a compelling reason to D. These speakers might allow that it was terrible that a tiger attached certain children at the zoo but would not say that the tiger ought morally not to have done so, because the tiger had no reasons to refrain. These speakers might even suppose that a moral monster like Hitler had no reasons to refrain from their terrible actions and would therefore be unable to judge that Hitler ought morally not to have done those things.

The issue is complicated because of the possible ambiguity between (objective) reasons and REASONS. Perhaps Hitler had compelling REASONS not to have acted as he did even though he did not have compelling objective reasons. It may have been UNREASONABLE for him to act as he did even though he was not objectively unreasonable in so acting. Some speakers may use P ought morally to D so as to imply that P had compelling objective reasons to D while other speakers may use P ought morally to D so has to imply merely that P had compelling REASONS to D. The latter

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speakers use the phrase “ought morally” in such a way as to be able to con-clude that Hitler ought morally not to have acted as he did.

As a moral relativist, in judging other people, should you judge them in the light of your own values or in the light of their values? It depends on what you say about them. If you are simply evaluating them, your own val-ues are relevant. If you imply something about their objective moral reasons, then their values may be relevant too.