

Phil 2, March 10, 2011

Harman distinguishes between three kinds of relativism:

- (i) normative moral relativism,
- (ii) moral judgment relativism, and
- (iii) meta-ethical relativism.

We will skip (iii). This form of relativism is not incoherent, but it is difficult to understand.

Moral judgment relativism: “X is wrong” *means* “X is wrong for person S” (or “X is wrong for group T” or “X is wrong according to outlook U”)

Objection: How is genuine disagreement possible? If I say, “X is wrong,” and you say, “X is not wrong,” then we disagree. But according to MJR, this is not always true. For I may be saying, “X is wrong for Niko,” and you may be saying, “X is not wrong for Dylan.” There is no disagreement here. Both judgments can be true.

Reply: When a relativist makes a moral judgment without indicating a particular outlook, she

- (i) implicitly refers to the outlook she accepts and
- (ii) presupposes that her listener shares that outlook.
 - A relativist who says, “It is wrong to X,” and another relativist who says, “It is not wrong to X,” can disagree, so long as each presupposes that the other shares the same moral outlook.
 - If they realize that this presupposition is false, however, then each will (i) rephrase her judgment to refer explicitly to the outlook that he accepts and (ii) drop the presupposition that her listener shares that outlook. Having done this, they will no longer disagree.

Normative moral relativism: roughly, that different people, as agents, can be subject to different ultimate moral demands.

- Does not say that the ultimate moral demands to which people are subject necessarily depend on their culture.
- Does not say that there are *no* ultimate moral demands to which everyone is subject. It is compatible with there being *some* ultimate moral demands to which everyone is subject.

More precisely, NMR says that 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, although
- (3) B is subject to some moral demands, and
- (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.

Argument for NMR: Assumptions 1 + 2W

Assumption 1: A moral demand D applies to a person only if that person either accepts D (i.e., intends to act in accordance with D) or fails to accept D only because of ignorance of relevant (nonmoral) facts, a failure to reason something through, or some sort of (nonmoral) mental defect like irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.

Argument for assumption 1:

- (1) If a moral demand applies to someone, that person has conclusive reason to act in accordance with that demand. (This is what distinguishes moral demands from legal demands.)
- (2) A person has conclusive reason to do something only if there is warranted practical reasoning available to the person that would culminate in a decision to do the act in question. "Available" in the sense that the person could reason in that way if he or she was of sufficient intelligence, was rational, knew all the relevant facts, etc.

The crux of the argument has to do with motivation. How can we say that someone is under a moral demand, Harman asks, unless his awareness of that demand could move him to act?

Objection: There is an ambiguity between "motivating" and "justifying" reasons. A "justifying" reason is a "reason to think one ought to do something." The reason in (1) is justifying, whereas the reason in (2) is motivating.

Assumption 2W: There are two people A and B and a moral demand D such that:

- (1) A is subject to D.
- (2) B does not accept D as a legitimate demand on him or herself.
- (3) B's nonacceptance is not the result of any relevant (nonmoral) ignorance on B's part or any failure to reason something through or any sort of (nonmoral) mental defect such as irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.
- (4) B is subject to some moral demands.
- (5) Neither A nor B accepts a moral demand D* that would account for A but not B being subject to D given the difference in situation between A and B.
- (6) In neither case is this failure to accept such a D* the result of any relevant (nonmoral) ignorance or any failure to reason something through or any sort of (nonmoral) mental defect such as irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.

Argument for assumption 2W: "Consider the moral demand that one not kill other people. Some professional criminals do not seem to accept this demand. These criminals have no qualms about killing other people if there is something to be gained from doing so. In some cases, their lack of acceptance of the relevant principle does not appear to rest on a failure to notice certain facts of incorrect reasoning or any failure to follow out certain reasoning. Nor is it always because of stupidity, irrationality, confusion, or mental illness. Furthermore, clearly this is not because there is some more basic moral demand which accounts, given the differences in situation, for why most people but not these criminals are subject to the prohibition against the killing of other people" (33).

Questions: Does it seem right to say that such criminals are not subject to the prohibition against the killing of other people? If this is right, then what would the point of moral demands be?

Review Questions:

1. What does Harman mean by an "ultimate" moral demand?
2. Why does Harman add the qualification "ultimate" in his statement of normative moral relativism?