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PROBLEMS OF EXPLANATION FOR METAETHICAL RELATIVISTS[1]

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Mackie, Harman and others have claimed that metaethical relativism better coheres with a naturalistic world view than does absolutism. In this paper, I follow the relativist in assuming that explanationism is a sound approach to moral theorizing. However, I present a variety of reasons for thinking that the relativist's is not the best explanation of the manifold phenomena of moral practice.

Introduction

Gilbert Harman has defined moral relativism as the thesis that:

> the dictates of morality arise from some sort of convention or understanding among people, that different people arrive at different understandings, and that there are no basic moral demands that apply to everyone.[2]

According to relativism thus construed, the dictates of morality are nothing more than either explicit or (more often) tacit agreements among people to act in certain ways, and these are motivated ultimately by personal interests. I shall assume absolutism to be the negation of relativism, such that the two form a mutually exclusive and exhaustive disjunction. I would like absolutism to capture the pre–philosophical idea that there

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[1] I would like to thank Gilbert Harman for reading and criticizing an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Harman, "Is There a Single True Morality?", in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation* (1989), p. 363. Further citations to this text will be made in the body of the paper to (1989).

are some actions which are morally impermissible, regardless of the circumstances under, society in, and time at which they occur.

Explanationism

Some moral philosophers aim to provide an explanation for what appear to be widely disparate moral practices, customs, and judgements, both inter– and intra–culturally. Faced with the data, that human beings comprise a heterogeneous group of moral agents, appearing to affirm conflicting moralities and embrace different values, philosophers avail themselves of one of two strategies.

Some posit a single true morality and provide the resources for an explanation of what constitute deviations from the correct view. Explanations of such "errors" assert that either persons sometimes act immorally, or (à la Socrates) ignorance leads to deviations from the true morality. These sorts of explanations are motivated by the philosophers' metaethical convictions, in those cases where they believe there to be moral facts but do not feel epistemically justified in asserting any particular ones as true. Alternatively, philosophers sometimes have convictions about particular ethical questions which lead them to a belief in absolutism. The following is an illustration of the sort of reasoning involved: The gratuitous torture of innocent children is absolutely wrong. There is no set of conceivable circumstances under which the gratuitous torture of innocent children would be morally permissible. So something is absolutely wrong. Therefore, moral relativism is false.

In contrast, philosophers defending relativism accept, *tout court,* the "fact" of heterogeneity. They deny that there is a single true morality and offer an explanation of inclinations to claim that the heterogeneity of "true" moralities is only apparent. Typically these sorts of explanations appeal to theories of acculturation and inculcation of established, but ultimately arbitrary, conventions. Relativists do not lack moral beliefs, but they believe there to be adequate explanations of the provenance of those beliefs, and those explanations do not involve appeal to absolutist morality.

Mackie calls his an "error theory," i.e., "a theory that although most people in making judgements implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false."[3]

[3] Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong,* 1977, p. 35.

Mackie's is a type of pragmatic strategy based on a more general idea of what it is rational to believe and which sorts of entities it is reasonable to think exist. If all of the data can be explained without appeal to special kinds of facts (moral facts) or *sui generis* values, then, according to this approach, it is reasonable to accept that explanation. In what follows, let us assume that explanationism is a sound approach to moral theorizing.

Problems of Explanation

The relativist has, *prima facie,* a more difficult explanatory task than the absolutist, for he must explain how it is that nearly everyone is mistaken. The absolutist needs only to be able to explain how some people could be mistaken. Because relativism conflicts with the deeply entrenched common sense beliefs that there are absolute moral demands and that people sometimes act immorally (as I shall explain below), it is, to my mind, difficult to understand how the relativist could think that "the burden of proof" lies with the absolutist. I shall return to this issue, but for now let us consider some specific facets of morality which are altogether mysterious on the relativist's picture.

First, the relativist lacks any clear explanation for the fact that persons who change their attitudes toward certain things, especially in matters of taste, often do not regard themselves as in a better or more authoritative position than they were before, while that is not so with regard to moral matters. A simple example would be an agent's revision of his opinion about the taste of a food. The agent need not and often does not insist that his current opinion is authoritative, somehow accessing "the absolute gustatory truth," and that formerly he was confused or wrong. In contrast, agents who revise their moral beliefs often regard themselves as having been genuinely wrong, misguided or confused before having changed their views.

The relativist conflates these valuational attitudes. He is incapable of distinguishing cases in the manner in which an absolutist can, by maintaining that in the revision of taste there may be no "right" or "wrong," while in the revision of moral belief, the agent may have become genuinely morally enlightened. The relativist cannot account for the distinction which agents make between matters of taste and fashion, on the one hand, and matters of morality, on the other. Ultimately, the relativist must resort to something like the following "explanation": "People as a matter of fact care more about imposing their moral opinions than their taste upon others."

Another problem for the relativist is his inability to account for what seems to be a genuine distinction between sociopaths and civil disobedients. To explain the sociopath's deviance, the relativist can appeal to facts about his brain. Indeed, absolutists sometimes exculpate agents due to their aberrant psychology. But, on the hypothesis that values are purely fortuitously inculcated by societies, how might the relativist explain the deviance of a civil disobedient, if not, once again, by appealing to facts about his anomalous psychological make–up? In the relativist's picture, civil disobedients would seem to be indistinguishable from sociopaths. But this is highly unintuitive.

Civil disobedience usually occurs after an agent has reached full physical and psychological maturity and, furthermore, seems to issue from an agent's rational reflection upon his society. The civil disobedient appears to be fully rational and capable of making and maintaining agreements and contracts with other members of his community. He rejects only a part of his society's code. The relativist might claim that his thesis explains this by allowing a very fine discrimination of societies, such that each civil disobedient forms his own society.[4] But if absolutism is false, then there is no reason for distinguishing the civil disobedient from the sociopath, so the relativist must explain the two cases in the very same manner: Either both the civil disobedient and the sociopath are psychologically aberrant, or each occupies his own "society."

The second of those alternatives points directly to yet a third, even more serious problem of explanation for the relativist, to which I alluded above, viz., the seeming impossibility, on his view, of immoral behavior. One kind of group is a group of one person. So the behavior of criminals "within society" can be explained by saying that they are not party to our agreements. Their morality differs from ours. How do we know this? In the only manner in which we might (assuming that "agreements" are to have been implicit): by observing what they do.

Harman has distinguished the cases of Hitler and Stalin by claiming that Hitler's crimes were so heinous and incomprehensible to us that we cannot properly regard him as having been party to our system of morality: "it sounds odd to say that Hitler should not have ordered the ex-

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[4] Harman suggests this in "Moral Relativism Defended," in *Philosophical Review*, vol. 94, no. 1, January 1975.

termination of the Jews, that it was wrong of him to do have done so."[5] According to Harman, although we cannot make sense of applying the "moral ought" to Hitler, it is sensible to apply the "evaluative ought" to him, saying, e.g., that "Hitler ought not to have ordered the massacre of the Jews," but meaning that "it would have been a good thing had Hitler not ordered the massacre of the Jews." In contrast, Harman claims, it is sensible for us to make full–fledged moral assessments of Stalin's actions, since we can see that he was moved by the same sorts of considerations by which we are.

However, the conclusions in these cases depend ultimately upon the level at which "relevant" similarities between us and the agent in question are identified and analyzed. It is altogether consistent to regard Hitler as having been motivated by the desire to make the world a better place, in conjunction with the belief that Jews are subhuman and evil. If it is true that Hitler conducted himself similarly to us in many other respects, e.g., by exhibiting practical rationality between means and ends, then there do not seem to be any grounds for denying that he was a member of our community as well. It is implausible to characterize Hitler as an alien of sorts merely because of the magnitude of his crimes. In other words, Harman does not adequately explain why we can, with linguistic propriety, describe Stalin as having been immoral, but not Hitler. But the relativist's own view implies that if we can judge Stalin, then we should be able to judge Hitler, and if we cannot judge Hitler, then neither can we Stalin. In fact, as we shall see, relativism precludes the possibility of judging (with linguistic propriety) anyone whose morality differs from one's own. Moral judgement of anyone else involves the projection of one's own peculiar values and beliefs upon others who may or may not share them. In cases where we judge another agent as "immoral," this simply means that his actions do not cohere with our morality, but that just means that he is not a party to our agreements, that he does not share our views about morality. He is, with respect to our moral community, "beyond the pale."

Harman's example illustrates his view about the necessity of an agent's ability to be galvanized by reasons to act otherwise in order for him to be able to be judged as having ought to have acted otherwise. According to Harman, "we make inner judgements about a person only if we suppose that he is capable of being motivated by the relevant moral

[5] *Ibidem*, p. 7.

considerations."[6] If Harman is right about this, then no one ever acts immorally. To understand more clearly why this is so, it will be helpful to consider yet another problem for the relativist, viz.: Why do agents often deeply regret their former actions and judgements?

The relativist rests his analysis upon the idea of implicit agreements, as he must if his theory is to have any plausibility whatsoever, given that it is patent that most "moral agreements" are never explicitly articulated. For example, most people in society tacitly "agree" not to murder one another, which is why most of us can generally walk down the street fearlessly, without first having to don bulletproof vests and gas masks. But this idea, that implicit agreements are constitutive of morality, conjoined with the claim that motivation and agreement are interrelated, precludes the possibility of immoral action. It would seem that the relativist must own that agents who regard themselves as having acted immorally in the past are behaving irrationally: They are systematically mistaken. If relativism is true, then there is a wide array of moralities and no non–arbitrary way of denying that every possible way of acting is a morality according to which some possible agent is abiding. But then how can a relativist account for agents who deeply regret their former actions?

There are two apparently distinct cases to consider. First, there is the agent who acts in a certain manner according to his beliefs, desires, and agreements, but, retrospectively, after having experienced some transformation in his belief and/or desire set relevant to his moral agreements, judges that he took the wrong course of action. The second type of agent acts in contradiction to his avowed beliefs and desires. For example, he believes that X is wrong, he desires not to do X, he has made an agreement with himself (and perhaps with others as well) not to do X and yet he does X nonetheless.

The first agent clearly has not broken any agreement, for at the time of action, he lacked at least one belief or desire crucially linked to the putative agreement, i.e., the agreement to which he is now a party. He has not acted immorally, in the sense of having acted against his own morality, since at the time of the action his current morality was not his morality. His regret about his actions can only be dismissed as irrational or a matter of ignorance, if relativism is true, but he does not know it.

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[6] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

The second agent acts apparently immorally, but the question about rationality should be raised here as well, since persons and moralities can be very finely differentiated, i.e., narrowly partitioned. The person acting in the moment could be regarded as not embracing the belief, desire and agreement which led to a retrospective characterization of his later behavior as immoral. For example, why not view this as a period during which he is ignorant of the relevant beliefs, desires and agreements? During that period, brief though it be, the agent embraces a different morality. He is not party to what were formerly his agreements and what, immediately subsequent to his action, become his agreements again. In other words, this case can be subsumed under the first type: The agent's guilt about his earlier actions constitutes either a breach of rationality or a case of ignorance, not of immorality.

And it is quite difficult to see how a cognitive defect, or what I have described as a "breach of rationality" might simultaneously be regarded as a moral defect, if it is true that "ought implies can." Indeed, it is arguably a part of the very concept of moral or immoral action that an agent be able to choose otherwise. To say that an agent were morally responsible for such a cognitive defect or failure of rationality would require that he have been able to choose not to have the defect. Unless the agent chooses to act irrationally, he cannot be said to act immorally. An hyperbolic example illustrates the point: Who would deem morally culpable a person who explodes into a psychotic episode, machine–gunning every person in sight to death, if that episode were fully caused by a brain tumor, a brain tumor that he never chose to have?

Relativism is in part motivated by a recognition that some persons are not moved by considerations which others believe to be of utmost importance.[7] But individuals through time are also motivated by completely different sorts of considerations. Personal commitments and moralities transform through time. Consider the changes in morality of one such individual: the infant (devoid altogether of morality), as compared to the docile child, as compared to the recalcitrant junior high school student, as compared to the reformed young adult, as compared to the elderly religious devotee. This is hardly an anomalous sequence of moral metamorphosis. According to the picture which I have argued the relativist is

[7] I discuss a vivid example of such an individual in "Moral Blindness and Moral Responsibility: What can we learn from Rhoda Penmark?", in *Journal of Applied Philosophy* (1996).

committed to, the individual spanning time should be regarded as a collection of distinct moral persons, each of whom is party to different moralities at different times. Alternatively, the individual could be regarded as a single person, but one who embraces different moralities over time. In fact, the first construal seems better to illustrate the analogy of the individual through time to the heterogeneous community of moral agents found within any given community at a given time.

Whether or not one accepts this sort of very fine discrimination of persons and moralities, it is clear that the relativist cannot have it both ways. If moral heterogeneity is evidential for the relativist's thesis that there is no single true morality, then it is evidential for the impossibility of genuinely immoral action. When one accepts heterogeneity as evidential of moral relativism, then the pre–philosophical idea that it is possible for agents to act immorally must be forsaken.

The Best Explanation?

Some relativists think that accepting science, due to considerations about success, coherence, prediction, etc., mandates that non–scientific entities, such as objective values and moral principles be rejected. But if its coherence with common sense, its manifest reasonableness, is a part of the argument for taking a realist attitude toward science, then, to the extent to which science contradicts common sense with respect to morality, by (supposedly) denying that there are objective values or basic moral demands which apply to everyone, this can only constitute evidence against the hypothesis that the scope of science is unlimited. The relativist's explanationist strategy presupposes the moot idea that we can only be justified in believing scientific (or quasi–scientific) theories to be true. But it is incontrovertible that science has nothing to say about those phenomena, if there be any, which he outside of its scope. Whether or not objective values and moral principles exist, they are inaccessible to scientific study. The inference from the fact that objective values and moral principles are inaccessible to scientific study, to the claim that they do not exist, is patently fallacious. Accordingly, the appearance that "the burden of proof" lies with the absolutist is illusory, since common sense favors absolutism.

The relativist's belief, that the epistemological problem of locating objective values and principles entails the metaphysical conclusion that they do not exist, requires his rejecting a good portion of common sense, judging it to be an enormous confusion. Common sense favors science and absolute morality. Science and relativism are related in completely contrary ways to common sense. Science, which presupposes the existence of material objects susceptible of empirical study, coheres with the overall view of common sense. Relativism, which asserts that there are circumstances under which the gratuitous torture of innocent children might be morally permissible, does not.

Furthermore, independent reasons can be offered for accepting realist explanations in science (e.g., predictive and other forms of pragmatic success), in addition to the fact that it coheres well with common sense, and those strategies are unavailable to the moral relativist. Ockham's razor is assumed in science only at a certain level, e.g., in choosing between two rival theories both of which already cohere with common sense. That is why they are genuine competitors. But the relativist's claim that objective values and categorical imperatives are "queer," [8] flies in the face of the entire history and structure of the institution of society. The fact is that, although scientific theories have metamorphosed radically through time, there has been a basic and persistent tendency of human beings to interpret actions as right or wrong. Although there have always been disputes over what, e.g., justice demands, no civilized society has rejected the basic constructs of morality as "vain and chimerical."

The "scientifically–minded" relativist merely assumes the metathesis that our knowledge is exhausted by scientific knowledge, a thesis obviously indemonstrable by science, since science cannot talk about itself. Scientific realism entails nothing about the metaethical issue between absolutists and relativists. Nor does scientific realism in any manner favor a metaphysical thesis concerning the unity, comprehensiveness and exhaustiveness of scientific methods and theories. Although "unity" in a weaker sense, viz., consistency, is presupposed by a belief in our best confirmed scientific theories, that is only due to the common sense commitment to something like the law of the excluded middle, which derives from the fact that all of our theories are in language and, therefore, governed by two basic laws of logic (the other being the law of noncontradiction). Moral principles could not possibly conflict with scientific facts, because the former are prescriptive, while the latter are descriptive. Science is irrelevant to morality.

[8] For example, Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*, 1977, and Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 1952.

Concluding Remarks

In spite of his claim that his is "the best explanation," the relativist lacks plausible explanations for a variety of distinctions and phenomena. His "best explanation" is a blunt instrument which must be supplemented by *ad hoc* auxiliary hypotheses in order even to begin to explain the subtleties of moral practice. While Harman has argued that the hypothesis of relativism explains "why we think that it is more important to avoid harm to others than to help others," and "a previously unnoticed distinction between inner and non–inner judgments,"[9] the former is easily accommodated by many versions of absolutism, e.g., theories favoring negative to positive rights, and the "previously unnoticed distinction" may have been unnoticed for a very good reason. As argued above, Harman's distinction between Hitler and Stalin is unintuitive, given that Hitler exhibited practical rationality between means and ends. Even if this distinction is a possible one, I doubt that it is a phenomenon of common sense morality. Whether or not people agree with Harman's distinction is an empirical matter, but the distinction counts in favor of his thesis only if it is actually made in our moral practices. Otherwise it is not a phenomenon "to be explained."

When we look closely at the complexity of our moral phenomena, we find that, even under the assumption that explanationism is a sound approach to metaethical theorizing, relativism leaves more unexplained than it explains. The claim that relativism coheres better with naturalism is spurious, since theories of science can only provide us with descriptions of the natural world. Values he outside the domain of science, but human beings are natural organisms who naturally perceive different aspects of the world tinged by values of many different hues. The fact that some human beings are neither moved by moral sentiment nor observant of the basic principles of decency governing civilized people in no way implies that "Everything is permitted."

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[9] Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended."