

THREE VERSIONS OF MORAL RELATIVISM AND AN ASSESSMENT OF THE FIRST

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Abstract : Divergent moral outlooks across different societies and the search for the theoretical basis for making cross-cultural value judgements bring forth the thesis of moral relativism. Gilbert Harman, as a moral relativist, thinks that the dictates of morality arise from some sort of convention and understanding among people and there is no basic moral demand that apply to everyone. He distinguishes between three plausible versions of this thesis, namely, Normative Moral Relativism (NMR), Moral Judgement Relativism (MJR) and Meta Ethical Relativism (MER). According to the first of these versions, which is chiefly to be discussed in this article, different people as moral agents would be subject to different ultimate moral demands. Now this thesis may take the strong form if it is asserted that there are no moral demands that apply to everyone, who is subject to some moral demand. But Harman prefers to uphold a weaker form which maintains that two people can be subject to different moral demands and not subject to some more basic moral demand that accounts for this difference. According to MJR, moral judgements contain an implicit reference to the speaker or certain norms, while MER maintains that there can be conflicting moral judgements about a particular case that are both valid.

Harman himself anticipates an objection against NMR and tries to defend his position. One may object that there must be some sort of general principle behind the difference between two people in whether to accept a moral demand or not. Bruce Russell challenges the stronger version of Harman's assumption, but Harman tries to defend his position by pointing out that one's desires and other intentions play significant role in determining what it is rational for a person to do.

Keywords: Moral relativism, three versions of moral relativism : NMR, MJR and MER, Gilbert Harman, strong and weak versions of NMR, Bruce Russell's objection, Harman's defence.

Moral philosophers often "have an anti-relativist predilection"¹ and it is said that moral relativism often suffers from lack of defence, and the few that have defended it have done so mostly to get rid of the confusion or misunderstanding associated with it. So it is of considerable interest to follow Gilbert Harman's defence of the thesis of moral relativism. In this essay I intend to discuss the three plausible versions of moral relativism as distinguished by Harman, a prominent advocate of the relativistic thesis. These three theses are normative moral relativism, moral judgment relativism and meta-ethical relativism respectively. The first part of my discussion is rather descriptive, while in the second part I try to probe into the tenability of the first of these theses. I here try to bring forth Harman's argument for the thesis of normative relativism, his insight into the issue and the tenability of some of the objections rose against it.

I

Moral or ethical relativism has been defined and defended in various ways starting from the Greek period. Protagoras, one of the earliest proponents of the position who lived in the fifth century B.C. made two relativistic claims, which are no less popular till today: first, moral principles cannot be shown to be valid for everyone, and second, people ought to follow the conventions of their own group.² Later philosophers have variously understood and modified these claims. One is sometimes said to be a relativist if one asserts that different social groups have different values as a result of the historical factors that shape those values and individual values are determined by the traditions prevalent in the society to which an individual belongs. One may suppose that particular circumstances make a difference to the morality of an action. In other words, differences in circumstances induce differences in moral demands. Setting aside all these notions Brandt prefers to reserve the use of the term “ethical relativism” for a theory close to the Protagorean tradition. He considers Protagoras’s first claim to be “theoretically more interesting and important than the second”³ and formulates the relativist thesis in ethics thus: “There are conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid.”⁴ This assertion is not to claim that no ethical propositions are valid for everybody; but claims that some ethical propositions are not more valid than other conflicting ethical opinions. W.T. Stace defines ethical relativism as the position which holds that there is no single universal moral standard. To quote his own language: “Any ethical position which denies that there is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times may fairly be called a species of ethical reasoning.”⁵ It may be noted that Stace stresses on the anti-absolutistic feature of moral relativism, which goes with Harman’s first version of moral relativism, whereas Protagoras’s first claim goes with the third version as discussed below.

Of the various views that have been called ethical or moral relativism by several of the thinkers as briefly sketched above, Harman in his essay, “What Is Moral Relativism?”⁶ distinguishes three plausible versions of it under the labels as follows:

- 1) Normative Moral Relativism’ (in brief, NMR)
- 2) ‘Moral Judgment Relativism’ (in brief, MJR) and
- 3) ‘Meta-ethical Relativism’ (in brief, MER).

We shall sketch in brief the preliminary discussions of these three theses and then turn to the more serious philosophical problems underlying them. Our main focus would concentrate on the tenability of the first of these theses.

II

Harman proposes that an initial statement of NMR would be that different people as moral agents would be subject to different ultimate moral demands. Only ultimate moral demands are of importance here, because a non-relativist would also agree that different agents are subject to some differences in moral demands. Demands vary as the situations or circumstances change. A is morally obligated to give B one thousand rupees, while B do not have such obligation for the simple reason that A is indebted to B by that amount. But the point is that both A and B might be subject to the same moral demand, namely that one must repay one's debt. Differences in situation include differences in social customs. In India, it would be perfectly alright to drive one's car on the left side of the road, while in France one ought to drive on the right side. This is not to be treated as a case of NMR, because the overriding principle behind this example is that one ought to obey the law and custom regarding driving on the designated side of the road. We are all familiar in our daily life with several differences in custom regarding manners, family responsibility, marriage and the like.

The question is: what is an ultimate moral demand? Harman answers thus: "A given demand D is an ultimate moral demand on an agent A if and only if there is no further moral demand D* on A which, given A's situation, accounts for A's being subject to D." ⁷ Now, from this it would be incorrect to suppose that anyone who denies ultimate moral demands thereby turns out to be a normative moral relativist. Neither it would be correct to suppose that normative moral relativism is the view that there are no moral demands to which everyone is subject. Because even a non-relativist does not fail to recognise that infants and idiots are subject to no moral demands. To think that according to normative moral relativism there are no moral demands that apply to everyone who is subject to at least some moral demands is to take a very strong version of NMR. So Harman prefers to uphold a weaker form which is compatible with denying one ultimate moral demand applicable to agents as agents, keeping the plausibility that different people can be subject to different moral demands. He formulates the weaker version of NMR thus:

There can be two people A and B and a moral demand D such that

- i) A is subject to D,
- ii) B is not subject to D, although
- iii) B is subject to some moral demands, and
- iv) There is no moral demand D* to which A and B are both subject and which accounts for i) and ii) given the differences in situation between A and B. ⁸

Thus Harman asserts that two people can be subject to different moral demands and not subject to some more basic moral demand that accounts for this difference. The stronger version of NMR can be got from the statement of the weaker version by replacing what comes before (i)-(iv) in that statement with the following.

For any moral demand D, there can be two people A and B such that . . .

The view of Frankena (1973) regarding what he calls “normative relativism” is close to Harman’s position, although not exactly the same. He holds that this kind of relativism puts forward the normative principle that “what is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another, even if the situations involved are similar. . . .” Harman points out that any two situations are similar in some respects while different in other respects. Harman’s criticism extends to Brandt’s (1967) usage of the term “normative relativism” according to which something is wrong or blameworthy if some person or group considers it to be so. Harman objects that such views are neither plausible version of relativism nor good examples of what he regards as normative moral relativism.

Let us now turn to the second of the relativistic theses, namely moral judgement relativism or MJR, which is about the meaning or form of moral judgements. Moral judgements, it is claimed, contain an implicit reference to the speaker or some group or certain norms or the like and in this sense moral judgments are relative. The judgment that ‘X is wrong’ is incomplete just as ‘X is tall’ is not complete unless the comparison class is mentioned. Harman mentions two versions of this form of relativism, the first of which makes an implicit reference to egocentric terms in analysing the meaning of moral judgments. Egocentric terms in English include terms such as I, me, this and now etc. ‘Stealing is wrong’ might be taken to mean ‘My stealing is wrong and so is everyone else’s.’ But Harman objects that such paraphrase which treats egocentric terms as essential may hold good for some, but not all, moral judgments. So he talks about the other version of moral judgment relativism, according to which moral judgments are true or false only in relation to one or another set of moral standards. We say that ‘X is right for a Christian, but not for a Muslim.’ Harman claims that Stevenson (1963) uses the term ‘relativism’ in the second sense of MJR, while Firth (1952) counts an analysis as ‘relativistic’ if it conforms to the first interpretation. In any case both views involve an implicit relativity to the meaning of moral judgment.

The third version of moral relativism considered by Harman is meta-ethical relativism or MER, which involves relativity of the correctness of moral judgment. According to this thesis there can be conflicting moral judgments about a particular case that are equally correct. Two people with different moralities may judge a particular action and reach conflicting judgments, one

saying the action under consideration to be right while the other declaring it to be wrong. And the claim is that both these judgments are fully correct; because neither can rest on mistakes about the fact or a failure in grasping the facts or incorrect reasoning or any other distortions. He considers MER to be the view that one of a pair of conflicting moral judgments can be fully correct for one person, the other fully correct for another person and not both the conflicting judgments are equally correct for the same person. From this the relativist may maintain that there is no unique rational method in ethics for assessing moral judgments. Unlike the realists, Stevenson (1963) would maintain that statements about the justification of moral judgments are themselves relational.

Now, we may note that Brandt in course of defining the relativist thesis in ethics as “There are conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid” may seem to be a meta-ethical relativist, but Harman maintains that Brandt’s position “would allow merely apparently conflicting opinions to count as conflicting, if moral judgment relativism should be true. So certain moral judgment relativists will count as meta-ethical relativists as Brandt uses this term but not as I am using it.”¹⁰ Elsewhere Brandt (1967) holds that a meta-ethical relativist ‘denies that there is always one correct moral evaluation’ of a given issue. Harman agrees with Brandt in denying one correct moral evaluation, but nonetheless, wants to stress on really conflicting and not merely apparently conflicting moral judgments.

Frankena in discussing about meta-ethical relativism maintains that “in the case of basic ethical judgments, there is no objectively valid, rational way of justifying one against another; consequently, two conflicting basic judgments may be equally valid.”¹¹ Now Harman interprets that presumably Frankena “refers to ‘basic ethical judgments’ to allow for the possibility that less basic judgments might be justified on the basis of more basic judgments, the question then being how the most basic judgments are to be justified.”¹² But Harman as a relativist wants to deny this kind of basic ethical judgments and he is left with conflicting ethical judgments that are both justified.

III

Harman himself anticipates an objection against the thesis called normative moral relativism and tries to answer it. The objection may be formulated thus: If A is subject to a moral demand D, while B is not, then there must be some difference between the two, which accounts for why A and not B is subject to D. Thus there is some sort of general principle P which implies that people with certain characteristics F are subject to D and others are not. But that there must be some more general principle or demand is just what is denied in normative moral relativism. Thus it

might be objected that the thesis under consideration in Harman's sense is 'quite incoherent'

Harman believes that this objection is wrong and NMR is perfectly coherent. The reasoning which he uses to meet this objection underlies his argument for both the weaker and the stronger versions of NMR.

The first premise in the argument is what Harman calls Assumption 1. It reads like this:

"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 (non-moral) facts, a failure to reason something through, or some sort of (non-moral) mental defect like irrationality, stupidity, confusion or mental illness."¹³

This premise is backed by considerations that support 'internalist' accounts of moral demands, according to which, moral considerations are certainly motivating for those who grasp them. It is said that if a moral demand applies to someone, that person has a compelling reason to act in accordance with that demand; or in other words, "there is warranted practical reasoning available to the person that would culminate in a decision to do the act in question."¹⁴ Now Bruce Russell formulates that Harman's Assumption 1 is implied by the following statements:

"(1a) A moral demand D applies to a person only if it is rational for that person to accept that demand.

(1b) It is rational for a person to accept a moral demand D only if that person either accepts D (i.e. intends to act in accordance with D) or fails to accept D only because of ..."¹⁵

The second premise in the argument might be stronger or weaker depending on how strong a position of NMR is to be defended. The strong assumption that Harman calls the Assumption 2S reads as follows:

For any moral demand D, there is someone subject to some moral demands who does not accept D as a legitimate demand on himself, where this non-acceptance is not due to any ignorance on that person's part or any failure to reason properly or any sort of non-moral defects such as stupidity, confusion or mental illness.

The weaker assumption that Harman calls Assumption 2W¹⁶ is as follows:

There are two people A and B and a moral demand D such that A, but not B, accepts the demand D, although B is subject to some other moral demand. Now B's non-acceptance of D is not due to some relevant ignorance of non-moral facts or any other mental inability or illness like stupidity or confusion. Neither A nor B accepts a more general moral demand D* which accounts

for A, but not B being subject to D and this non-acceptance is not due to some relevant ignorance of non-moral facts or any other mental inability or illness like stupidity or confusion

Now Assumption 1 and 2S taken together imply the strong version of NMR, which says there are no universal moral demands that apply to everyone who accept some moral demand; while Assumption 1 and 2W jointly imply the weaker version of NMR, which maintains that different people can be subject to different moral demands all the way down. This is the preferred version of Harman. He cites the case of cruelty towards animals as an example to show that Assumption 2W is true. He continues that for the average middle class American citizen it is forbidden to inflict needless pain on animals, whereas the society of Hopi Indians do not take such a strong demand to be a legitimate moral demand on themselves. There are many other cases that could be shown in support of the Assumption 2W.

Bruce Russell considers Harman's argument for the stronger version of NMR and challenges what Harman calls Assumption 2S as described above. He holds that the reason for accepting the first assumption is amenable to criticism. His point is that "just because there is some reason for a person to do what a moral demand requires, it does not follow that it is in accord with reason for that person to accept that demand. After all, there may be overriding reason for the person to reject the demand even though there is some reason for him to accept it."¹⁷ He puts forward an argument in order to undermine Harman's claim that a moral demand applies to someone only if it is rational for that person to accept that demand. This Harmanian claim acts as the basis for his argument for NMR. By trying to undermine this claim Russell intends to revive the objection against the Harmanian position. Russell argues thus:

- (A) "If (1a) and (1b) are true, then it is possible that the following moral demand D fails to apply to someone: do not torture innocent children to death for the fun of it.
- (B) Necessarily, D applies to everyone.
- (C) Therefore, either (1a) or (1b) is false."¹⁸

The first premise being true if (1a) and (1b) are true, it would be possible that a moral demand D not apply to someone. But the second premise, for Russell, is supposed to be intuitively obvious. So the antecedent part of the first premise cannot be upheld.

Now, it may be objected to Bruce Russell that whether Harman or others would consider the second premise to be 'intuitively obvious' is not beyond the range of doubt. One may contend that human history is overshadowed with philistine cruelty towards children. So if every human

being really considers it to be 'intuitively obvious', how can the instances of cruelty towards children be explained?

Besides, Bruce Russell's criticism against NMR is designed against the stronger version of it. But Harman is only interested in the weaker version, so that he prefers to claim that it can be rational for different people to accept different moral demands, rather than claiming the stronger thesis that there are no moral demands which apply to everyone. So the Russellian criticism is slightly beside the point. But his objection, nonetheless, raises an important point regarding the tenability of the Assumption 2W. Some have argued that a rejection of moral demands, such as mentioned by Bruce Russell, must involve stupidity or some sort of mental illness. Some others might hope that psychology would resolve the issue. But Harman quotes one of Brandt's remark about a related issue, "Unfortunately, psychological theories do not provide a uniform answer to our question."¹⁹ While the Gestalt theory and the Piagetian theory point to one direction, the psychoanalytical theory and the Hullean learning theory point towards other. So considering all these Harman believes that "it is safe to say that neither philosophy nor psychology has produced a strong case against assumption 2W".²⁰

It has already been suggested that Harman's Assumption1 is backed by the internalist account of moral demands. Objections often come from the externalist camp on the ground that the term 'reason' as used by the relativist "rest on an ambiguity"²¹. Because it might mean either 'justifying reason', that is, reason to think one ought to do something, or 'motivating reason', that is, reason that motivates an agent internally to do some action. Frankena maintains that the relativist analysis of the 'conclusive reason to do something' seems to conform to the analysis of 'motivating reason to do something'. But moral demands are such that if it applies to someone that person has a compelling reason to act in accordance with that demand. Here the 'justifying reason' is all relevant and so the explanation in terms of the supposed 'motivating reason' does not work.

Harman, from the internalist camp, contends that the notion of a justifying reason in the present context leads to some sort regress. In his own language, "To think one ought to do something is to think one has reasons to do it. These reasons must not in turn be taken to be justifying reasons. Otherwise, thinking one ought to do something would be explained as thinking one has reason to think one ought to do that thing."²² In this context he distinguishes moral ought from the mere talk of obligation. A legal obligation, for example, demands to be obeyed, while there being no 'reason' to do so. We cannot, for example, hold that legally one ought to do some action in question. But in the case of morality, Harman maintains, if one ought to do something then he

must have a reason to do it

Now, the question may be raised as to how it can be rational for different people to accept different moral demands under the same situation? Harman, as a relativist, answers that what it is 'rational' to accept depend on how one's mind works, and different people's minds work differently. To put the matter in less stringent language of Harman, "the demands it is rational to accept depend on the demands one already accepts, where different people accept demands sufficiently different to begin with that it is rational for them to end up accepting different demands."²³ Of course, Harman recognises that as to the question what it is rational to accept other things also play important role. One's desires, beliefs and other intentions also play significant role in determining what it is rational for a person to do. Accepting a moral demand, in the relevant sense, has to be in conformity with these. Thus the answer from the Harmanian position to the supposed objection raised against him would be that a general moral principle in question does not always express an equal moral demand. A, but not B, may be subject to the moral demand D because it is rational for A, but not for B, to do so. And this difference is not to be understood in terms of a more general principle applying to both A and B, but in terms of their accepting different starting positions.

In conclusion, we may note that Harman as a relativist has put forward an alternative explanation of our being subject to some moral demands. But he himself admits that although a strong case can be made for it, "there is no way to prove the relativist's first assumption"²⁴. On the other hand, Bruce Russell, who designs his argument to undermine the Harmanian reasoning for normative relativism, admits that he has not conclusively shown that the thesis under consideration must be false. He maintains that to show "that the meta-ethical claim that Harman used in his explanation is false does not show that there are no such claims that could provide the needed explanation"²⁵. There may be other explanations purported to establish the normative thesis. Now in the absence of any conclusive evidence either for or against the normative relativist thesis, it may be maintained that although the strong version of this thesis probably does not stand, but that does not nullify the weaker version. Whether everyone is subject to certain moral demands is a big question that needs elaborate discussion, not to be covered in the short span of this article.

Notes and References

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15. Russell Bruce: "Moral Relativism and Moral Realism", *The Monist*, vol.67, No. 3, July 1984, p. 439
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