HARMAN ON RELATIVISM AND MORAL DIVERSITY

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For over two decades Gilbert Harman has been a prominent advocate of ethical relativism (e.g., in [4]). He has offered a number of interesting defenses of relativism; the one which we wish to discuss is his abductive or explanatory version of the traditional argument from moral diversity ([6] and [7], Ch. 1). We will argue on the basis of Harman's own commonly accepted standards for a good explanatory inference that his argument falls far short of cogency.

Before examining Harman's relativist argument from diversity, it would be best to spend a few words saying what the doctrine of ethical relativism amounts to in his hands. Harman's relativism contains two components, one semantic and the other non-semantic:

(a) 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 wrong of P to D.* Similarly for other judgments. (Emphasis in original)

(b) There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others. ([7], pp. 4–5)

Since (b) is compatible with moral nihilism and at least some forms of noncognitivism, as Harman notes, he adds two more relativist theses:

(c) Morality should not be abandoned.

(d) Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking. ([7], pp. 5–6)

But we can for ease of exposition take (b) not merely to assert that ethical absolutism is false (because there is no single correct morality), but also to make the positive, generic relativist claim that there is *more than one correct morality* or moral framework. Harman often seems to understand his own relativism in just this way (e.g., [7], p. 17).

It is tempting to speculate on the logical connections, if any, between (a) and (b). Curiously, Harman is nearly mute on such matters. Even so, it is not an implausible stretch to suppose that (b) entails (a). After all, given the absence of a uniquely correct moral framework, all that can be invoked to specify a moral judgment's truth conditions is one of the remaining frameworks. And unless thesis (a) is true, generic relativism would seem to lead to incompatible judgments from different frameworks, and thus to self-contradiction. (On the relativist problem of self-contradiction, see [8], and [10].) Be that as it may, in what follows we will focus primarily on thesis (b).

Harman begins his argument for (b) by appealing, as relativists so often do, to the established fact of moral diversity. He mentions, for example, cross-cultural differences in moral belief concerning cannibalism, polygamy, the unequal treatment of women, slavery, caste systems, infanticide, domestic violence, and harming or cheating outsiders. Harman goes on to note that there are also deep moral

disagreements within a society. For instance, in America there are sharp disputes in connection with the moral status of abortion and euthanasia, the proper treatment of animals, the relative value of cultural artifacts and human lives, the comparative importance of individual liberty and social equality, and the existence of nonegoistic moral reasons ([7], pp. 8–11).

Harman emphasizes two closely related points about cross-cultural and intra-cultural moral diversity. First, these moral disagreements involve not merely differences in social circumstances or situations, or in nonmoral beliefs or information, but differences in *basic* moral values or overall moral outlooks. Second, precisely for this reason these disagreements are *intractable* ([7], pp. 10–12): they are not rationally resolvable "simply by collecting evidence and pointing to mutually acceptable general principles" ([6], p. 22).

Harman acknowledges that intractable moral diversity does not *entail* ethical relativism ([7], pp. 10, 18). But he points out that such diversity is a phenomenon in need of *explanation*. And he claims that relativist thesis (b) not only explains moral diversity but explains it better than any rival. In short, (b) is the best explanation of moral diversity and that fact constitutes a reason to believe that (b) is at least likely to be true, assuming that there is moral truth at all. ([7], pp. 12–14, 18; see Ch. 2 for an attack on the moral-nihilist denial of moral truth.)

Thus the argument evidently goes something like this:

(1) Basic moral disagreements exist concerning a variety of moral issues: polygamy, abortion, etc.

(2) These disagreements are rationally unresolvable by appeal to evidence and accepted moral principles.

(3) Relativism explains the existence of intractable moral disagreements better than absolutism does.

(4) Therefore, relativism is a better ethical theory than absolutism.

(5) Therefore, relativism is probably true.

Now there are pressing questions that arise immediately about this diversity argument. Here are four.

First, concerning premise (1), there is the kind of question absolutists invariably ask: Is it really true that the moral disagreements Harman mentions are about *basic* moral values? Many of these disputes —for example, on polygamy, abortion, etc.— seem to depend at least in part on differences in religious, metaphysical, or even biological belief.

Second, just what are moral *frameworks*? In giving his diversity argument Harman appears reluctant to commit himself —despite his own conventionalist inclinations (e.g., [4])— to any particular answer to this question, though the moral principles that groups of people do or would accept seem to play an essential role ([7], pp. 13–14, 19).

Third, and relatedly, how, if at all, are moral frameworks —which have an oddly Platonistic look so far— supposed to *causally interact* somehow with human beings in order to account for their diverse moral beliefs? Harman's own moral conventionalism would seem to suggest a social-psychological answer ([9], p. 74, n. 10); but he wants to defend the generic relativism of (b) independently of conventionalism.

Fourth, just how is the existence of equally correct multiple frameworks supposed to *explain* intractable moral diversity? This is easy to answer —at least superficially— if conventionalist relativism is true: as a result of "moral bargaining" in different situations, different groups accept different sets of moral conventions. But again, Harman aims to make relativism independently defensible.

It's hard to see where Harman makes any serious effort to answer any of these questions. But important though they are, we aim to discuss yet another one, concerning crucial step (3): Is it clear that relativism provides a *better* explanation than absolutism of the alleged tact of intractable moral diversity? In addressing this question, we will, to be sure, have to touch on both third and the fourth question.

1. *Harman's Neglect of His Own Explanatory Standards*

In his diversity argument for relativism, Harman is making a kind of inference —often called "abduction" or "inference to the best explanation"— that is widely practiced in science. A familiar example is Mendel's postulation of (then) unobservable genes to explain the presence of certain observable characteristics of successive generations of plants. And the explicit use of such explanatory inferences has become increasingly common and respected, partly indeed as a result of Harman's own insightful work in epistemology ([2], [3], and [5]). Moreover, that work contains brief but highly relevant discussions of familiar standards for evaluating explanations as better or worse than their rivals: plausibility, explanatory power or completeness, simplicity, degree of ad hocness, and conservatism ([2], p. 89; [3], p. 159; [5], pp. 68, 116).

What is striking and puzzling about Harman's explanatory defense of relativism in step (3) is that it almost entirely ignores his own standards for judging explanations. He does seem to acknowledge the relevance of conservatism (the minimizing of change in one's belief system), but it does not figure in his argument ([7], p. 12). He also says that the relativist explanation of intractable moral diversity is "plausible", indeed "the most *plausible explanation* of the range of moral diversity that actually exists"; and

he seems to regard absolutism about "the justice of our treatment of animals" as so implausible as to be incredible ([7], pp. 10, 13, and 18; emphasis in original). But that is about all the argument he gives us for the explanatory superiority of relativism to absolutism (unless his interesting but for present purposes entirely question-begging analogy between moral relativity and the Einsteinian relativity of motion, mass, and time is included ([7], pp. 3–5, 12–14, 18–19). And such unsupported judgments concerning the comparative plausibility of rival explanations simply cannot carry much weight.

It may be that in the following passage Harman does provide a hint of a different justification for step (3):

> Disagreement can persist even between moral relativists who agree about what is right and wrong with respect to each other's moral frameworks. This fact is no objection to moral relativism, since *relativism predicts this sort of persistence*: The difference that remains is a difference in attitude that may be resolvable through bargaining even if it cannot be resolved simply by collecting evidence and pointing to mutually acceptable general principles. ([6], p. 22; emphasis added)

Perhaps he supposes that relativism leads us to *expect* intractable moral diversity while absolutism does not; if this supposition is correct then relativism is *empirically adequate* in a way that its absolutist rival is not.

But if this is what Harman believes, it is doubtful that he is right. In the first place, the absolutist can appeal to whatever "differences in attitude" to which the relativist appeals. In the second place, at least two absolutist explanations mentioned by Harman may well lead us to expect intractable moral diversity after all: "the sheer difficulty of the issues involved" ([6], p. 19; cf. [1], p. 202 on "moral ties") and the fact that "some people are simply not well

100

placed to discover the right answers to [certain] moral questions" because their antecedent moral beliefs are so far from the answers given in the one true morality ([7], p. 12 (citing Nicholas L. Sturgeon), 14; [1], pp. 199–200 (also pp. 205–206 on "distorting influences").)

What we need to do is to carry out the task that Harman himself fails to do: to use his own standards for explanatory superiority to evaluate relativist and absolutist explanations of intractable moral diversity. We shall focus on explanatory power, simplicity, and conservatism.

2. *Relativist vs. Absolutist Explanations of Diversity*

Consider the following absolutist explanation of intractable moral diversity:

> (E) There is only one correct morality or moral framework, but it is so difficult for human beings (who are subject to a variety of distorting factors in different environments) to know its basic principles and many of its concrete applications that accepted moral frameworks at best merely approximate —in varying degrees— absolute moral truth.

Obviously this explanation must be developed in much greater detail to be at all compelling. It should, for example, give us an account of "distorting factors" that does not presuppose the falsity of relativism. But the issue before us is not whether this is a *good* explanation as it stands, but whether it is any *worse* to Harman's relativist explanation of diversity. And it is hard to see any inferiority here with respect to *explanatory power* or scope: what precisely is there about intractable moral diversity that the relativist account explains and the absolutist one does not?

If we turn now to the comparative *simplicity* of the two explanations, the advantage seems indeed to go to absolutism. An analogy will be useful for clarifying this point.

Suppose there was once the following diversity of opinion and belief regarding the causes of infectious disease. In one culture the hypothesis that germs cause certain diseases was endorsed by the medical community (and some of their followers) while in some other culture the hypothesis that demons cause disease was endorsed by the community of high priests (and some of their followers). Despite this diversity, it would have been unreasonable to infer that the cause of type-identical infectious diseases varies from one culture to another. If we suppose that neither demons nor germs could be directly observed, then each hypothesis was in a sense underdetermined by the available observational data. Even so, type-identical constellations of symptoms appear *across* cultures and this fact would suggest a *single* underlying cross-cultural cause rather than culturally confined *multiple* causes. For one thing, in general there is a reason to prefer a common-cause to a multiple-cause hypothesis: the common-cause hypothesis is a better explanation, other things being equal, at least in part because it is simpler, more unified.

Now (E) and (b) are analogous to the foregoing common-cause and multiple-cause explanations, respectively. (E) posits a single correct moral framework underlying the supposed diversity of basic moral values within and across cultures: imperfect cognitive contact with that framework, due in large part to distorting factors, results in this diversity. By contrast, (b) posits multiple correct frameworks, perfect or imperfect grasp of which yields moral diversity. (Harman seems to believe that the grasp is always imperfect (e.g., [7], p. 13).) Whether moral frameworks can sensibly be regarded as *causally* affecting us is a controversial question; elsewhere Harman argues that moral facts can have causal powers only if they are type-identical to natural facts ([4]; contrast [1984] and [11]). But even if moral frameworks somehow influence us noncausally, the fact remains

that the common-factor explanation in (E) is simpler and more unified than the multiple-factor explanation in (b).

Finally, the standard of comparative *conservatism* also seems to favor the absolutist explanation. For arguably Harman's relativism is doubly revisionist of commonsense convictions about morality and moral disagreement.

In the first place, most people seem to believe in absolute right and wrong, especially after they have been disabused of the confused idea that absolutism requires intolerance and relativism requires tolerance. (Harman may acknowledge this implicitly when he uses the Einsteinian-physics analogy to try to account for absolutist moral beliefs ([7], p. 13).) And indeed most people seem to be absolutists about even the controversial moral issues whose apparent intractability is central to the diversity argument.

In the second place, Harman is forced by his own semantic thesis (a) to hold that disagreements about basic moral values are not cognitive but *merely attitudinal* disputes ([6], pp. 18–22): both sides in the debate over abortion rights, for example, may be correct relative to their respective moral frameworks, though one side is pro- and the other anti-choice. But in general neither side would accept such a characterization of what divides them. (See [10] for related and helpful discussion.)

The upshot is that although Harman tells us repeatedly in his epistemological writings that rational belief revision aims at minimizing change of antecedent beliefs as well as increasing overall coherence ([3], p. 159, [5], pp. 39–40, 68, 115–116), his own generic relativism in thesis (b) —unlike the absolutism of (E)— would require radical change in most people's belief systems. Of course, the popularity of absolutism hardly shows it to be true; but it does suggest that (E) is superior to (b) with respect to conservatism.

Thus not only do Harman's own —quite plausible— standards for judging explanations fail to support his claim

that the relativist explanation of intractable moral diversity is superior to any absolutist account, they actually support the opposite claim: absolutist explanation (E) turns out to be better, overall, than relativist explanation (b) by those standards. We conclude that Harman's abductive argument from diversity for the relativist thesis that there is more than one true morality is a dismal failure.

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