

## Handout #10

### H&T4

#### Reading advice

Although you should be reading Harman's chs. 1-5, chapter 3 (about "quasi-absolutism") is very difficult, and we will not have time to go into the background necessary to understand it. So just get what you can out of chapter 3, and rest assured that quasi-absolutism will not make an appearance on the final exam.

#### Agent and critic relativism (pp. 62-3)

Suppose Raylene utters the sentence 'Doreen ought to be a vegetarian' and Joylene utters the sentence 'It's false that Doreen ought to be a vegetarian'.

According to *agent* relativism, what Raylene said is true just in case in relation to Doreen's moral framework, she ought to be a vegetarian, and what Joylene said is true just in case, in relation to Doreen's moral framework, she ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Raylene said is the denial of what Joylene said: if Raylene spoke truly then Joylene spoke falsely, and vice versa. Thus, although agent relativism really is a form of *relativism* (because what morality requires of a person is dependent on that person's moral framework), it is *not* a form of relativism that allows two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

According to *critic* relativism, on the other hand, what Raylene said is true just in case in relation to *Raylene's* moral framework, Doreen ought to be a vegetarian, and what Joylene said is true just in case in relation to *Joylene's* moral framework, Doreen ought not to be a vegetarian. So what Raylene said is quite consistent with what Joylene said: Raylene and Joylene might *both* have spoken truly. Critic relativism, then, *does* allow two apparently conflicting moral judgments to both be true.

But how can Raylene and Joylene both speak truly? After all, Joylene utters a sentence that is the *negation* of the sentence that Raylene utters, and surely a sentence and its negation can't both be true! Here we have to distinguish between a *sentence* that a person utters and *what she says* (or *the proposition she asserts*) by uttering that sentence (a distinction we made in class).

Sometimes what one says depends not only on the sentence one utters, but also on the context of utterance. And sometimes a person A who utters 'p' in context C<sub>1</sub> and a person B who utters 'Not p' in context C<sub>2</sub> can assert propositions that are both true.

Example: suppose Raylene is hungry and Joylene is not hungry, and let 'p' be 'I am hungry'. Another example: suppose Raylene is on a moving train with Alfonse, and suppose Joylene is on the platform, and let 'p' be 'Alfonse is stationary'. (So the claim

that a sentence and its negation can't both be true should be revised to read: a sentence and its negation can't both be true *with respect to the same context.*)

### What do relativists say about moral debate?

The agent/critic distinction creates a difficulty for moral relativism. In cases of intractable ostensible moral disagreement between A and B, let's say about whether Doreen should eat meat, the agent relativist analysis is no help. (Why?)

But the critic relativist analysis seems to miss something as well. Raylene is claiming that Doreen should be vegetarian, relative to Raylene's moral framework, and Joylene is claiming that she should not, relative to Joylene's moral framework. But now it turns out that such ostensible moral disagreement is not really disagreement at all!

Harman's argument for moral relativism starts by pointing out that there seem to be many instances of moral disagreement that are hard or impossible to resolve. However, the *conclusion* of the argument implies that our firm intuition that *apparent* moral disagreement is *genuine* disagreement is quite wrong. Moral argument certainly doesn't feel like "I'm hungry!" "You are so wrong about that! I am NOT hungry."

Harman does in fact have a story to tell about why moral debate seems to involve genuine conflict and opposition. He thinks moral debate is a kind of bargaining (chapter 2), akin to bargaining about wages. The debate is really about what to do, even though much of the language used is on the face of it fact-stating; one says "these wages are unfair!" as well as, or instead of, "pay us more and we will be back on the job tomorrow."

Harman suggests some otherwise puzzling aspects of morality become comprehensible on this conception. Why is harming considered so much worse than failing to help, when the results are in many cases the same? Everyone benefits from a strict duty not to harm others, but only the poor would benefit from a strict duty to avoid harm" (25) Why is hurting animals a lot considered not as bad as hurting babies a little? Same answer, he thinks.

### What is a moral framework, and what is meant by "in relation to moral framework M"

Thomson sees a problem with claims like (T) In relation to Mark (a certain moral framework), it would be morally wrong of Paul to dance (p. 193). Two suggestions for what Mark might be:

(i) a set of (truth-valueless) moral sentences, which a person might (not believe, but) in some sense accept or assent to or endorse. (ii) a set of attitudes (pro and con) which a person might have.

If (i), then (T) says: Mark has among its members the sentence 'it would be morally wrong of Paul to dance'. If (ii) then (T) says: Mark has among its members a con-attitude toward Paul's dancing. Sets have their members necessarily, however. So either way (T)

comes out necessary rather than contingent, which seems intuitively wrong "Mark would have had ["Paul shouldn't dance"] among its members no matter what the world was like, no matter what effects it would have, no matter whether Paul had or had not promised not to dance, or etc." (p 195).

Perhaps the relativist could respond as follows. When a person has an attitude (of approval, say) towards some act, this might be explained in terms of other attitudes that the person has, or it might not. Why does Charles approve of Alice giving Bert a banana? Because he approves of repaying one's debts, and Alice's giving Bert a banana was the repaying of a debt. Why does he approve of repaying one's debts? Because repaying one's debts is a kind of promise keeping, and he approves of promise keeping. Why does he approve of promise keeping? No answer--he just does. If a person has a moral attitude towards acts of kind K that cannot be explained in terms of other attitudes (like the approval of promise keeping above), let's say she has a *fundamental* attitude towards acts of kind K.

Now let us identify S's moral framework with a set of sentences that specify exactly what S's fundamental attitudes are. E.g., {`S has a fundamental attitude of approval towards promise keeping', `S has a fundamental attitude of disapproval towards causing gratuitous pain',...}. Here is what Harman might mean by "in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D".

In relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D, just in case there is an act-kind K such that P's D-ing is an act of kind K and M contains a sentence that means that S has a fundamental attitude of disapproval towards acts of kind K.

This should have the desired result that `In relation to Mark (a certain moral framework), it would be morally wrong of Paul to dance' is contingent, and even a possible subject of inquiry and debate. Why?