

Harman & Thomson 3

Handout #9 (Revised)

Harman's moral relativism

So far we have met two meta-ethical views. The first, discussed and rejected by Thomson, was

Moral scepticism: we have no moral knowledge

Analogy: religion, literary criticism, market analysis (on pessimistic views of these topics!)

(Letter-)Emotivism: no moral facts, moral sentences are used to express attitudes, not to state anything

Analogy: "ouch" "boo!", "finally!", "drat", "aw, shucks", "no smoking", "California or bust!"

Another meta-ethical view, that we have touched on only briefly is:

Moral error thesis: moral sentences are all false (cf. p. 4)

Analogy: witchcraft, vitalism, phlogiston theory ["according to Johann Becher, the conversion of wood to ashes by burning was explained on the assumption that the original wood consisted of ash and *terra pinguis*, which was released during burning....Stahl renamed the substance *phlogiston*...and extended the theory to include the calcination...of metals...metals were thought to be composed of *calx* (a powdery residue) and phlogiston" *Oxford Concise Science Dictionary*]

Now we will examine yet another meta-ethical view: Harman's *moral relativism*. It is, he tells us, "to a first approximation," made up of four claims, each of which mirrors an aspect of Einsteinian relativity of motion and (more profoundly) mass.

(2) 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 morally wrong of P to D*. Similarly for other moral judgments.just as *X is moving at velocity V*, or *X has mass K*, has to be understood as short for a judgment of the form, *in relation to spatiotemporal framework F, X moves at velocity V, or X has mass K*.

(3) There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others....just as there is no single correct spatiotemporal framework.

(4) Morality should not be abandoned....just as we should not stop ascribing velocities and masses.

(5) Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking....just as relative velocity and mass judgments continue to play a serious role in physical thinking.

The *moral absolutist* denies (3) (p. 5). The *moral nihilist* affirms (3) and denies (4) and (5) (pp. 5-6). Our primary interest is in (2) and (3). Despite the order in which the theses are listed, it would seem that (2) depends on (3).

What is meant by "For the purposes of assigning truth-conditions"?

The *truth conditions* of a sentence or judgment (note that Harman speaks of *judgments* where Thomson speaks of *sentences*) are all the possible situations in which that sentence or judgment is true. (More exactly: the set of *possible worlds*--completely detailed ways the world might have been--in which that sentence or judgment is true.) Perhaps then (2) can be rephrased as follows:

(2') When someone utters a sentence of the form 'it would be morally wrong of P to D', what she says has the same truth conditions as a sentence of the form 'in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D'.

This talk of same *truth conditions* (as opposed to sameness of *meaning*) is supposed to allow us to say that (2) can be true even though a competent speaker may not agree that Harman's relativised moral sentences capture what she *meant*. (Cf. the comparison with mass on p. 4.)

Why should we believe "no single true morality"?

Harman thinks it is a "reasonable inference from the most *plausible explanation* of the range of moral diversity that actually exists" (p. 10). What is the most plausible explanation, according to Harman? It is "that many moral disagreements do indeed rest on basic differences in moral outlook rather than on differences in situation or beliefs about nonmoral facts" (p. 12).

How does "no single true morality" support the thesis about truth-conditions?

The analogy with relativity helps here. Once it is established that there is no single true assignment of velocities and masses, we face the question of what we are to think of ourselves as doing when we say, "Out of the way! That SUV weighs 2 tons and is moving at 80 mph." It doesn't seem we are just talking nonsense! Relativizing truth-conditions to frame of reference gives us a story about what we are doing that satisfies most of our intuitive preconceptions while giving up the part that according to relativity is just false. Likewise relativizing the truth-conditions of moral claims to

moral frameworks satisfies most of our intuitive preconceptions while giving up the part that according to (3) is false.

HOWEVER: One might think that we are giving up more in the moral case, and on the basis of weaker evidence. How good is the analogy in these respects?

Exercise. Here are some other attempts at formulating moral relativism:

‘x ought (morally) to do A’ means, or has the same truth-conditions as,

(i) ‘I approve of x's doing A’.

(ii) ‘members of my society approve of x's doing A’

(iii) ‘x approves of x's doing A’

(iv) ‘members of x's society approve of x's doing A’

Why can't you consistently accept more than one? Are any of them plausible?