

Is there a Single True Morality? A reply to Gilbert Harman

Introduction

Many have undertaken the task of refuting relativism in general and moral relativism in particular, and it is perhaps this task, more than any other, that defines the focus of Fr. Eleutherius Winance's scholarship and teaching. Put positively, Fr. Winance is a defender of realism in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. Though conscious human beings fit naturally in the world, the world exists independently of human minds (metaphysical realism). Since facts about the world are accessible to human minds, those minds must humbly conform themselves to the facts (epistemological realism), rather than, as postmodernists and relativists would have it, that the world must conform itself to human minds. When conscious human beings reflect on the facts, they realize the moral values already present, fitting naturally into a complete view of reality. Values are as much part of reality as the facts from which they are derived (moral realism). Moral values exist in the relationship between two sets of natural entities: human minds and the mind-independent world. Moral realism rejects today's common practice of separating facts and values.

Fr. Winance is a moral realist, not a moral relativist, as he is a realist about metaphysics and epistemology. But his position is not, as it is popular to say, "his own opinion." He faithfully and thoughtfully embraces the Catholic view—the view of St. Thomas Aquinas, broadly conceived, inspired by phenomenology. Because Gilbert Harman is one of the most competent and best known defenders of moral relativism, critical consideration of his work is a fitting way to pay tribute to Fr. Winance.

Harman asks, in an article of the same name, "Is There a Single True Morality?" (*Morality, Reason and Truth: New Essays in the Foundations of Ethics*, ed. D. Copp and D. Zimmerman (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allenheld, 1985) and comes up with a No answer, but this No answer is complicated.

Is there a single true morality? As Thomas Aquinas might say, Yes in one sense, and No in another. Morality is "single" and "true" but not unchanging and univocal.

Although he is not interested in defending moral relativism in this essay, Harman is and "has always been a moral relativist," he says. [p. 27] In order to show the plausibility of moral relativism, Harman proceeds as follows: he lays out what he takes the real issue to be, what possible approaches there are to the issue, and what he thinks is the most reasonable answer to the question of whether there is a single true morality. Part I is an analysis of what Harman takes "the real issue" to be. Part II looks at the possible answers. Part III concludes the critique, with a look at the question of and the answer to whether there is "a single true morality."

Part I The "Real Issue"

The Real Issue According to College students

Those of us who have taught an introduction to ethics course invariably encounter moral relativism as the most popular idea among students. Moral relativism comes from their new exposure to other cultures. These other cultures accept what their own culture considers to be wrong. There is no agreement among cultures as to what specific actions are right and which are wrong. People in different cultures have different reasons for what they do or refrain from doing.

The average undergraduate definition of moral relativism is this: the ideas of right and wrong are nothing more than what a culture, subculture or individual thinks is right and wrong. “Right” and “wrong” are childish, imprecise, or disguised terms for what a society approves of and what it disapproves of. The educated and sophisticated stance, then, is to realize that, since there is no single view of morality, there is no single morality.

But when the moral problem under discussion is one that touches students personally (e.g., homosexuality, abortion, personal freedom), they drop their pretence of moral relativism and make free use of the easy-to-accept-but-hard-to-deny concept of the moral ‘should.’ Even when individual relativism (subjectivism) rather than group relativism (cultural relativism) is what they mean, students soon see that when they say that abortion is not immoral “to me,” they mean that everyone else should agree, even if they do not. They realize that if they say that they should be tolerant of the differing beliefs and customs of others, then there is at least one moral value: tolerance. The real issue, then, is not no-tolerance vs. complete-tolerance but how-much-tolerance, and of what beliefs. They don’t start with, but eventually often do come to see, that whether there is a single true morality is different from whether or not everyone agrees about what it is.

The Real Issue According to Gilbert Harman

But for Gilbert Harman, there is no single true morality because there is no such difference. The real question, as he puts it, is whether there is a single true morality, which for him is and only is the question of whether or not everyone agrees about what it is.

More specifically, there is one single true morality if either (a) everyone has the same reasons for doing what they do and avoiding doing what they do not do or (b) those reasons, even if ignored by some agent, are available to that agent: to all agents.

Here is an example of what he has in mind, if I understand him correctly. I will use an extreme example (terrorists) because Harman uses an extreme example (the successful criminal). The newspapers are now and for months have been filled with stories of terrorist attacks by so-called Islamic fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden. (I say “so-called” because the vast majority of Muslims reject such actions, though the newspapers continue to describe these groups that way.) Osama bin Laden has no reason to refrain from attacks on American citizens, given his initial set of beliefs about Americans as infidels, the injustice of the presence of Americans in Afghanistan and Iraq, and other beliefs. When he is deciding about whether to plan another 9/11-type attack on the U.S., he merely consults this initial set of beliefs and proposes an action consistent with those beliefs. Since absent from his initial set of beliefs is a belief in the equal dignity of all human beings, or a belief in the right of all persons to be free from harm, or the belief in tolerance of people with opposing beliefs, he proceeds with his plan of attack.

For Harman, such a way of analyzing an agent’s reasons is the only way to proceed for someone who values science. Every question is a scientific question, and so it is only within science that answers can come. The social sciences, especially psychology, explain why people have the reasons they have. Morality is relative in the sense that the social sciences tell us that people in different cultures have different sets of reasons; perhaps each culture or subculture has its own set of reasons, but there is no universal set of reasons for doing and refraining from doing. Carefully conducted surveys reveal that agents have different reasons for doing x or avoiding y, and since we can all see that some people do x and others do not, there is no single true morality.

The metaphysical commitment that gives rise to this way of proceeding is the separation of facts and value and the redefinition of value to a psychological state. Facts are empirically verifiable sentences describing the way world is and the way people are. Values in the moral realism sense are not empirically verifiable: how could someone verify a “should”?

Like the typical undergraduate, Harman is impressed with the variety of beliefs and practices in different cultures and different individuals. Having started with a description of what societies and individuals, as a matter of empirical fact, have reason to do, morality, on his view, is a matter of empirical fact. The initial belief that people have in the queer concept of the moral “should” evaporates. All each person has to go on is her initial set of beliefs, appropriately modified (“reflective equilibrium”). But reflective equilibrium is merely a matter of taking an interior survey of your own commitments, to see if your contemplated action accords well with them. Reflective equilibrium does not extend to a search for culture-independent values.

Like students of contemporary cultural studies, Harman is more impressed with the ways in which cultural influences make us different than he is with what, by virtue of our shared human nature, makes us the same. Indeed, it hardly need be said that Harman would deny the very existence of human nature.

The Real Issue According to Moral Realism

I call the view defended here moral realism, aware that there are many different and even conflicting accounts of moral realism. I am also aware that criticism of Harman’s position comes from philosophical approaches other than the one I take here. Moral realism here is the view that values or moral facts are as much a part of reality as scientific facts. Like Fr. Winance, I rely on a Thomistic view, broadly conceived, according to which moral realism emerges naturally from a robust metaphysical realism and epistemological realism.

For metaphysical realists, moral realism is a theory within metaphysical realism, because morality is a category within metaphysics and presupposes it. Since mind-independent, culture-neutral values (moral facts) are as much a part of reality as physical facts, there is no fact/value distinction. Minds apprehending both physical facts and moral facts are part of reality. Moral facts supervene on physical facts. Supervenience refers to the ordering of a *should* to an *is*. Proper supervenience refers to the accurate coordination of values to physical facts; this proper supervenience is available to human beings, embodied consciousnesses, who have had the right kind of education and been fortunate in being exposed to moral exemplars. Others can explore the different kinds of supervenience; my goal here is to note that moral facts coordinate with physical and psychological facts, naturally. [*Roughly, my view is weak supervenience; moral facts—moral values—supervene on physical facts and human acts in that certain moral facts always appear in the presence of certain human acts but certain moral facts might be present even in the absence of certain human acts. Supervenience is one way.*]

The physical facts and psychological facts, the moral facts, and the way they are coordinated in science are knowledge in the proper sense of the term. A proper understanding of all the physical and psychological facts is necessary but not sufficient for knowing the moral facts. For all his insistence on his allegiance to science, Harman fails to see that science itself is incomplete without the moral facts.

When conscious human beings reflect on the physical facts and psychological, they derive the moral facts, fitting naturally into a complete view of reality. Human minds are ordered to mind-independent reality, so grasping the fit between values and physical facts is

possible and natural. *Pace* Hume, with the proper understanding of the relationship of reality, you can derive an *ought* from an *is*.

Realism is the view that while the world exists independently of being acknowledged and understood by minds, minds are as much a part of the world as anything else. Epistemological realism is the view that people's beliefs about reality have to and can conform to reality. Moral realism requires that moral rules conform to human nature. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Moral rules are made for human persons; human persons are not made for moral rules. Moral rules follow the contours of human nature, providing guidelines to a fully flourishing, full human life. Because human persons live in constantly changing real life situations, the moral rules themselves have to change to keep faithful to the link between unchanging human nature and changing real world situations. The goal, according to realism, is the development of virtuous persons, that is, persons permanently disposed to seek the good (moral virtues) and able to understand the relationship of the moral to the physical facts (epistemological virtues).

All things, including human beings, fit into Aristotlean categories by virtue of their differing natures; all these things, including human beings, have a nature. Aristotlean categories can accommodate the scientific discovery of evolution. Due to evolution, the definition of human nature changes; it might happen that a new kind of being emerges requiring a new category. Still, human nature is definable in the same way that other terms are definable even if, due to evolution, each category has borderline cases. Species change in ways that, over time, necessitates the renaming or regrouping of categories by nature, but these categories exist nonetheless. Furthermore, the basis of human rights is the existence of human nature; since all human beings are, in some way, alike, by virtue of sharing a common nature, they deserve similar treatment.

So we can, with Harman, think it strange that “everyone seems to be firmly on one side or the other...since everyone knows, or ought to know, that many intelligent people are on each side of this issue.” [28] But the presence of intelligent people on each side of the issue might also be an indication that Harman has misrepresented what the issue is. Moral realists think so. The first question for them is not whether or not there is a single true morality but what kind of person is it worth trying to be? What is human nature and what are the goods both constitutive of and necessary for the development of excellent human persons? Only secondarily do we ask what the moral rules are and whether there is a single set of rules.

Moral realism presumes metaphysical realism about persons and epistemological realism about what persons can know. With a description of an accurate metaphysics of the human person, moral rules are self-evident. Without a philosophy of human nature, moral rules do seem to be, and are, arbitrary. Without a philosophy of human nature, moral rules are either about authority (e.g., Divine Command) or about consistency (e.g., some deontological ethics).

To summarize, then: moral realism is the following view: (i) conscious human beings are part of the natural world; (ii) conscious human beings, reflecting on the world, discover values there; (iii) and as human beings move toward incorporating these moral values in their own lives, they embody these moral values as virtues.

Conscious human beings are part of the natural world. Moral facts, or values, supervene of physical facts and are discoverable by these conscious human beings. By repeatedly and consciously acting in accordance with these values—for example, justice—these conscious human beings become just. There is no democracy when it comes to judging ourselves or others:

virtuous persons are superior to others, however consistent the actions of non-virtuous others are with their beliefs.

Part II Possible Approaches to the Issue

The Method According to Harman

According to Harman, deciding if there is a single true morality is the relatively simple matter of accurate opinion gathering. If people have the same moral beliefs and practices, because they have the same reasons for acting, then there is single true morality. Like Abraham asking God how many just people he must find in Sodom in order to avoid destroying it, one might reasonably ask how many people have to agree for there to be a single true morality. If it is 98%, is there a single true morality? What if it is just 58%? God seems to be more liberal in his answer to Abraham than Harman is to us. God need find only ten just men in the huge town of Sodom in order to refrain from destroying it (Gen. 18:32). Although he doesn't say so, we presume that Harman requires a much higher percentage, or perhaps 100%.

The silliness of this approach is often enough to persuade students to return to their initial belief in the existence of this admittedly queer thing, the moral *should*. The moral *should* supervenes on the moral beliefs and practices of real people but does not collapse into them. There is an obvious and common sense conceptual difference between what people, as a matter of empirical fact, do—have reason to do—and what people should do, or what reason should be present, even if it is not.

We meet people everyday who, it is easy to see, lack the kind of motivational reasons that a virtuous person would have. These people often understand and are faithful to the standards of their culture; they are rational; they are alert. Nonetheless, their views are defective. But Harman neither condemns nor pity them. He merely notes this interesting statistical diversity. If he condemns them, it is only because of their lack of consistency, or perhaps their failure to have understood what rules their criminal community (e.g., the Mafia) expects them to follow. For Harman their faulty metaphysics of human nature is not at stake. If he pities them, it is because the criminal community will exact a price for non-compliance, not because they were not given a role models or a chance to develop their natural attraction to the good. It is not for their lack of a decent moral education that he would condemn them.

Harman thinks that the question of whether there is a single true morality is answered in three steps: "...we must begin at the beginning with our initial moral beliefs," and then, second, "consider possible modifications that will make these beliefs more *coherent* [italics mine] with each other and with plausible generalizations and explanatory principles." [29]. Finally, having gone through this process, you will either stick with your initial beliefs or you will modify them. If you modify them, the modifications will (it is hoped) eliminate inconsistencies or clarify them in light of general principles. So there are three possible final states: your original set of beliefs, a different—because more consistent—set of beliefs, or a revised version of your original set of beliefs. You will then have achieved "reflective equilibrium," a term Harman takes from Rawls. [29]

Note the similarity to a coherence theory of truth. You begin with your "initial beliefs," and then modify them for consistency only; no need (or possibility?) to check the truth of your initial beliefs: any currently accepted set of initial beliefs will do. Just as a problem with the coherence theory of truth is that starting with false beliefs yields consistent false beliefs, not

truth, the problem with Harman's coherence theory of moral rules is that starting with a set of false initial moral beliefs will yield more false moral beliefs.

Science is the search for natural explanations to natural phenomena; the most comprehensive theory is the best theory. A theory that can account for more parts of ordinary experience than another is a better theory. But even with his self-proclaimed commitment to science, Harman misses at least two aspects of real life. First, some children receive a better moral education than others; some children receive from their parents such bad modeling that, even if we condemn them, we also pity them, because they did not have the chance that others have. It is simply false that any set of initial beliefs is as good as another. Second, accurate moral analysis watches development over time rather than one act of deliberation at one particular time. Harman does not take "the long view." He does not see what even a casual observer uninfected by relativism can see, namely, that some people improve, grow in virtue.

Readers of the novels of Jane Austen sees that a man might improve his "initial beliefs" not only by checking for consistency, but by checking for accuracy. Consider Mr. Darcy in Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*; whose character improves because of his friendship with Miss Bennett. With respect to moral development, Mr. Darcy's upbringing suffered from the distortion that comes from privilege and wealth; he developed the pride of vice. He was proud, but if the reader evaluates his character comprehensively – from what he is like at the beginning of the novel to what he is like by the end – the reader gets a more accurate picture.

Harman and "Absolute" Morality

For the relativist, there is no more negative term than "absolute." Harman describes a moral absolutist as one for whom "there is a moral law that "applies to everyone"" in the sense that "everyone has sufficient reason to follow that law." [34]

There are several things to note here. First, Harman's idea of morality is law-based. Second, he speaks of a moral law that applies to everyone but does not say what the foundation of that law might be, or where it comes from. Third, "everyone" must have the same motivation or reason to act in his set of moral motives. Every person in every place must be found, after using reliable empirical methods for collecting data, to have the same motives or reasons for what they do and so they will all act the same way, in similar circumstances.

Harman's idea of morality is rule-based. For evaluation purposes, Harman gives primacy to rules over persons. But logically and metaphysically, persons have primacy over actions. Given that Harman considers them irrespective of whether or not they got a decent moral education, and irrespective of where they are in their personal growth in virtue, it is not surprising that he comes up with a negative answer to the question of whether there is a single morality and a positive answer to the question of whether morality is relative.

Harman thinks that, if the same moral law does turn out to apply, then moral relativism is false. But he asked the wrong question. The question Harman asks is whether or not, as a matter of empirical fact, the same reason for acting in a certain way can be found in all persons. Clearly the answer is no. Two people can act in the same way for different reasons. Two people can act differently in the same situation because one person, as a matter of fact, lacks a reason for doing the action, while the other person has that reason. A person with a defective moral education might not have developed a reason to avoid harming torturing animals (another of Harman's examples). A person with a good moral education is acutely aware of pain and has compassion for sentient beings. But the question is not whether two people, as a matter of empirical fact, have the same reason for choosing to do what they do, but whether the same standard of morality

applies to both. Immoral people sometimes do fail to do what they see to be right; other immoral people do not even see what the right thing is to do.

But for moral realism, the same moral law applies to everyone, because the law of human nature follows from human nature. Harman misuses the word “apply;” for Harman a law applies if and only if that law is an expectation of the community. But for moral realism, here is an analogy: a police officer pulls you over for failing to follow a traffic law that “applies” to you. Ignorance of the traffic law is no excuse. Neither does your being a member of “the scofflaw community” get you off. Ignorance of human nature is no excuse.

For morality to be absolute, everyone has sufficient reason to follow that law, according to Harman. But it takes only a bit of reflection to see that we can condemn a person in two ways: first, for failing to have a correct understanding of human nature, and second, for failing to act according to the law of human nature.

Relativists of Harman’s stripe seem to suffer from a lack of imagination; they do not seem to be able to imagine a better world with better people in it. All they can do is accurately assess the persons and motives and actions we have now.

Concerning Political Correctness: A Clarification

Returning to insights gathered from students in an introduction to ethics classroom, we know that students want to think of themselves as moral relativists because they do not want anyone “imposing” her morality on them. If students, like Harman, are ignorant of or reject a metaphysics of human nature, then their complaint of imposition seems justified. At most you can point out to me that my deeds do not match my words; but you cannot demand that my deeds match *your* words. That is what students mean by their dismissive “that’s your opinion.”

Often, once students have come to consider the possibility that there might be a standard of morality that pertains to all of us in virtue of our shared human nature, their next question is, “Who is to say?” what that standard of morality is. It is true that explicating a true account of human nature is difficult; wanting to avoid the difficult work of coming up with that account is what drives students to the “Who is to say?” ploy. But wanting to avoid this difficult work is itself a moral failure, a lack of intellectual courage.

Harman might suffer from this lack of intellectual courage. He begins with a survey of what motives people already have, not what motives they ought to have. Who those people are—saint or sinner, virtuous or vicious—does not matter, for him. Who’s to say that physicians working in dangerous conditions in war torn countries are any better (can’t say “better!” Can’t use evaluative terms!) than the Mafia? Harman seems to have taken one New Testament injunction seriously: do no judge. Judging implies a standard; there are standards, for Harman, but my standard might now be your standard, so I cannot “impose” my standard on you.

But Harman is wrong to put all players on a level playing field. reasons persons have for what they do depends crucially on what kind of persons they are: but not so for Harman. Harman’s examples (e.g., criminals) betray that he knows this, but he does not want to give any higher value to one sort of person than another. It seems that his inexplicable aversion to judging is preventing him from seeing the obvious: that some lives are better than others. Judging implies a standard, and a standard implies the moral “should” that keeps him from seeing the obvious. He has made it clear that, at all costs (even the cost of common sense), he wants to avoid evaluation of persons as well as actions.

What he calls his commitment to science forbids him from finding moral values in the world in any form other than empirically-detectable reasons that actual persons have at the time they act; moral values and moral goodness are either unnatural or eliminable by reason of their reducible to categories in the social sciences, especially psychology.

The Method According to Moral Realism

In the Catholic and some other traditions, moral philosophy is embedded in a metaphysical theory of the human person. Public debates on issues like abortion or gay marriage go nowhere because nothing is presumed about human nature or purpose; the result is that free choice wins. But free choice is not itself a “thick” value; it merely indicates that each person should choose her values. We might add to Anscombe’s criticism of modern moral philosophy with its rule-based theories as the search for laws without a law-giver. Modern moral philosophy, both for those who think there is a single set of moral laws and for those like Harman who think that there is not, is a search for laws without any adverting to what the laws are for.

But the moral law is for becoming a certain kind of person, a virtuous person. So, for example, whereas Harman thinks that we have nothing more to say to the successful criminal who presently lacks a reason to avoid harming others, the kind of moral realism endorsed here provides a reason. The successful criminal is insufficiently attentive to reality; he has failed to understand human nature. We might pity him because he is missing a moral education; he is missing moral exemplars in his life, especially during that crucial period of time in moral development, childhood and early adolescence. We might condemn here for an intellectual failure: failure to grasp an already existing reason to avoid harming others. But, contrary to Harman, we do not simply accept his lack of a reason.

Finally, we can do something else that Harman cannot do; we can note moral growth even in that same successful criminal. For example, we can note with approval the beneficent influence that the Catholic monk visiting the jails had on him. Harman’s view merely takes a snapshot of where the criminal is now, of what reasons he has or lacks to do what he does or does not do now. But on the view of moral realism endorsed here, we judge by looking at a person’s life as a whole, noting their growth or progress in moral virtue, or regretting its lack or decline. We do not judge the person by a single action. We do not even judge his decisions by a single decision.

Modern moral philosophy would do well to begin with a description of human nature. We perform a kind of *epoche* on our moral theory until our metaphysical theory is in place. We put aside the set of our initial moral beliefs until our work of giving an adequate description of human nature is completed. Just as cultures are a wider category than individuals, human beings as such—human nature—is a wider category than cultures alone. If we begin with our initial moral beliefs we get stuck in an egocentric predicament. We favor our own beliefs merely because they are ours. Far from avoiding the of “imposition” of values, moral relativism actually assures imposition: the values of one’s own culture, like the Mafia culture, are incorrigible.

But on the opposing view, the one advocated here, moral reasons are external—not because ideal persons have them, but because real persons, virtuous persons, have them. Some persons serve as role models for other persons. Harman might object that we are sneaking valuation in through a different door: we shift evaluation from rules to persons. The supporter of virtue ethics should proudly admit guilt as charged. Evaluation is justified, when morality is tied to metaphysics. Banishing valuation from a discussion of morality seems to miss what morality is. It also seems to miss a fully informed description of reality: value-laden phenomena and

evaluating entities. Relativism is unscientific; it ignores a large part of reality, namely, values. It ignores a legitimate and widespread human activity: judging.

Virtue ethics helps not only with deliberation but also inspiration. Virtuous people inspire others to be virtuous and to engage in virtuous actions. Real people “catch” morality like a good contagion from worthy exemplars in life and in books. The advantages of having good parents and good friends cannot be overestimated.

The coherence theory of truth uses what could be called an egalitarian idea of beliefs: no belief has priority over any other. A set of false beliefs could be just as coherent as a set of true beliefs. As we will see shortly, however, Harman does not think his method has this problem, since, like most moral relativists, he thinks that moral beliefs are neither straightforwardly true nor false.

Part III Is there a Single True Morality?

Harman’s Answer

Is there a single true morality? Harman’s answer is no. Our answer, as Thomas Aquinas might say, is yes in one sense and no in another. The answer is yes, because human persons share a single human nature, and morality follows from that human nature in an orderly and natural way. For Harman the answer is no, because as a matter of psychological fact, some people are missing motivations that other people have. For moral realism, the answer is also no, but not for the reason that Harman gives; the answer is no in the sense that human persons live in a metaphysical region between change and permanence. Moral rules have to change precisely because human nature does not; the changing moral rules conform to unchanging human nature.

Take the virtue of temperance. What develops temperance varies by circumstance, kind, and stage of life. A Catholic fasting during Lent acts according to an imprecise set of rules different from those of he relies on at a birthday party or a wedding. What develops temperance also varies by kind; there is intellectual temperance and bodily temperance. Bodily temperance includes the appropriate regulation of manual labor; intellectual temperance moderates the length of periods of study and its relationship to time and effort spent in manual labor. Monks develop temperance by moving according to the Rule of St. Benedict between periods of rest, manual labor and study. Finally, the development of the virtue of temperance varies according to the stage of life; the right amount of exercise for a 20-year old is not the same as the right amount for a 60-year old; Temperance is both an intellectual virtue (knowing how much) and a bodily virtue (deriving pleasure from the right amount of exercise). Knowing when to change the informal, imprecise, temporary rules also requires temperance.

For Harman the question of whether there is a single true morality is identical to the question of whether all people have the same reason for doing or refraining from doing. Since people have different commitments and different backgrounds, they do not have the same reasons. And he is correct: there is no single true morality, in his sense: people with difference moral opinions from our own see the world so differently that they cannot see the force of reasons that move us to action.

Consider the abortion debate, one of the clearest examples of a metaphysical problem underlying a moral problem. The metaphysical problem is the ontological status of the unborn. Are the unborn persons? Does personhood matter for intrinsic value? These metaphysical questions must be answered before the question of the morality of abortion. Otherwise, as

Harman says correctly, all we can do is fault a person for inconsistency or for ignoring the expectations of his community. (Warning: requiring metaphysics for morality is an unpopular position. I once received from someone from a pro-choice political action committee, asking for my pro-choice vote. I asked her if she thought that the unborn was a person. She said, “You are confusing me,” and hung up.)

Given how Harman explains what the real question is (Part I) and what cannot count as possible solutions (Part II), Harman is correct that some agents do lack a reason to avoid doing what they do, and that is why they do it. But the conclusion he draws from this is short-sighted and close-captioned.

First, he does not consider what a sufficient exposure to virtuous persons over time might do for someone’s imagination. He studies one moment and one decision.

Second, he does not consider that a person might have a reason to avoid doing something but fail to realize that she has a reason. For example, the pro-choice person might want to relieve the suffering of pregnant women in particular because she is committed to relieving the suffering of human persons in general. A metaphysics that includes the unborn in the category of persons would lead her to see that she does indeed have a reason to avoid abortion, to avoid causing suffering to unborn persons. If she came to see that this wider commitment takes in relief of the suffering of unborn persons, she would see that even now she has reason to reconsider her pro-choice position.

Or perhaps the metaphysical problem is not about what a person is, but the related metaphysical problem of personal identity. Think of Harman’s criminal, reformed. On our view, he can, looking back, say, “If I had only realized then what I see so clearly now!” But a metaphysics that denies the persistence of personal identity does not permit such insight. I do not know for sure that Gilbert Harman denies the persistence of personal identity, but it seems reasonable to assume that he does. The criminal was some other person then; that other early person is now gone, so there is no way to know if that earlier person had reason to avoid doing what he in fact did. But according to a metaphysics asserting the persistence of personal identity through change, the later person, the reformed criminal, has access to the earlier person because she is the earlier person. She was then, unreformed, the same person she is now, reformed. With self-reflection and insight, she can come to see that she had hidden a reason from herself, a reason she had all along. *[The person might later come to realize that her earlier self had ignored a reason she had, such as a reason to be faithful to a marriage vow, but her will was weak. Weakness of the will could be an epistemological vice, viz., the vice of overemphasizing the importance of reasons that support her already-made decision and underemphasizing the importance of reasons opposing her already-made decision.]*

Concerning Harman’s Answer: About Internalism

Harman uses the term, “has reason to,” but the reader is not to suppose that the phrase must refer to rationality. If I understand him correctly, the phrase refers to whatever it was (motive) that was strong enough to propel that person to do what he in fact did. Absent that motive, the person would not have acted as he did. But this is just a truism, and as such lacks explanatory power. Nonetheless, it is upon this absence of the same motive in all persons considering an action that Harman stakes his claim that there is no single true morality.

Harman’s view rests on his commitment to internalism. Motive internalism is the view that if an agent has a motive or a reason to act, that motive is available to the agent at the time of deliberation. Harman is an internalist about motivation because, for him, if an agent is unaware

of having a particular motive, then she does not have that motive, and she cannot be faulted for not acting other than the way she did. Justification internalism is the view that if there is some standard against which the agent's action is to be judged, that standard is available to and accepted by the agent, and that the standard applies to the agent, even when she does not realize it herself.

Concerning Moral Realism's Answer: About Externalism

For moral realists the foundational question is not whether there is a single true morality, but what kind of life is worth living. As to whether people have the same reason for doing or not doing what they do, for moral realism the answer is yes, in the sense that the same reason applies to all persons and does not depend on their acceptance of that reason. The foundational question is: What reasons do virtuous people have for doing what they do?

The position defended here is compatible with externalism. Motive externalism is the view that someone other than the agent might see more clearly than the agent herself that she does indeed have a motive to act or not act in a certain way. Motive externalism is consistent with a metaphysics that relishes mystery; a person might be a mystery to herself. Sufficient and daily self-reflection—an important part of Catholic spirituality, such as the noon *examen* in Ignatian spirituality—makes it possible for an agent to see that she does have a motive. Perhaps fear or cowardice prevented her from noticing that she had this reason. Motive realism is consistent with an epistemology according to which insufficient self-reflection is a vice. Or pride might prevent a person from seeing that he has reason to avoid doing what he is now considering. Justification externalism is the view that if there is a standard for judging actions, that standard might not be available to the agent at the time, or at least not immediately and easily available to the agent. Justification externalism is most compatible with metaphysical realism, according to which moral facts (values), like physical facts, exist independently of minds that are nonetheless capable of grasping that standard.

Harman's Dualism

Harman follows the odd but popular practice of making one world into two: the world of facts (only facts are physical facts) and the world of values. There are no values, other than the mind-dependent ones the agent has at the time of deliberation. Values are sociological facts. Harman insists that it is his commitment to science that requires him to proceed in this way.

But this is odd, since Harman says that he prefers one world. Moral values, having been put in a separate realm, are allowed back into the one world if and only if they show the credentials of the sciences. But Harman's dualism, like most dualisms, is irreversible; having once divided the "worlds," one is inevitably preferred and the norm and the other has to meet the requirements of the norm.

A two-layered universe is a problem for science. Just as a non-reductive materialism cures the ills of substance dualism, a non-reductive ethics cures the ills of fact/value dualism. Non-reductive ethics recognizes that human beings are natural evaluators or values assigners. Non-reductive ethics searches for the best way—that is, the most accurate way—to understand the relationship between physical and moral facts (supervenience) without either denying the reality of moral facts or reducing values to physical facts.

Having cleaved the one world in two, Harman thinks there are two choices: make morality—specifically moral values—palatable to the natural sciences or deny their existence. Harman is not a nihilist, although he acknowledges moral nihilism as one kind of moral

relativism, according to which moral values, being too queer, are eliminated. Are there moral values? The answer depends on whether science finds them by using empirical methods. Harman does find that moral values do exist because science—the social sciences of psychology and anthropology—finds them. Anthropology, sociology, and psychology show that some people have certain reasons, and other people have other reasons. So there is no single, true morality because the data show disagreement, not agreement, among reasons.

What moral values are, for Harman, is something like what college students mean by moral values. Although college students typically sound like nihilists at first (there are no moral values), after questioning they allow the existence of moral values so long as by them we mean nothing more than what people believe. Harman's version is this: moral values refer to what people have reason to hope for or want. Harman sees no difference between "S considers p to be immoral" with "P is immoral." Moral facts have been reduced to scientific (sociological) facts.

All truth claims must meet the requirement of being able to be rendered in the language of the empirical sciences. Those who invoke science on their side subtly suggest that their opponents, in opposing them, are opposing science. It is an easy trap to fall into: Christians who oppose evolution have fallen into the trap. Even if such Christians were to succeed in reading the book of Genesis as if it were science, their opponents have already won, because these Christians have accepted the requirement that truth claims are univocally science claims. Science doesn't enjoy hegemony; it enjoys monopoly.

In his classes on phenomenology, Fr. Winance warned against scientism, and Harman's allegiance is to scientism, not science. Roughly, scientism is the unjustified (and unjustifiable) assumption that only science questions are true questions and only science answers are true answers. Any hope that any area of human inquiry might have for acquiring respectability depends on its measuring up to the standards of the natural and social sciences. (The fine arts and literature, it must be assumed, are reduced to the status of recreation between bouts of doing science, with no serious value.)

To require that all legitimate disciplines be natural sciences is certainly not part of "our initial beliefs," nor does this requirement fare well after "reflective equilibrium," for most people. We are left wondering why we should follow the naturalists, among whom Harman numbers himself, in accepting that the language of truth claims is univocal.

Help from Philosophy of Mind

David Chalmers begins his defense of a form of dualism about consciousness this way: "Consciousness is the biggest mystery. It may be the largest outstanding obstacle in our quest for a scientific understanding of the universe...Consciousness is not just business as usual; if we are to make progress the first thing we must do is face up to the things that make the problem so difficult...The first and most important is to *take consciousness seriously*." [David J. Chalmers, *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996, xi–xii.] Chalmers's calling consciousness mysterious is not an invitation to avoid understanding it, or even an invitation to give up a scientific undertaking: it is just his way of reminding the reader that the supervenience of consciousness on microphysical facts is surprising. Figuring out why some matter has conscious experiences is what Chalmers calls "the hard problem." (By comparison, understanding how the brain works is "the easy problem.")

Harman himself compares his method for doing moral philosophy with his preferred method for doing philosophy of mind. So it is not out of place for us to use Chalmers's warning to philosophers of mind against reductionist accounts of consciousness as inspiration to warn

moral philosophers against reductionist accounts of morality. Just as consciousness supervenes on the microphysical facts without being reduced to them, moral facts supervene on scientific facts without being reduced to them. Like consciousness, the moral *should* is mysterious, not because it is unnatural but because the moral *should* is part of a complete picture of reality and not reducible to sociological and psychological facts.

Chalmers distinguishes between psychological consciousness and phenomenal consciousness. Moral realism distinguishes between psychological relativism and moral relativism. No matter what a person or culture does do, it is not the same as what a person or culture should do. Appreciation of the irreducibility of the moral *should* serves as a warning to natural science monopolists. Understanding why people believe that certain actions are right and other actions are wrong, or discovering what people have reason to do or not do, is what might be called the easy problem: anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists employing rigorous methods for opinion gathering. But for Harman it is the only problem. He explicitly denies the hard problem, namely, the independence of the moral *should*. For him, the moral *should* simply the cultural *is*. the understanding of the moral *should* on its own terms, irreducible to “is.” But for moral realism you can derive an *ought* from an *is*. But you cannot reduce an *ought* to an *is*.

The Problem with Anatole

We have noted that Harman may lack a moral imagination. With a moral imagination a person’s single act of deliberation on one occasion can be seen against the background of her whole life: is she growing in virtue or vice? With a moral imagination we can evaluate a person as he is now against what he could be. We close, fittingly, with a reflection on one of the greatest works of the human imagination—even moral imagination. Consider Anatole Kuragin, a character in Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, whose actions destroy the order and happiness of several lives, including most notably the innocent young Natasha Rostov.

Kuragin was always content with his position, with himself, and with others. He was instinctively convinced with his whole being that it was impossible for him to live otherwise than the way he lived, and that he had never in his life done anything bad. He was not capable of reflecting either on how his actions might affect others, or on what might come of one or another of his actions. He was convinced that, just as the duck was created so that it must always live in water, so he was created by God so that he must live on an income of thirty thousand and occupy a high position in society. He believed it so firmly that others, looking at him, were also convinced of it and refused him neither a high position in society, nor the money which he, obviously without an intention of paying it back, borrowed from anyone and everyone.

He was not a gambler, at least he never cared about winning, and never even regretted losing. He was not vain. To him it made absolutely no difference what people thought of him. Still less could he be accused of being ambitious. Several times he taunted his father by ruining his career, and he made fun of all honors. He was not stingy and never refused anyone who asked of him. There was one thing he loved—merrymaking and women—and since, to his mind, there was nothing ignoble in these tastes, and since he was unable to reflect on the consequences that the satisfaction of his tastes had for other people, at heart he considered himself an irreproachable man, sincerely despised scoundrels and bad

people, and with an easy conscience carried his head high.” [Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, tr. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), pp. 567-568.]

What kind of person would think and act this way? Is there something missing in the psychological makeup of such a person? It seems so easy and obvious to say *Yes* that it is hard to imagine someone who would say *No*, and yet Harman is such a one. *Pace* Harman, morality is not a matter so of finding or failing to find reasons in the set of explanations that a person has for acting; it is a matter of evaluating persons.

Kuragin, because of a defective moral education (his father is shallow), might really lack a motive that he should have. Merely by describing Kuragin, Tolstoy invites such a reading. Or maybe, it is imagination that Kuragin lacks; he believes that “it was impossible for him to live otherwise than the way he lived.” With a good imagination and with moral exemplars, he would be able to see himself living some other type of life. *Or maybe he already had a reason to be more considerate of those he harmed, especially Natasha and Prince Andrei, but did not realize it.*

Moral relativists might do well to read more novels and do their moral reflections from that source.