

A 'Parallel Arguments' Response to Harman's Case for Appraiser

Relativism

In this paper, I critically examine Gilbert Harman's case for appraiser relativism. I first clarify the difference between agent and appraiser relativism, and show why Harman's choice to use the argument from moral disagreement as a support for his appraiser relativism is likely the wisest one available to him. However, I go on to argue that Harman's defense of appraiser relativism is nevertheless unsuccessful. I argue for this conclusion in a rather unusual way. I first try to follow what I have elsewhere called a 'parallel arguments' approach to the relativism issue: this involves an attempt to show that, if Harman's argument for relativism about morality is successful, he will be committed by that same logic to relativism about scientific, epistemic, logical and other apparently non-relativistic areas of inquiry. However, the process of adjusting the parallel arguments to make them genuinely parallel seems in the end to uncover the surprising fact that the argument from moral disagreement commits the fallacy of begging the question.

Agent Relativism and Appraiser Relativism

Appraiser relativism is the view that the moral status of an action or inaction is relative to the moral views of the appraiser of that action or inaction. This is the sort of relativism Harman discusses when he draws an analogy between the variability of the mass of objects relative to different inertial frames and the variability of the moral status of acts relative to different moral views. To an appraiser relativist, there is no objectively correct answer to the question "Should George W. Bush have bombed Afghanistan?" According

to some moral views, the answer is yes; according to others, the answer is no; and no moral views (and hence no answers) can be better or worse, objectively, than any others.

Agent relativism, by contrast, is the view that the moral status of an action is relative to certain features of the particular agent performing (or neglecting to perform) that action. These features vary depending on the version of agent relativism in question, but they tend in all accounts to be psychological features such as desires, interests, concerns, etc. To illustrate this with one of Harman's examples, we can imagine (again) that Hitler cannot be made to feel remorse about killing the innocent people he killed, but that Stalin can (or does) feel remorse about his own killings of innocents. An agent relativist could hold that this discrepancy is sufficient to make it the case that, even though the actions performed by Hitler and Stalin may have no morally relevant differences in themselves, the differences between the agents make it the case that Hitler did not act wrongly, and that Stalin did, in performing those actions.

Not only are these views distinct, but neither one entails the other. One can consistently hold that appraiser relativism is true and that agent relativism is false. For instance, one can imagine a world in which everyone is either a specific sort of ethical egoist (to be explained more fully below), a preference utilitarian, or a divine command theorist who accepts the teachings of some particular branch of Pentacostalism to be correct. Let us assume as true, for the sake of argument, the not unlikely claim that these three moral theories are incompatible with one another. Let us also assume, for the sake of argument, that appraiser relativism is true. Now, we can imagine that opportunities for a perfect

crime exist from time to time in this world. Among these opportunities are those in which an old-age pensioner can be defrauded of all his or her savings. Some agents who have the opportunity to commit these crimes can be made to care about their victims, and some cannot. Regardless of these differences between agents, however, the Pentacostals and utilitarians all hold that none of the agents would be acting morally if they were to commit the crimes. And regardless of the differences between the agents, the egoists all hold that the agents are morally obliged to commit the crimes (since the particular brand of egoism they espouse entails that anyone who feels moral concern for a helpless victim is morally weak and needs to overcome that weakness by committing the crime in question). In this scenario, then, everyone's moral view is correct (since appraiser relativism is true) and yet none of these moral views entail that agent relativism is correct (since there is at least one act whose moral status is independent of any psychological facts about the agent).

One can also consistently hold that appraiser relativism is false and that agent relativism is true. One might, for instance, believe that the ultimate test of whether an action would be ethical is whether or not one could be made to care about the consequences, and one might simultaneously believe that anyone who thinks otherwise is objectively mistaken.

Appraiser relativism and agent relativism are motivated by different concerns, and hence different arguments tend to be advanced for each. Appraiser relativists tend to be puzzled by the presence of seemingly intractable moral disagreement. If there are objective moral facts, they wonder, how can moral disagreements persist among rational appraisers who

seem open to entertaining one another's arguments? Appraiser relativists are typically motivated by such puzzlement to abandon the view that there are objective moral facts. When challenged by those who believe in objective morality, therefore, they tend to support their form of relativism by arguing that it is the best explanation for persistent disagreement among real or idealized disputants.

Agent relativists, by contrast, tend to be puzzled by the claim that one can be objectively obliged to do something that one could not possibly be motivated to do for the sake of those one could not possibly be made to care about. They therefore deny that there can be any such obligations. When pressed, they tend to argue for their position by pointing to apparent difficulties in the view that one can have a moral reason to do something that one cannot be made to care about doing. Hence, while appraiser relativists are fond of the various versions of the argument from moral disagreement, agent relativists are fond of the various versions of what I will call the argument from moral reasons.

It should be noted that neither of these two arguments is effective at establishing the opposing position: the argument from moral reasons is not a good argument for appraiser relativism, and the argument from moral disagreement is not a good argument for agent relativism. Consider, first, the argument from moral reasons. If that argument were effective, it would establish that (for instance) Stalin acted wrongly, and that Hitler did not, on Harman's portrayal of them; but what seems to follow from this is merely the *objective* moral fact that one cannot rightly be blamed for doing something one had no

psychologically-driven reason not to do. Far from supporting appraiser relativism, this seems to undermine it.

Next, consider the argument from moral disagreement. Even if that argument were made persuasively, such that it followed from it that disputes over such issues as abortion, vegetarianism, and religious toleration are unresolvable even in principle, that conclusion would still be irrelevant to the issue of whether one can be morally obliged to do something one can't be made to care about. So the argument from moral disagreement is not effective support for agent relativism.

Appraiser Relativism and the Argument from Moral Disagreement

I will begin this section by presenting what I take to be the most important problems with appraiser relativism. This will show the hurdles that any argument will need to clear in order to establish this form of relativism. Next, I will present Harman's argument from moral disagreement. Following that, I will present some objections against Harman's argument along the lines of the parallel arguments strategy.

Problems with Appraiser Relativism

Robert Streiffer, in his excellent but neglected work, *Moral Relativism and Reasons for Action*, has compiled (and in some cases strengthened) a number of the traditional objections against appraiser relativism.¹ Here are some of the best:

¹ Streiffer 2003, Chapter 1. I am taking a few liberties with Streiffer's examples here for ease of exposition.

- 1) Suppose that Smith claims that stealing money is immoral, and that Jones replies, “That’s true: stealing money is immoral”. Normal speakers of English would assume that Jones’ claim that stealing is immoral is just a spelling-out of his earlier claim, ‘That’s true’. However, if appraiser relativism is correct, then this assumption is mistaken. According to appraiser relativism, Jones must mean, in saying ‘stealing is immoral’, that stealing is contrary to Jones’ moral view; but that, in saying ‘that’s true’, he is endorsing the truth of what Smith said (namely, that stealing is immoral according to *Smith’s* moral view).
- 2) Further, normal speakers of English tend to suppose that Smith and Jones, in the above scenario, are both stating the proposition that it is wrong to steal money. But according to appraiser relativism, this is false. If both Smith and Jones were stating that proposition, then they would both be stating the same thing, which appraiser relativism denies (since it entails that Smith says stealing money is wrong *relative to Smith*, etc.). Furthermore, there seems to be no reason to think that Smith is stating the proposition while Jones is not, or vice versa. Hence, the natural position for an appraiser relativist to take is that Smith and Jones are both alike in that *neither* of them is stating *the* proposition that that stealing money is wrong.
- 3) Also, and perhaps most famously, appraiser relativism implies that one person can claim that stealing money is wrong while another can claim that stealing money is not wrong, without either of these two speakers being mistaken. This, too, flies in the face of the basic linguistic intuitions of the great majority of competent speakers of English.

As Streiffer goes on to note,² some relativists have responded to these sorts of criticisms by attempting to show why our basic linguistic intuitions might be mistaken in these cases; but these responses seem inadequate. David Wong admits that it is *generally* true that speakers who utter the same moral sentences are in agreement, etc., since people from the same culture (broadly speaking) will have common moral values. However, he claims that this general trend makes us tend to overlook the fact that, when significantly different cultures come into contact and their members take the time to discuss their moral views in depth, it can be seen that these intercultural moral differences are too fundamental to allow for rational resolution, so that our linguistic intuitions are based on faulty overgeneralizations from this limited set of cases.³ But as Streiffer points out,⁴ this response fails. The attraction of appraiser relativism is that it is meant to help explain intractable moral disagreement, but there are vast numbers of moral disagreements that take place within a single society, a single culture, and even a single family. Moreover, even Wong's own examples of intractable moral disagreements – disagreements about the morality of abortion, welfare, and taxes, for example – regularly occur between members of the same society.

It might be thought that this rebuttal merely limits the explanatory power of appraiser relativism to disagreements between cultures, so that Wong's form of moral relativism at least applies between pairs of cultures with radically different moral views (if such pairs of cultures exist). But Streiffer preempts this retreat quite effectively:

² *Ibid.*, pp.13ff

³ Wong, 1984

⁴ Streiffer, pp.14-16

I do not think that narrowing the range of disagreements will help the Appraiser Relativist. Even if it were rare for an assertion of a moral sentence to be consistent with an assertion of that sentence's syntactic negation, our linguistic intuitions would nonetheless reflect these rare cases, and we would not be tempted to overgeneralize. Consider the sentence 'Dogs dogs fight fight.' Upon canvassing the possible contexts in which that sentence might be used, many people find it intuitively obvious that there are no contexts in which that sentence is syntactically acceptable. But once you point out a context in which the speaker is using that sentence to say that dogs that dogs fight, also fight, the intuition goes away... In general, an intuition that something is impossible is much more sensitive to counterexamples than it is to confirming instances.⁵

Therefore, since our linguistic intuitions about moral sentences survive what Wong claims are counterexamples, we have good reason to maintain that our intuitions are correct and that the supposed counterexamples are no such things. All in all, as Streiffer points out, we have excellent *prima facie* grounds for suspecting that moral disagreements are better explained in some other way – for instance, by pointing out that we lack an adequate and generally accepted notion of personhood (in the case of abortion), of justice (in the case of capital punishment), etc.⁶

It follows from all this that any successful argument from moral disagreement will need to be very powerful if it is to meet the difficult challenge of establishing such a *prima facie* unlikely view as appraiser relativism.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.15

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.26

In setting out the problems with appraiser relativism, I have followed Streiffer's analysis quite closely. In what follows, I will move in a somewhat different direction, and make use of the parallel arguments approach.

Harman's Version of the Argument from Moral Disagreement

Harman's presentation of the argument from moral disagreement can be found in Sections 1.2 and 1.3 of his book-length debate with Judith Jarvis Thomson.⁷ This argument has a particularly important function in that work, since (as I understand it) Harman intends it to be the central argument he presents for relativism there.

Harman begins that section, whose title promises that it will be about "Explaining Moral Diversity", as follows:

In this and the following section, I argue that the following claim is a reasonable inference from the most plausible explanation of moral diversity.

There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.

I begin by mentioning data to be explained: the nature and extent of moral diversity.⁸

Harman follows up admirably in *mentioning* the extent of moral diversity over the next two sections. However, he seems less keen to keep his earlier promise that he will go on to argue that the indented claim is a reasonable inference from the data he presents. He does mention, on two or three occasions, how a relativist might *account* for various

⁷ Harman and Thomson, 1996

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8

features of moral language and discourse, but he never even claims outright, let alone argues, that these relativistic explanations would be in some way better than any others. It is true, no doubt, that a relativist might *account* for certain instances of moral discourse; but this does not provide good grounds for thinking that the relativistic account is the best available explanation or even a good one.

This, together with the powerful *prima facie* case against appraiser relativism outlined above, makes it very difficult indeed to see how – on any reasonable view – Harman can be seen as having met his argumentative burdens here.

Nevertheless, so as not to dismiss what may be an implicit argument too quickly, I will assume that Harman intends his argument to go roughly as follows:

P1. Moral diversity exists.

P2. The moral diversity that exists involves some intractable disagreements.

P3. Appraiser relativism is the best explanation of intractable disagreements.

C. Therefore, appraiser relativism is true.

Criticism of Harman's Argument from Moral Disagreement

In order for this argument to work, P3 must be correct. But is it? If it is, then intractable disagreements about morality, in themselves, provide at least some reasonably good evidence for appraiser relativism. *How* good that evidence is will depend, among other things, on the viability of alternative explanations. However, a comparison of this

argument with parallel arguments about other sorts of disagreements makes it unclear why one should take this fact to provide reasonably good evidence for such a view.

To start with a simple case, let us suppose that Mr. and Mrs. Jang are out shopping. Mr. Jang feels confident that there is already an unopened container of orange juice at home, but Mrs. Jang feels sure that all the orange juice has been drunk. They stand in front of the orange juice at the market, attempting to assure one another that their views are correct; but neither can make any headway. Global relativists might explain this by saying that, since Mr. and Mrs. Jang sincerely hold opposing views on the matter, they must both be right. However, it does not follow from this that the Jangs' disagreement provides *reasonable evidence* for global relativism: it's just that global relativists would see things this way. Those who believe in the objective truth of some statements about orange juice would not have reason to reassess their commitment to this objectivity by hearing the Jangs argue. They can unproblematically maintain that either Mr. Jang, or Mrs. Jang, or both, is simply in error about the facts.

It might be objected, however, that the case of Mr. and Mrs. Jang is not really parallel with an instance of the relevant kind of moral disagreement, since Mr. and Mrs. Jang can resolve the issue to their satisfaction once they return home and inspect their refrigerator. Such an objection, I feel, confuses a question about reality (i.e. about whether there really are objective moral facts, or whether there really is enough orange juice at home) with a question about our knowledge of that reality (i.e. whether a given pair of subjects are or could be in a position to know the answers to these questions about reality).

Nevertheless, I will entertain this objection by considering what might not be as simple a case: the case of John and Janice. Both John and Janice have a great deal of confidence in their beliefs on a number of issues. The two of them are now watching the second hand of a clock with great interest, waiting for it to reach the top of its circuit. When it does, they have agreed that they will use their intuitive and intellectual powers to determine whether the population of Vancouver Island a thousand years – to the second – before that instant was an odd or an even number. The second hand reaches the top, and Janice shouts out, “Even!” while John shouts out, “Odd!”. Now, surely, either John is correct or Janice is (even in the very unlikely event that there happened to be no people at all on Vancouver Island at that second, we can count that as even). However, there seems to be no rational means whatever by which they can resolve their disagreement. Even if they render themselves fully informed by all available means, it does not seem that they will be any closer to discovering which of them is right: the relevant evidence simply does not exist any longer and cannot be reconstructed. Now, someone who is already committed to global relativism (say) might explain this disagreement in such a way that both Janice and John are correct, despite the fact that their beliefs seem to most of us to be incompatible with one another. However, the most natural judgment to make about such a situation is that either Janice is objectively right about this, or else that John is, but that neither we nor they have any way of knowing which it is, and that they both ought to be a little less confident in their assertions and beliefs. This natural, objectivist view does not seem to be threatened in any way by the fact that Janice and John cannot resolve their disagreement.

But the appraiser relativist might object, again, that Janice and John do not have an unresolvable disagreement in this case since there are some facts – albeit facts that are no longer accessible – that would settle the matter. If John and Janice could use a time machine, say, to go back to the second in question, and if they could then freeze time in such a way that they could run around and take a census while being assured that nobody else on the island would leave it, come to it, be born on it, or die on it, they would have the information they need to resolve the issue. Therefore, the objection might go, even though there is no way for them to recover this information in the actual world, the fact that such information-gathering is theoretically possible is enough to disqualify the Janice and John case as relevantly parallel. Further, the appraiser relativist might insist that the theoretical possibility of resolving the Janice and John dispute by obtaining this new information shows that Janice and John are not perfectly informed on all relevant issues, which is essential in order to show that some dispute is intractable.

It is not easy to see how to modify these attempted parallels to satisfy this requirement. There do seem to be cases where it is physically impossible for someone to know something despite being confident enough to assert that he or she does, such as when Jim claims to be certain that he knows the position and momentum of a certain subatomic particle. But if we are to be permitted to assume, counterfactually, that John and Janice can obtain normally inaccessible information about the precise population of ancient Vancouver Island, why not also assume, counterfactually, that Jim can violate Heisenberg's uncertainty principle?

To avoid all these problems, let us just hypothesize, for the benefit of the appraiser relativist, a very generic parallel: there exists a person X, and there exists a person Y, such that X and Y confidently hold apparently incompatible beliefs on some issue Z, such that Z is not an ethical issue and there is no way for X and Y to resolve their disagreement about Z. The problem, however, is that even this very generic description violates the criteria that X and Y need to be perfectly informed just as the Janice and John story does. For there are some relevant facts – namely, the correct answer to issue Z and all facts that follow from that fact in some way – that neither X or Y knows. For this reason, any parallel with objective facts seems impossible.

We can imagine, though, that appraiser relativists may be happy with this conclusion. They might hold that this is exactly their point: they might hold that questions of morality are questions of value, not of fact; that there is a strict dichotomy between facts and values; and that, **while all factual matters are resolvable in principle by fully informed, rational people, matters of value are not.**

If this were true, then we would have good reason to doubt that there could be any adequate parallel to be drawn between a dispute over morality and a dispute over facts. But why should we accept that this *is* true? It is no use pointing to a large range of cases where *apparently* reasonable and adequately-informed individuals have been unable to persuade one another on some ethical matter after a given amount of time. Such cases are always open to the responses that

- a) despite the confidence of the appraiser relativist, the individuals in question might not be fully rational, and (in particular) they might not have drawn out all the relevant logical implications from their beliefs;
- b) since the individuals under observation are presumably far from omniscient, they might after all not be adequately informed;
- c) either or both of these individuals might be prey to psychological factors that make it difficult for them to accept that they are mistaken when they should know that they are; and
- d) more time might be needed to resolve the dispute.

Furthermore, it is not difficult to find issues in science, philosophy, and elsewhere that appear to be as intractable as those in ethics. What reason do we have for thinking otherwise? The *a posteriori* evidence Harman presents is certainly inadequate to lead us to think otherwise, and it is not clear how he could have done better. However, there also seems to be no *a priori* reason for thinking that moral disagreements are intractable while those of science and philosophy, say, are not. Those who are not appraiser relativists seem to be under no compulsion, therefore, to accept such an assumption.

But let us extend the principle of charity and *assume*, for the moment, that there is good reason to believe that disagreements in morality, unlike other disagreements, are unresolvable in principle. Would appraiser relativism follow *then*? No. Even with that assumption, there is no reason for those inclined to believe in objective morality to accept the relativistic conclusion, since a plausible interpretation – and also, it seems, the most

natural – is that the moral facts in question are simply **unknowable**, rather than framework-relative. The appropriate position to adopt, in that case, would be skepticism rather than relativism. One would only be constrained to accept the truth of appraiser relativism if, in addition to the above-mentioned assumption, one had good reason to adopt the further assumption that moral claims cannot be mind-independently true or false (perhaps because one has good reason to believe that morality is constructed). But no such reasons are offered by the argument from moral disagreement.

Still, let us extend the principle of the charity even further and assume *both* that moral disagreements are unresolvable in principle *and* that morality is mind-dependent. If we accept both these assumptions together, and *then* consider the argument from moral disagreement in light of these assumptions, that argument does seem to succeed.

However, it is worth remembering, first of all, that these two additional assumptions are needed in order for appraiser relativism to follow from the argument from moral disagreement; and second, that those who oppose appraiser relativism are given no good reason to accept either assumption. Also, it should be noted that these two assumptions, together, seem already to imply appraiser relativism, even without the other premises of the argument.

What follows from this is that **the argument from moral disagreement is only effective if one already assumes (which one need not) that appraiser relativism is true**. Since the argument is meant to *establish* the truth of appraiser relativism, it is clear that it commits the fallacy of begging the question.

Hence, Harman's argument from moral disagreement fails.

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