Gilbert Harman — Moral Relativism

Summary

• Harman draws an analogy between Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity (STR) and Morality.

  – According to STR, sentences of the form ‘The length of X is L’ are incomplete. In order to get a proposition — in order to get something which is capable of being true or false — we must specify a spatio-temporal framework $F$. For instance, the sentence

    The length of the standard meter stick is 1 meter.

    is true if we plug in the reference frame at which the meter stick is at rest. However, it is false if we plug in a reference frame at which the meter stick is moving.

  – Similarly, according to Moral Relativism, sentences of the form ‘Action A is wrong’ are incomplete. In order to get a proposition, we must specify a moral framework $M$. So, for instance, the sentence

    Abortion is impermissible.

    is true according to one person’s moral framework, but false according to another person’s moral framework.

  – Just as, according to STR, there is no privileged spatio-temporal framework, according to Moral Relativism, there is no privileged moral framework. So, the only truth in the area is relative truth.

• Harman isn’t making a claim about what people intend their sentence to mean. The claim isn’t that when I utter the sentence ‘Abortion is impermissible’, I’m trying to say that Abortion is impermissible according to my moral framework. Nevertheless, if we want to understand what I’m saying in such a way that it has the possibility of being true, we should understand me as making the moral-standard-relative claim.

• Recall Rachel’s criticisms of Moral Relativism:

  1. The argument from disagreement isn’t valid — disagreement doesn’t entail faultless disagreement.
  2. Relativism makes it too easy to figure out what is right and wrong.
  3. Relativism doesn’t allow us to criticize those with abhorrent views.
  4. Relativism doesn’t allow us to make sense of moral progress.
• Harman responds to criticisms 1–3 as follows:

1. The conclusion of the argument from disagreement isn’t supposed to follow *deductively*. Rather, it is an *inference to the best explanation*. The claim is that the best explanation of moral disagreement is the hypothesis that there is no single true morality; rather, there are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.

   **P1** Disagreements between moral vegetarians and nonvegetarians can survive full discussion and full information.

   **C1** If there is a nonrelative truth concerning the moral importance of animals, it cannot be discovered. [from **P1**]

   **P2** As a general methodological principle, it is better to not suppose that there are undiscoverable truths.

   **C2** It is better to not suppose that there is a truth about the moral importance of animals. [from **C1** and **P2**]

2. Harman allows that an individual can be wrong about their own moral framework. Just as the law is not determined entirely by existing legislation, an individual’s moral framework is not determined entirely by what the individual *now* values.

   – Rather, we could say that the moral framework is determined by values the person *would* have, were they to rationally revise their views to make them more consistent with each other and the facts.

3. Just because people have different moral frameworks doesn’t mean that they can’t *disagree*. They will disagree because they want incompatible things. The vegetarian will try to persuade the nonvegetarian to become vegetarian so that fewer animals suffer. The abolitionist will try to persuade the slave owner to stop owning slaves so that fewer humans suffer. This is a complex process of bargaining which establishes the accepted moral conventions of a society. Such bargaining may take the form of criticism. Accepting Moral Relativism doesn’t mean that we can’t criticize others; it simply means that, when we do, we should regard this criticism as a form of bargaining, and we shouldn’t think that our moral framework is superior to theirs.