Lecture 11: The Argument from Disagreement for Relativism

I. Last Thoughts on Joyce’s Moral Fictionalism

A smattering of possible worries for Joyce’s brand of revolutionary moral fictionalism (and his master argument for it):

- Does he get the cost–benefit analysis right?
- Why are untrue beliefs (in Joyce’s particular sense of what belief involves) instrumentally costly, as opposed to untrue thoughts on specific occasions?
- If we can compartmentalize the set of all moral sentences and adopt a different stance toward it, why can’t we compartmentalize that set when we engage in critical inquiry?
- If morality is incoherent (as some but not all nihilists hold), how can we pretend that it is true?
- Which of the many possible moral stories are we to adopt a fictionalist stance toward?
- Why is the philosophy classroom the most reliable indication of what one truly believes?
- If I reject a given moral claim when at my most critical, can it really do the motivational work that Joyce imagines it doing?

II. Harman’s Moral Relativism: First Pass

Gilbert Harman’s version of moral relativism consists of the following four theses (pp. 4–6):

(Rel1) For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form “It would be morally wrong of agent A to \( \phi \)” must be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form “In relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of agent A to \( \phi \)” (And similarly for other moral judgments.)

(Rel2) There is no single true morality; there are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.

(Rel3) The practice of making moral judgments should not be abandoned.

(Rel4) Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking.

Harman motivates this view by making an analogy with the Einsteinian idea that simultaneity, motion, and mass are relative to a choice of spatio-temporal framework.

(Sim1) For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form “Events \( E_1 \) and \( E_2 \) occurred simultaneously” must be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form “In relation to spatio-temporal framework F, events \( E_1 \) and \( E_2 \) occurred simultaneously.”

(Sim2) There is no single privileged spatio-temporal framework; there are many different spatio-temporal frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.

(Sim3) The practice of making judgments of simultaneity should not be abandoned.

(Sim4) Judgments of relative simultaneity can continue to play a serious role in our thinking.

(Rel1) is not intended to be a claim about the meaning of moral sentences; rather, the central idea is that the only truth there is in this area is relative truth, so we should be charitable and interpret people as really making relative moral judgments when they seem to be making absolute moral judgments.
III. The Ubiquity of Moral Disagreement

The most common way of arguing for moral relativism involves appealing to the alleged ubiquity of seemingly intractable moral disagreements that exist both between cultures and within the same culture.

Examples of such moral disagreements, culled from the Harman and Rachels chapters:

- **inter-cultural disagreements** over cannibalism, bigamy, burping, the moral status of women, slavery, caste systems, eating the dead, infanticide, female circumcision;

- **intra-cultural disagreements** over vegetarianism, abortion, euthanasia, whether it is worse to kill someone than let that person die, the extent of our duties to others, the value of artifacts of culture versus the value of human life, the value of liberty versus the value of equality.

IV. A Bad Argument for Moral Relativism

Here is one way of arguing from the ubiquity of moral disagreements to moral relativism:

**bad argument for moral relativism:**

1. There exists a wide variety of moral disagreements.  [*premise*]
2. So, there is no single true morality.  [*follows from 1*]

As its name suggests, this is a bad argument. The mere fact that people disagree about some issue is not enough to show that there is no absolute truth in the matter, or else the existence of disagreements about whether the earth is flat (Rachels’ example) would be enough to show that it is not absolutely true that the earth is not flat.

V. A Better Argument for Moral Relativism

A more plausible way of arguing for relativism insists that it is the most plausible explanation of why we encounter the sort of moral disagreement that we encounter in the world:

**the argument from disagreement for moral relativism:**

1. There exists a wide variety of seemingly intractable moral disagreements.  [*premise*]
2. The best explanation of the existence of so many seemingly intractable moral disagreements is that there is no single true morality.  [*premise*]
3. So, there is no single true morality.  [*follows from 1 and 2 by inference to the best explanation*]

Alternative explanations which Harman insists are less plausible than the one offered by moral relativism:

- Although people disagree on specific issues in applied ethics, there exists a central core of universally agreed upon moral principles (pp. 8–9).

- All moral disagreements can be explained either by differences in people’s beliefs about the non-moral facts or by non-moral differences in the situations of the individuals being morally evaluated (p. 11).

- Some people are not as well placed as others to discover the right answers to moral questions (p. 12).

However, there are a number of other non-relativist explanations that Harman does not consider. (What are they? Are any of them particularly plausible?)