Lecture 12: More on the Argument from Disagreement for Relativism

I. Recap: the Argument from Disagreement

The most common way of arguing for moral relativism insists that it is the most plausible explanation of why we encounter the sort of widespread, recalcitrant moral disagreement that we do.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>the argument from disagreement for moral relativism:</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. There exists a wide variety of seemingly intractable moral disagreements.  [premise]</td>
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<td>2. The best explanation of the existence of so many seemingly intractable moral disagreements is that moral relativism is true.  [premise]</td>
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<td>3. So, moral relativism is true.  [follows from 1 and 2 by inference to the best explanation]</td>
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Objections to this argument break into three general categories:

- claims that there are not, in fact, as many moral disagreements as there seem to be;
- claims that there is an alternative morally absolutist explanation that is as good an explanation as moral relativism is of the existence of seemingly intractable moral disagreements;
- claims that there is an alternative morally deflationary explanation that is as good an explanation as moral relativism is of the existence of seemingly intractable moral disagreements.

II. How Much Disagreement Is There, Really?

Reasons why there might not be as much moral disagreement as there seems to be:

- General worries about the underdetermination of empirical hypotheses by the data (Moody-Adams, pp. 93–94). It is a platitude of contemporary philosophy of science that any empirical hypothesis is underdetermined by the available data that supports it: an infinite number of alternate hypotheses are always compatible with whatever data we have, and we must use explanatory virtues such as simplicity, comprehensiveness, conservativeness, etc. to choose among the competing hypotheses. In so far as it is an empirical issue whether a wide variety of apparently irresolvable moral disputes exist, general worries about underdetermination plague this issue as well.

- Difficulties determining whether a disagreement between two groups or individuals is really a moral disagreement, as opposed to a disagreement about the non-moral facts (Rachels, pp. 59–60; Brandt, pp. 28–29; Moody-Adams, pp. 97–99). Are societies with different conceptions or systems of property really in moral disagreement over the permissibility of theft? Do people with different beliefs on the nature and possibility of reincarnation really morally disagree over whether it is wrong to eat cows?

- Difficulties ascertaining whether two groups or individuals who do not speak the same language really conflict in their moral judgments (Brandt, p. 29). In order to determine that a Navajo finds some action wrong, do we first have to determine whether the Navajo language contains a synonym for ‘morally wrong’? Or is it enough to determine that she feels guilt when acting in that way, or would prefer not to do so? (There are similar problems over how to individuate the action being evaluated.)

- Difficulties in finding an “authority” on the values and practices of a given culture (Moody-Adams, pp. 95, 103–104). Trusting the opinions of some privileged informant on the moral practices and beliefs of a given society risks overlooking the possibility of internal conflict within that society.
III. Alternative Morally Absolutist Explanations

Possible morally absolutist explanations of the existence of persistent and widespread moral disagreement:

- Some disagreements are due to differences in non-moral beliefs between individuals and cultures. For example, differences in opinion on the ethics of abortion might be explainable by differences in opinion on the issue of when a fetus first becomes a person.

- Some disagreements are due to non-moral differences in the situation of the agents being evaluated. Infanticide might be wrong for us to practice in the general milieu of early 21st century middle-class America, but okay for the Inuit to practice in the harsh, unforgiving environment in which they live.

- There exists a central core of universally agreed upon moral principles, but people have a difficult time applying them to individual cases. Maybe a small set of basic moral principles undergirds all moral thinking, but since it is not always clear how to apply these principles in specific cases, people are often disagreeing about the implications of the principles, not the principles themselves.

- Some people are better placed than others to discover the right answers to moral questions. Perhaps the advance of science aids the advance of ethical inquiry. Perhaps the decline of religion-based approaches to ethics aids the advance of ethical inquiry. Perhaps some people and cultures are simply less good at ethical inquiry than others. (Danger of intellectual arrogance.)

- Ethics is hard. Doing moral theory is extremely difficult—perhaps one of the most difficult intellectual endeavors we could ever undertake. This is all the more so if you think that nearly all moral questions are connected with one another (Thomson, p. 205).

- The answers to some moral questions might be indeterminate. If the answer to some moral question is indeterminate, but you and I do not know this, we might continue to debate the question even though it has no determinate answer (Thomson, pp. 205–206). Two ways in which such indeterminacy might arise:
  
  1. Vagueness: Just as the claim “A man with \( m \) hairs on his head is bald” might have no truth-value for some values of \( m \), the claim “Abortion is impermissible in the \( n \)th week” might have no truth-value for some values of \( n \).
  
  2. Incommensurable values: Some philosophers believe that certain values are incommensurable: not measurable upon a common scale in terms of which they can always be compared. In some cases in which incommensurable values clash, there may be no fact of the matter about which is more important than the other.

- “Walling off.” When people have some personal stake in a debate, or when it threatens some of their most cherished beliefs and practices, they may “wall themselves off” by ignoring facts that they know to be the case, or by failing to consider arguments that would usually convince them (Thomson, p. 205). (Sartre’s slightly more elegant term for this phenomenon is “bad faith.”)

Perhaps the most convincing absolutist strategy is to combine all of these possible explanations, and to claim that in some cases some of them apply, and in other cases others apply (Thomson, p. 205).

However, this is too quick. The datum that drives those convinced by the argument from disagreement is that the type of disagreement we encounter over moral issues seems to be more widespread, more persistent, and more recalcitrant than the disagreement (both inter- and intra-cultural) that we encounter over scientific issues.

So we need to ask: do enough of the above items not apply (or not apply as much) in the scientific case for us to be able to explain the perceived difference in the ubiquity and intractableness of moral disputes?
IV. Alternative Morally Deflationary Explanations

It might be insisted that the truth of moral nihilism or the truth of moral expressivism would do just as good a job explaining the data about moral disagreement as the truth of moral relativism would.

However, an argument that we have good reason to believe in the truth of (nihilism or relativism or expressivism) would still be pretty powerful.

V. Companions in Guilt: Philosophical Disagreement

Shafer-Landau notes that disagreements within first-order ethics over the permissibility of (say) abortion or euthanasia seem as intractable as disagreements within philosophy about free will, skepticism, the existence of God, the connection between mind and body, the nature of consciousness, and so on (p. 220).

Thus it looks as if we can argue as follows:

the argument from disagreement for philosophical relativism:

1. There exists a wide variety of seemingly intractable philosophical disagreements. [premise]
2. The best explanation of the existence of so many seemingly intractable philosophical disagreements is that there are no absolute truths about philosophical matters. [premise]
3. So, there are no absolute truths about philosophical matters. [follows from 1 and 2 by inference to the best explanation]

However, philosophical relativism is a big bullet to bite. Two worries:

- Since moral relativism is a philosophical topic, philosophical relativism implies that moral relativism is not absolutely true.
- Since philosophical relativism is itself a philosophical topic, philosophical relativism implies that philosophical relativism is not absolutely true.