Lecture 13: The Coherence of Relativism

I. Williams on the Incoherence of Vulgar Relativism

Suppose a version of relativism makes the following two claims:

1. The term ‘wrong’ means ‘wrong for a given society’.
2. It is wrong for people in one society to condemn or interfere with the values and moral behavior of another society.

As Williams points out, such “vulgar and unregenerate” forms of relativism are (on their most natural interpretation) inconsistent: the first proposition insists that all uses of the term ‘wrong’ are relative to a society, but the second proposition goes on to employ ‘wrong’ in a non-relative way (pp. 20–21).

II. Varieties of Moral Relativism

Three different forms of moral relativism:

- **Descriptive relativism**: Different individuals or cultures have different moral frameworks.

- **Agent relativism (or normative relativism)**: It is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C iff, according to X’s moral framework, it is wrong for X to φ in C.

- **Critic relativism (or appraiser relativism, or metaethical relativism)**: The judgment “It is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C” as made by agent Y in circumstance D is valid (i.e. true or justified) iff, according to Y’s moral framework, it is wrong for X to φ in C.

Some possible ways in which an individual’s moral framework can be determined:

- **Actual individual’s framework**: (According to agent Y’s moral framework, it is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C) iff (Y believes that it is wrong for X to φ in C).

- **Idealized individual’s framework**: (According to agent Y’s moral framework, it is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C) iff (when considering the matter under idealized conditions, Y would believe that it is wrong for X to φ in C).

- **Actual group’s framework**: (According to agent Y’s moral framework, it is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C) iff (according to the actual moral principles now endorsed by Y’s social group or culture, it is wrong for X to φ in C).

- **Idealized group’s framework**: (According to agent Y’s moral framework, it is wrong for agent X to φ in circumstance C) iff (according to the moral principles that Y’s social group or culture would endorse under idealized conditions, it is wrong for X to φ in C).

“Ideal conditions” could include any or all of the following:

- carefully considering the matter;
- being fully informed of all the relevant non-moral facts;
- not making any mistakes of reasoning;
- taking into account all of the arguments for and against competing moral views on the matter;
- not being biased by self-concern or any other irrational influences.
III. Lyons on the Incoherence of (Some Forms of) Agent Relativism

As Lyons points out, individuals can belong to more than one social group at a time. Moreover, one can belong to groups that have differing values. Consider the following example:

*conflicting groups:* Claudia is considering whether to have an abortion during the first trimester. According to her church community’s moral framework (both actual and idealized), she is morally forbidden from doing so. According to the moral framework of her society (both actual and idealized), she is morally permitted to do so.

Both actual group’s framework and idealized group’s framework versions of agent relativism seem to yield the result that, in this case, Claudia is both morally forbidden and morally permitted to have an abortion. As these results are inconsistent, Lyons dismisses these forms of agent relativism as incoherent.

Does a similar problem face actual individual’s framework and idealized individual’s framework versions of agent relativism?

IV. Lyons on the Incoherence of (Some Forms of) Critic Relativism

Suppose we have the following scenario (p. 127):

*conflicting opinions:* Alice and Barbara have been discussing Claudia’s proposed abortion. They know Claudia well, and they agree about the circumstances and the likely consequences of the act. They judge as follows:

Alice: “It would be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion.”

Barbara: “It would not be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion.”

According to Alice’s moral framework, it would be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion, and according to Barbara’s moral framework, it would not be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion.

When applied to this case, critic relativism seems to yield the result that both Alice’s and Barbara’s judgments are true. Moreover, on the face of it these judgments are logically incompatible. So critic relativism seems to be incoherent if it allows the possibility of such a scenario.

Three ways of resisting this result:

A. Deny that such a scenario is possible.

B. Hold that although Alice’s and Barbara’s judgments are indeed logically incompatible (in some sense of ‘logically incompatible’), neither judgment is true.

C. Deny that the judgments are logically incompatible.

**Lyons against response A:** To deny that Alice’s and Barbara’s moral frameworks can conflict in this way would be to deprive critic relativism of much of its point, since then such a relativist would be unable to recognize several independent grounds for moral evaluation (p. 132).

**Lyons against response B:** Lyons goes on a lengthy digression arguing against this possibility (pp. 132–138). Unfortunately, much of this discussion involves arguing against idiosyncratic features of R. M. Hare’s metaethical theory, and so is not of much general relevance.

**Lyons against response C:** “On the surface it appears that Alice and Barbara are disagreeing about Claudia’s proposed abortion, saying incompatible things about it. But, according to this sort of theory, they are confused if they believe their judgments to be incompatible. In fact, the theory says, they are actually talking at cross purposes” (p. 138).
V. A Dilemma for Relativists Who Endorse the Argument from Disagreement

I think Lyons’ worry is best formulated not as the charge that one or another form of relativism is incoherent (since by ‘incoherent’ he seems just to mean ‘not very plausible’), but rather as a dilemma for relativists who would use the argument from disagreement to argue for their view.

A relativist who is a fan of the argument from disagreement appears to have two options: either she can try to use the argument to establish agent relativism, or she can try to use the argument to establish critic relativism.

*option #1:* Use the argument from disagreement to establish *agent relativism.*

The problem here is that when Alice and Barbara are arguing about the permissibility of Claudia’s proposed abortion, according to agent relativism there is *one correct answer* on the subject matter, determined by the nature of Claudia’s moral framework.

So agent relativism by itself can’t explain the seeming intractability of Alice and Barbara’s dispute.

*option #2:* Use the argument from disagreement to establish *critic relativism.*

The problem here is that when Alice says, “It would be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion,” and Barbara says, “It would not be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion,” what Alice says is true if and only if *according to Alice’s moral framework* it would be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion, and what Barbara says is true if and only if *according to Barbara’s moral framework* it would not be wrong of Claudia to have the abortion.

But then according to critic relativism, Alice and Barbara are not actually disagreeing: they’re making claims that are not, in fact, contraries of one another.

On the critic relativist’s view of things, it’s as if Alice were saying, “Claudia is to the left of me,” and Barbara were saying, “No, Claudia is to the right of me.”

So critic relativism can only explain the seeming intractability of Alice and Barbara’s dispute by positing that they don’t realize that they’re not in fact disagreeing.

Hence our dilemma: in either case, the argument from disagreement doesn’t seem to be a particularly convincing way of establishing the form of relativism being argued for.