Lecture 14: The Motivational Argument for Relativism

I. Harman’s Motivational Argument for Relativism

Two facets of Harman’s brand of moral relativism as defended in “Moral Relativism Defended” (1975) and “Is There a Single True Morality?” (1985):

- the claim that the truth of (a certain class of) moral judgments is relative to certain motivational attitudes;
- an account of how those motivational attitudes arise through a process of mutual bargaining between individuals in a society.

Today we will fix on Harman’s arguments for the former of these claims; next lecture we will focus on his arguments for the latter.

Let H be a general moral prohibition against harming others. Then we can argue as follows:

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<th>the motivational argument for moral relativism:</th>
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<td>0. An agent ought morally to adhere to H only if that agent has sufficient reason to adhere to H. [premise]</td>
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<td>1. An agent has sufficient reason to adhere to H only if, were that agent to reason about whether to adhere to H while suffering no empirically discoverable failures, then that agent would be motivated to adhere to it. [premise]</td>
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<td>2. There are agents who are not motivated to act in accordance with H and who are not suffering any empirically discoverable failures of reasoning. [premise]</td>
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<td>3. So, these agents do not have sufficient reason to adhere to H. [follows from 1, 2]</td>
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<td>4. So, it is not case that these agents ought morally to adhere to H. [follows from 0, 3]</td>
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According to Harman, empirically discoverable failures of reasoning include (“Is There...?” p. 173):

- inattention;
- lack of time;
- failure to consider or appreciate certain arguments;
- ignorance of certain available (non-moral) evidence;
- an error in (theoretical) reasoning;
- some sort of irrationality or unreasonableness;
- weakness of will.

The sorts of examples given by Harman in support of premise 2:

- a professional criminal/an assassin for Murder, Incorporated (“...Defended,” pp. 5–6; “Is There...?,” pp. 172–173);
- an alien without the slightest concern for human life or happiness (“...Defended,” p. 5);
- a cannibal/a member of some primitive tribal group (“...Defended,” p. 5; “Is There...?,” p. 172);
- Hitler (“...Defended,” pp. 7–8).
II. Harman on Methodological Naturalism versus Autonomous Ethics

Two different approaches to the study of moral philosophy (“Is There...?,” p. 166):

- **methodological naturalism** concentrates on the problem of finding a place for value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science;
- **autonomous ethics** ignores that problem and concentrates on problems internal to ethics.

According to Harman, **methodological naturalism** leads naturally to moral relativism, whereas **autonomous ethics** leads naturally to moral absolutism.

III. Defending Premise 0

Harman maintains that the moral ‘ought’ is reason-involving: to make a claim about what a person morally ought to do is to make a claim about what that person has (good or sufficient) reason to do.

Different senses of ‘ought’:

- **the ‘ought’ of expectation**: “The assassin ought to arrive soon.”
- **the ‘ought’ of rationality**: “The assassin ought to go in by the rear door.”
- **the normative ‘ought to be’**: “It ought to be that people like the assassin are in jail.”
- **the moral ‘ought to do’**: “The assassin ought not go around killing people.”

Harman insists that even if the first three of these senses are not reason-involving, the fourth is.

IV. Defending Premise 1

*Objection to premise 1 (Scanlon):* If an agent is a bad/immoral person, then she might not be motivated to do what she has sufficient reason to do, even when suffering no empirically detectable failures of reasoning (“Is There...?,” p. 174).

*Harman’s reply:* This response is only available to the practitioner of **autonomous ethics**, since it “does not explain having a sufficient reason to do something in terms that are acceptably factual from a naturalistic perspective” (“Is There...?,” p. 175).

V. Defending Premise 2

*Objection to premise 2:* If the professional criminal is not being irrational or unreasonable, then she will be motivated to abstain from harming other people, since it is irrational/unreasonable not to care about the pain one inflicts on other people.

*Harman’s reply:* “…on any plausible characterization of reasonableness and unreasonableness (or rationality and irrationality) as notions that can be part of the scientific conception of the world, the absolutist’s claim is just false” (“Is There...?,” p. 176).

*Reply to Harman’s reply:* ‘Empirically detectable failures of reasoning’ is ambiguous. Consider an error of theoretical reasoning, such as the fallacy of affirming the consequent. One affirms the consequent when one reasons as follows: “Q. If P, then Q. Therefore, P.” In one sense, this error is empirically detectable: we can design experiments to determine whether someone forms beliefs in this manner. But in another sense, this error is not empirically detectable: we can’t design experiments to determine whether someone who forms beliefs in this manner is reasoning improperly.

Now suppose Harman’s opponent insists that it is a failure of practical reasoning to not care about the pain one inflicts on other people. The problem for Harman is that, although this (putative) error is not empirically detectable in our second sense, it is empirically detectable in our first sense: we can design experiments to determine whether a person cares about other people’s pain.