

A 'Parallel Arguments' Response to Harman's Case for Appraiser

Relativism

In this paper, I critically examine Gilbert Harman's case for appraiser relativism. I first clarify the difference between agent and appraiser relativism, and show why Harman's choice to use the argument from moral disagreement as a support for his appraiser relativism is likely the wisest one available to him. However, I go on to argue that Harman's defense of appraiser relativism is nevertheless unsuccessful. I argue for this conclusion in a rather unusual way. I first try to follow what I have elsewhere called a 'parallel arguments' approach to the relativism issue: this involves an attempt to show that, if Harman's argument for relativism about morality is successful, he will be committed by that same logic to relativism about scientific, epistemic, logical and other apparently non-relativistic areas of inquiry. However, the process of adjusting the parallel arguments to make them genuinely parallel seems in the end to uncover the surprising fact that the argument from moral disagreement commits the fallacy of begging the question.

to some moral views, the answer is yes; according to others, the answer is no; and no moral views (and hence no answers) can be better or worse, objectively, than any others.

Agent relativism, by contrast, is the view that the moral status of an action is relative to certain features of the particular agent performing (or neglecting to perform) that action. These features vary depending on the version of agent relativism in question, but they tend in all accounts to be psychological features such as desires, interests, concerns, etc. To illustrate this with one of Harman's examples, we can imagine (again) that Hitler cannot be made to feel remorse about killing the innocent people he killed, but that Stalin can (or does) feel remorse about his own killings of innocents. An agent relativist could hold that this discrepancy is sufficient to make it the case that, even though the actions performed by Hitler and Stalin may have no morally relevant differences in themselves, the differences between the agents make it the case that Hitler did not act wrongly, and that Stalin did, in performing those actions.

Not only are these views distinct, but neither one entails the other. One can consistently hold that appraiser relativism is true and that agent relativism is false. For instance, one can imagine a world in which everyone is either a specific sort of ethical egoist (to be

seem open to entertaining one another's arguments? Appraiser relativists are typically motivated by such puzzlement to abandon the view that there are objective moral facts. When challenged by those who believe in objective morality, therefore, they tend to support their form of relativism by arguing that it is the best explanation for persistent disagreement among real or idealized disputants.

Agent relativists, by contrast, tend to be puzzled by the claim that one can be objectively obliged to do something that one could not possibly be motivated to do for the sake of those one could not possibly be made to care about. They therefore deny that there can be any such obligations. When pressed, they tend to argue for their position by pointing to apparent difficulties in the view that one can have a moral reason to do something that one cannot be made to care about doing. Hence, while appraiser relativists are fond of the various versions of the argument from moral disagreement, agent relativists are fond of the various versions of what I will call the argument from moral reasons.

It should be noted that neither of these two arguments is effective at establishing the opposing position: the argument from moral reasons is not effective that

psychologically-driven reason not to do. Far from supporting appraiser relativism, this seems to undermine it.

Next, consider the argument from moral disagreement. Even if that argument were made persuasively, such that it followed from it that disputes over such issues as abortion, vegetarianism, and religious toleration are unresolvable even in principle, that conclusion would still be irrelevant to the issue of whether one can be morally obliged to do something one can't be made to care about. So the argument from moral disagreement is not effective support for agent relativism.

Appraiser Relativism and the Argument from Moral Disagreement

I will begin this section by presenting what I take to be the most important problems with appraiser relativism. This will show the hurdles that any argument will need to clear in order to establish this form of relativism. Next, I will present Harman's argument from moral disagreement. Following that, I will present some objections against Harman's argument along the lines of the parallel arguments strategy.

Problems with Appraiser Relativism

Robert Streiffer, in his excellent but neglected work, *Moral Relativism and Reasons for Action*, has compiled (and in some cases strengthened) a number of the traditional objections against appraiser relativism.¹ Here are some of the best:

¹ Streiffer 2003, Chapter 1. I am taking a few liberties with Streiffer's examples here for ease of exposition.

- 1) Suppose that Smith claims that stealing money is immoral, and that Jones replies, “That’s true: stealing money is immoral”. Normal speakers of English would assume that Jones’ claim that stealing is immoral is just a spelling-out of his earlier claim, ‘That’s true’. However, if appraiser relativism is correct, then this assumption is mistaken. According to appraiser relativism, Jones must mean, in saying ‘stealing is immoral’, that stealing is contrary to Jones’ moral view; but that, in saying ‘that’s true’, he is endorsing the truth of what Smith said (namely, that stealing is immoral according to *Smith’s* moral view).
- 2) Further, normal speakers of English tend to suppose that Smith and Jones, in the above scenario, are both stating the proposition that it is wrong to steal money. But according to appraiser relativism, this is false. If both Smith and Jones were stating that proposition, then they would both be stating the same thing, which appraiser relativism denies (since it entails that Smith says stealing money is wrong *relative to Smith*, etc.). Furthermore, there seems to be no reason to think that Smith is stating the proposition while Jones is not, or vice versa. Hence, the natural position for an appraiser relativist to take is that Smith and Jones are both alike in that *neither* of them is stating *the* proposition that that stealing money is wrong.
- 3) Also, and perhaps most famously, appraiser relativism implies that one person can claim that stealing money is wrong while another can claim that stealing money is

As Streiffer goes on to note,² some relativists have responded to these sorts of criticisms by attempting to show why our basic linguistic intuitions might be mistaken in these cases; but these responses seem inadequate. David Wong admits that it is *generally* true that speakers who utter the same moral sentences are in agreement, etc., since people from the same culture (broadly speaking) will have common moral values. However, he claims that this general trend makes us tend to overlook the fact that, when significantly different cultures come into contact and their members take the time to discuss their moral views in depth, it can be seen that these intercultural moral differences are too fundamental to allow for rational resolution, so that our linguistic intuitions are based on faulty overgeneralizations from this limited set of cases.³ But as Streiffer points out,⁴ this response fails. The attraction of appraiser relativism is that it is meant to help explain intractable mo

I do not think that narrowing the range of disagreements will help the Appraiser Relativist. Even if it were rare for an assertion of a moral sentence to be consistent with an assertion of that

features of moral language and discourse, but he never even claims outright, let alone argues, that these relativistic explanations would be in some way better than any others.

It is true, no doubt, that a relativist might

argument with parallel arguments about other sorts of disagreements makes it unclear why one should take this fact to provide reasonably good evidence for such a view.

To start with a simple case, let us suppose that Mr. and Mrs. Jang are out shopping. Mr. Jang feels confident that there is already an unopened container of orange juice at home, but Mrs. Jang feels sure that all the orange juice has been drunk. They stand in front of the orange juice at the market, attempting to assure one another that their views are correct; but neither can make any headway. Global relativists might explain this by saying that, since Mr. and Mrs. Jang sincerely hold opposing views on the matter, they must both be right. However, it does not follow from this that the Jangs' disagreement provides *reasonable evidence* for global relativism: it's just that global relativists would see things this way. Those who believe in the objective truth of some statements about orange juice would not have reason to reassess their commitment to this objectivity by hearing the Jangs argue. They can unproblematically maintain that either Mr. Jang, or Mrs. Jang, or both, is simply in error about the facts.

It might be objected, however, that the case of Mr. and Mrs. Jang is not really parallel with an instance of the relevant kind of moral disagreement, since Mr. and Mrs. Jang can resolve the issue to their satisfaction once they return home and inspect their refrigerator. Such an objection, I feel, confuses a question about reality (i.e. about whether there really are objective moral facts, or whether there really is enough orange juice at home) with a question about our knowledge of that reality (i.e. whether a given pair of subjects are or could be in a position to know the answers to these questions about reality).

Nevertheless, I will entertain this objection by considering what might not be as simple a case: the case of John and Janice. Both John and Janice have a great deal of confidence in their beliefs on a number of issues. The two of them are now watching the second hand of a clock with great interest, waiting for it to reach the top of its circuit. When it does, they have agreed that they will use their intuitive and intellectual powers to determine whether the population of Vancouver Island a thousand years – to the second – before that instant was an odd or an even number. The second hand reaches the top, and Janice shouts out, “Even!” while John shouts out, “Odd!”. Now, surely, either John is correct or Janice is (even in the very unlikely event that there happened to be no people at all on Vancouver Island at that second, we can count that as even). However, there seems to be no rational means whatever by which they can resolve their disagreement. Even if they render themselves fully informed by all available means, it does not seem that they will be any closer to discovering which of them is right: the relevant evidence simply does not exist any longer and cannot be reconstructed. Now, someone who is already committed to global relativism (say) might explain this disagreement in such a way that both Janice and John are correct, despite the fact that their beliefs seem to most of us to be incompatible with one another. However, the most natural judgment to make about such a situation is that either Janice is objectively right about this, or else that John is, but that neither we nor they have any way of knowing which it is, and that they both ought to be a little less confident in their assertions and beliefs. This natural, objectivist view does not seem to be threatened in any way by the fact that Janice and John cannot resolve their disagreement.

But the appraiser relativist mig

To avoid all these problems, let us just hypothesize, for the benefit of the appraiser relativist, a very generic parallel: there exists a person X, and there exists a person Y, such that X and Y confidently hold apparently incompatible beliefs on some issue Z, such that Z is not an ethical issue and there is no way for X and Y to resolve their disagreement about Z. The problem, however, is that even this very generic description violates the criteria that X and Y need to be perfectly informed just as the Janice and John story does. For there are some relevant facts – namely, the correct answer to issue Z and all facts that follow from that fact in some way – that neither X or Y knows. For this reason, any parallel with objective facts seems impossible.

We can imagine, though, that appraiser relativists may be happy with this conclusion. They might hold that this is exactly their point: they might hold that questions of morality are questions of value, not of fact; that there is a strict dichotomy between facts and values; and that, **while all factual matters are resolvable in principle by fully informed, rational people, matters of value are not.**

If this were true, then we would have good reason to doubt that there could be any adequate parallel to be drawn between a dispute over morality and a dispute over facts. But why should we accept that this *is* true? It is no use pointing to a large range of cases where *apparently* reasonable and adequately-informed individuals have been unable to persuade one another on some ethical matter after a given amount of time. Such cases are always open to the responses that

Bibliography

Harman, Gilbert, and Thomson, Judith Jarvis 1996. *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Blackwell Publishing

Streiffer, Robert 2003. *Moral Relativism and Reasons for Action*. Routledge

Wong, David B., 1984. *Moral Relativity*. University of California Press, 1984.