

True for you, maybe

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

Spring 2005

Review of meta-ethical positions

- Moral skepticism: we lack moral knowledge
 - compare religion, weather forecasting,...
- Emotivism: moral claims are not descriptive
 - compare ouch, no smoking, aw shucks,...
- Error theory: they are descriptive but false
 - Analogies? witchcraft, vitalism, phlogiston,...
- Now a new meta-ethical view, *relativism*

The key relativist claim

For purposes of assigning truth conditions, *doing X would be morally wrong* has to be understood as short for, *in relation to such and such a moral framework, doing X would be morally wrong.*

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Just as *Y is moving at high speed* has to be understood as short for *in relation to such and such a spatiotemporal framework, Y is moving at high speed.*

Further relativist claims

- There is no single true morality; there are many moral frameworks, none more correct than the others ... just as there is no single correct spatiotemporal framework
- Morality should not be abandoned...just as we should not stop ascribing velocities
- Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking...just as relative velocity plays a key role in physical thinking

Relativism is not nihilism

- The *nihilist* also says "no single true morality"
- But the nihilist thinks that morality should therefore be abandoned; give up absolute moral truth and there is nothing worth saving
- Where would a nihilist position be appropriate?

"For the purposes of assigning truth-conditions..."

- By the *truth-conditions* of a sentence or judgment we mean the conditions under which it is true -- this is often identified with the set of all possible worlds where it is true
- So the key claim can be rephrased: when someone says, "it would be morally wrong to do X," it is as though she had said, "in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong to do X" -- both sentences are true in the same worlds
- Speakers need not be aware of this, as they are often not in the velocity case; it's not about people mean or have in mind

Why believe relativism?

- "No single true morality" is supposed to be a "reasonable inference from the most plausible explanation of the range of moral diversity that actually exists"
- The most plausible explanation is "many moral disagreements do indeed rest on basic differences in moral outlook rather than on differences in situation or beliefs about nonmoral facts"

Competing explanations -- moral differences due to

- A. Different non-moral *situations*; child labor, parricide, cannibalism permissible if...
- B. Different non-moral *beliefs*, e.g., about who is a person or the likely effects of doing so and so
- C. Morality is just very hard; eventually we may hope to figure it out (compare God, cosmology,...)
- D. Fundamentally opposed moral outlooks, with no possibility of reconciliation

Harman picks D. Either one group has somehow stumbled on the truth (unlikely), or there is no single true morality.

From no single true morality to relativistic truth-conditions

- Once it's established there is no single correct assignment of velocities, we face the question what we are doing when we say "That thing's moving 80mph!"
- Relativizing truth-conditions to reference frame satisfies most of our intuitive preconceptions while giving up the indefensible part
- Likewise relativizing the truth-conditions of moral claims to frameworks preserves most of our intuitive preconceptions about morality while giving up the indefensible part