

What are we arguing about?

Reason, Relativism, and Reality

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The problem of moral disputes

- Harman says relativism is the best response to *no single true morality*. Is it?
- Crucial to keep pushing for answers to moral disputes: review evidence etc.
- Why persist if objectively true answers are not to be hoped for?
- Relativism encourages us to give up

Harman's two responses

- This objection (a) overlooks costs of persisting, and (b) overlooks other, better, ways of resolving moral disputes
- (a) What's so good about interminable, inconclusive debate?
- (b) Conflicts in affective attitude -- the two sides want different outcomes -- are best resolved by *bargaining*, not "evidence"

Moral conventionalism

- Moral rules are social conventions adopted for ultimately self-interested reasons
- These may arise naturally (row-boat) or through implicit or explicit agreement
- Relativism holds because *different groups naturally arrive at different conventions*
- Moral conventionalism explains puzzling features of our moral code

Conventionalist explanations

- Harming is worse than not helping -- why?
 - Bargaining is between unequals
 - Both strong and weak benefit from a ban on harming; so both sides will agree to it
 - The weak are main beneficiaries of a requirement of helping or mutual aid, and the strong the main benefactors; so the strong won't agree
- Treatment of animals
 - Why is it permissible to cruelly abuse them?
 - Animals aren't there at the bargaining table

Moral principles undermined?

Not clear why we should *respect* principles arrived at this way...

1. morality is supposed to provide objectively compelling, non-overridable reasons -- a convention cannot have that kind of authority
2. morality is supposed to be *fair* -- bargaining between unequals must surely produce an unfair result, favoring the stronger party

Not undermined

Morality as provider of compelling reasons

- *the conventionalist claims morality never had that kind of force to begin with*

Morality as fair to all sides

- *if both sides agree, an unequal deal is still fair*
 - finance charges are fair, even if the bank holds all the cards
 - the rich and powerful may prefer this reply
- *an unfair deal is still a deal, not null and void*
 - you make the best deal you can
 - the poor and weak may prefer this reply
- either way, the rules are binding and have to be taken seriously

Moral argument

- The rhetoric is applying old principles to new cases; deep down it's often disguised moral bargaining
- Progressives: the old rules are unfair, I might withdraw my consent and urge others to do the same
- Conservatives: this is the deal we've always had, if people opt out willy nilly, the result will be chaos
- Women's suffrage, labor movement, same-sex marriage
- Example of the rhetorical element in these debates
- Example of the (disguised) bargaining element