

24.231 Ethics – Handout 9 My Notes on Lyons, “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence”

The Problem of Incoherence

Ethical Relativism (R) suggests that two apparently conflicting moral judgments could both be *valid*. E.g., Alice’s judgment that Claudia’s abortion was wrong, and Barbara’s judgment that it was not wrong, might both be valid. But the two judgments appear to be logically incompatible. And this appearance goes beyond mere surface grammar: it is suggested by the way we argue about moral matters. And theories accepting both judgments as valid seem to endorse the possibility of true contradictions. So is R simply *incoherent*?

Two Kinds of Relativism

- (1) Agent’s-Group Relativism: An act is right if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the agent’s group.
- (2) Appraiser’s-Group Relativism: A moral judgment is valid if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the appraiser’s social group. (= An act is right if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the appraiser’s social group.)

Lyons says that appraiser’s-group relativism is the version of relativism that is primarily vulnerable to the charge of incoherence, since it allows that differing standards have overlapping applications (both Alice and Barbara may be making valid judgments, relative to their group’s norms, about Claudia’s abortion), whereas agent’s-group relativism need not allow that differing standards have overlapping applications (only Claudia’s group’s norms are relevant to assessing her act). But, as Lyon’s points out, if we allow (as is plausible) that an agent may belong to more than one group, with conflicting norms, agent’s-group relativism might also have to countenance conflicting valid judgments.

Avoiding Incoherence

I. Relativism about Justification

A. Hare’s relativism: One’s moral judgment is justified if it can be derived, given reasonable assumptions about the facts, from general moral principles one accepts and which are themselves not “arbitrary” or “unfounded.” (Hare seems to think that accepting a general moral principle is not arbitrary or unfounded if one’s decision to accept it is made after consideration of all the consequences and the way of life it represents – he calls this a ‘decision of principle.’)

B. Lyons grants that two conflicting moral judgments (e.g., Alice’s and Barbara’s judgments about Claudia’s proposed abortion) could both be justified in this sense without incoherence. Just as two conflicting non-moral judgments made by different people could both be justified because those people have access to different evidence (and justification is relative to available evidence), there’s no difficulty posed by the possibility that two conflicting moral judgments

could both be justified. [*Question: can we imagine that two conflicting moral judgments might both be justified, in the way that two conflicting non-moral judgments might be? Even if we resolve any disagreements about the relevant non-moral facts? How might two people have different evidence in the moral case, once non-moral disputes have been resolved? Compare to mathematical disagreements...*]

But granting this much, Lyons argues, does not amount to accepting moral relativism. For just as we can allow that two conflicting judgments about, e.g., the likelihood of rain might both be justified, while holding on to the view that at most one can be “objectively” correct, we can allow that two conflicting moral judgments are justified, while holding on to the view that only one can be objectively correct.

But Hare argues that moral judgments, unlike straightforward judgments of fact, cannot be “objectively” appraised in this way – the most we can do is ask whether they are justified. So relativism about the justification of moral judgments amounts to relativism about the only kind of validity moral judgments can possess.

Lyons is unconvinced by Hare’s arguments that moral judgments themselves cannot be shown to be objectively correct or incorrect – we can’t assess those arguments now because we haven’t read them. But Lyons also thinks that “combining Hare’s innocuously ‘relativistic’ theory of justification with the claim that moral judgments are not themselves objectively correct or incorrect is itself suspect.” (p. 136) Why? Lyons writes: “we seem to get an understanding of what is meant by justifying one’s judgments in that “relative” sense partly by contrasting it with objective appraisal of the judgment itself. It is unclear whether the idea of “relative justification” has any proper applications, any reasonable interpretation, outside such a context.” (p. 136)

Think about what’s usually involved in arguing that a judgment is justified (whether or not it is objectively true or “valid”). We usually appeal to the *evidence* available to the judge that suggests that the judgment is valid. We might argue that the judge was justified in reaching the conclusion she reached because things looked, from her point of view, just like they would have looked had her judgment actually been true, or valid. But notice that when we make such arguments, we are appealing to the possibility that her judgment could have been true. We are, as Lyons says, contrasting her judgment with an objective appraisal of the judgment itself. It’s not at all clear how we could go about establishing that a judgment is justified without making any appeal to what would follow from it’s being true. [*Question: Can we think of other cases in which we apply the notion of subjective justification but we don’t think a corresponding notion of objective validity has any place? What about judgments of taste?*]

C. Lyons considers a different kind of relativism: a relativism not about the *justification of making* certain judgments (which, he’s argued, is compatible with all that an antirealist might desire as far as the validity of the *content* of such judgments is concerned), but instead about the validity of the *content* of moral judgments. On this view, Alice’s judgment is valid (in respect of *content*) when it’s supported by the fundamental principles she accepts on reflection. And Barbara’s judgment is valid only if it’s supported by the (possibly different) principles she accepts on reflection. Now let’s imagine that Alice and Barbara make the same judgment about Claudia’s abortion – both condemn it – but that this judgment accords with Alice’s principles but

not with Barbara's. This would have the result that the same judgment (the judgment itself, in respect of content, not someone's making the judgment) is simultaneously both valid and invalid. But this is indeed incoherent.

II. Relativistic Analyses of the Meaning of our Moral Judgments

A. Lyons next considers versions of moral relativism that attempt to avoid the charge of incoherence by offering relativistic analyses of the meaning of our moral judgments.

E.g., Alice and Barbara's judgments, if they belong to different 'groups', might not really conflict, because Alice's judgment means "Claudia's abortion would violate the norms of my group" and Barbara's judgment means "Claudia's abortion would not violate the norms of my group."

These two judgments could, of course, both be valid without any incoherence. But relativists of this stripe: (i) must take A and B to be confused if they believe themselves to be disagreeing – they are merely talking past each other; and (ii) must take A and B to be claiming different things even when they think they are and appear to be *agreeing* about the moral status of C's proposed abortion. [*It's worth bearing in mind that the theory can allow for both genuine agreement and genuine disagreement when the disputants belong to the same "group." But it's also worth bearing in mind how tricky it is to give a plausible account of what it takes to belong to the same "group."*]

B. Lyons considers a possible rejoinder on the part of the relativist: we can reconcile such theories with our views about what goes on in moral discourse (i.e., the apparent possibility of genuine moral disagreement and agreement between members of different groups) by accounting for the perceived agreements and disagreements in terms of shared or conflicting *attitudes* that are expressed by such judgments. A and B disagree, even when their judgments are not technically inconsistent, because those judgments are accompanied by conflicting attitudes about C's abortion; similarly, they agree, even when their judgments are not technically the same, because those judgments reflect shared attitudes towards C's abortion.

Lyons doesn't think that our intuitive judgment that disagreements and agreements between members of different moral groups can be accounted for in this way. He acknowledges that moral judgments are generally accompanied by corresponding attitudes. But, Lyons says, moral attitudes are grounded upon moral beliefs: any attitude expressed by the judgment that C's act would be wrong must be grounded in a belief that the act would be wrong. But relativists must offer the same relativistic account of what judges *believe* when they judge acts wrong as they offer of what they *mean* by such judgments. So, according to the relativist, when A judge's C's act wrong and B judges is not wrong, we must take A to *believe* that C's act would violate her group's principles, and B to *believe* that C's act would not violate her group's principles. But it's not clear how *these* beliefs could ground genuinely conflicting attitudes (any more than, say, similarly relativised judgments of taste would). [*Question: Is Lyons right about this? Think again about a corresponding relativism about judgments of taste. If I come to believe that the best way to interpret my judgment that peanut-butter is disgusting is as making an implicit reference to me – e.g. I dislike the taste of peanut-butter – can any attitudes I have on the basis*

of that belief no longer conflict with an attitude you have on the basis of your belief that peanut-butter is delicious? We might have another, related worry – it's not clear that we can hold on to our attitudes once we reinterpret our judgments as judgments about what norms our group accepts, rather than judgments about the objective moral facts. In this respect, morality and taste might come apart. In the case of the latter, we don't seem to feel pressure to drop our preferences if we come to believe they merely reflect facts about us, rather than objective taste-facts out in the world.]

C. Harman's moral relativism: Lyons points to Harman's descriptive arguments for his relativist view – Harman claims that when we judge someone's conduct, we take into account that person's attitudes, and do not invoke considerations which we believe would not move him (at least if he were rational). So our moral judgments are implicitly relativised to the moral standards of the agent we are judging. Or so says Harman. Harman's view is, as Lyons notes, a kind of agent's-group relativism, and so avoids the problem of incoherence (although it is also, we'll remember, a kind of appraiser's-group relativism, since Harman thinks we can appropriately make moral judgments (that aren't explicitly relativised) only in the context of a presupposition of *shared* moral standards between the appraiser, listeners, and agent). [*Lyons doesn't challenge Harman's descriptive claim; but do you agree with it?*]

But Lyons worries that while Harman's view avoids the problem of incoherence, it seems undermotivated. As Lyons describes it, Harman offers a revisionist, relativist account of the meaning of our moral judgments to explain various aspects of our practice of moral judgment. But, Lyons claims, the same phenomena can be explained just as well without adopting Harman's revisionist, relativist account of the meaning of our moral judgments. Perhaps we withhold condemnation of someone's conduct when they lack the relevant motivations or moral commitments because we cannot influence him, or because we think it unfair to judge someone by standards other than his own. Since, Lyons says, we needn't appeal to relativism to explain the descriptive phenomena, Harman's relativism is undermotivated. [*Questions: Does Lyons give Harman a fair shake here? Harman, in defending his moral relativism, seems to do more than just claim that it explains our practice of moral judgment. He also thinks it follows from the fact that when we ascribe a moral duty to someone, we also take ourselves to be ascribing a reason to him; and that when we ascribe a reason to someone, we are committed to the view that that person would act accordingly if he were reasoning correctly. Harman thinks that since not everyone would be motivated to follow the same moral principles even if they were reasoning correctly, his two assumptions lead to relativism. And he thinks even if we do sometimes ascribe moral duties to people who we don't think would be motivated accordingly even if they were reasoning well, we are misusing moral language.]*

General questions about relativism: (1) Is moral relativism incoherent? (2) Can a coherent version of moral relativism accommodate our impression that there can be genuine moral disagreements? (3) Is Harman's relativism plausible? Can we question his premises? (4) Does the pervasiveness of moral disagreement provide more support for relativism or error theory? (5) In what ways does comparing moral relativism to relativism about matters of taste support or undermine the case for moral relativism?

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.231 Ethics
Fall 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.