What are we arguing about?

Reason, Relativism, and Reality
Spring 2005
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