

CAN MORAL JUDGEMENTS BE OBJECTIVELY JUSTIFIED?

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An attempt is made to justify spontaneous moral judgements along anti-relativistic lines. The target of polemic is the work of G. Harman, specifically his thesis that the moral is just the result of implicit agreement of community. After criticising this standpoint by appeal to considerations of coherence and reliability, the author concludes by rehearsing the pragmatic point against relativism.

1. The question whether people have the capacity of expressing judgements concerning morality that could have a role comparable to the role of perception in the natural sciences plays an important role in the methodological discussion about morality. There are great disagreements about the subject. Intuitionists support the credibility of moral judgements.¹ The philosophers who propose a coherentist method called *reflective equilibrium* support it in a restricted manner; they say that moral philosophers have to find an equilibrium between moral principles which follow philosophical theories and moral judgements expressed in everyday life and selected by some criteria of cognitive reliability, that are called

¹ M o o r e, G. E. 1903, *Principia Ethica*, Cambridge: Cambridge Universitu Press; R o s s, W. D. 1930, *The Right and the Good*, Oxford: Clarendon Press; P r i c h a r d, H. A . 1949, *Moral Obligation*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

considered judgements,² On the other hand, we have relativists and skeptics, who deny reliability of moral judgements.³ With the term “moral judgements” I intend judgements that are particular in their character, i.e., connected to particular situations, as, e.g., when I see a robbery and I maintain that it is an evil action; the contrasted term is “moral principle”, which is general in character and applies to the classes of similar situations, as when I say “it is wrong to rob”.

In this paper I'll try to defend the use of considered judgements in morality. With this end on my mind I'm going to open a discussion with Gilbert Harman, the supporter of relativism in morality. Harman proposes the model of explanatory coherence as the best model of justification of beliefs. I shall accept this model but, contrary to Harman, I'll try to show that this model can support first steps in the attempt of justifying considered judgements. My discussion will diverge from Harman's on another point, too. For him the sole basis for the reliability of moral judgements is truth: moral judgements have to be related to the facts of the real world, intended as natural properties. On the contrary, my criterium will be the wider criterium of correctness. By this I mean that there are moral judgements that are objectively correct in another way, e.g., by being the result of the right constructivistic process (as J. Rawls looks at his principle of justice).

Nevertheless, I don't intend to offer a conclusive defence of the considered judgements. Instead, I'll try to show some reasons for justifying reliability in morality through a comparison with the justification of perception in natural sciences. The success in this attempt could permit us to take moral judgements as the criterium for the choice of moral theories.

2. Gilbert Harman claims that one of the most important distinctions in moral philosophy is the distinction between naturalistic and autonomous ethics. Contrary to Harman's claims, I shall try to show:

² Rawls, J. 1989(1971), *A Theory of Justice*, Oxford: Oxford University Press: 20, 46-53, 118-121; Daniels, N. 1979, “Wide Reflective Equilibrium and Theory Acceptance in Ethics”. *Journal of Philosophy* 5: 256-282; Rink, D. O., 1989, *Moral Relism and the Foundations of Ethics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 100-143.

³ Lyons, D. 1975, “Nature and Soundness of the Contract and Coherence Arguments”, in N. Daniels (ed. by) 1985(1975), *Reading Rawls*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell: 145-149, 158-160; Hare, R. M. 1975, “Rawls Theory of Justice”, in N. Daniels (ed. by) op. cit. : 82-96; Brandt, R. B. 1979, *A Theory of the Good and the Right*, Oxford: Clarendon Press: 16-23; Hudson, W. D. 1983, *Modern Moral Philosophy*, London: Macmillan: 65-106.

- (i) that it is very important to discuss the problem of the credibility of considered judgements to both varieties;
- (ii) that it is possible to justify them, at least as a working hypothesis, even before the choice between the alternatives is made, and that this strategy could help us to make the choice.

Harman presents the best discussion of this subject in his *Is there a Single True Morality*.⁴ The differences between moral naturalists and supporters of autonomous ethics depend on their different approaches to the science. Naturalists claim that it is necessary to find a place for moral facts in the world as described by science. On the other hand, supporters of autonomous ethics ignore this problem and claim that we must concentrate on ethics only. Harman also says that each view starts from the existing beliefs and tries to make them cohere reciprocally but also with the explanatory principles; in other words, each of them tries to find reflective equilibrium. But, the supporters of the autonomous approach and the naturalists diverge: the former consider reflective equilibrium to be the final goal, and the latter consider it to be important for the explanation of how to include moral principles and judgements in a scientific view of the world.

So, Harman thinks that supporters of autonomous ethics do not need to discuss the reliability of moral considered judgements; the only thing required by them is coherence with the general moral principles. Even if Harman admitted that they would like to find a coherence with explanatory principles too, nevertheless, for them such a claim isn't really interesting.

On the other hand, the basic problem for naturalists in ethics is how to include the objects of moral discussions in the scientific view of the world. The discussion about the reliability of moral judgements is subordinated to the results of the former enterprise. It is only natural, given the way in which Harman dismisses the result of the attempt, that he will opt for moral relativism.

According to Harman, a relativist bases his attitude on the fact that there are no objectively reliable moral judgements, because it is impossible to find the truth-makers to whom his judgements would be connected. This position is a direct consequence of the naturalist's approach, which says that moral judgements have to refer to objects that can be included into a scientific vision of the world, if they claim to be objective. Harman thinks that it is not possible to accomplish such task.

I think that Harman is wrong. First, I shall try to show the failure in Harman's interpretation of morality. Then I shall try to present some reasons supporting the

⁴ Harman, G., 1985: "Is there a Single True Morality", in D. Copp and D. Zimmermann (ed. by) 1985, *Morality, Reason and Truth*, Totowa: Rowman & Allanheld.

objectivity of moral judgements.

3. Harman discusses the problem of the justification of moral judgements in the first chapter of his book *The Nature of Morality*.⁵ He gives negative answer to the question which concerns the possibility for moral judgements to be tested in the same way as scientific principles. He bases his answer on an example which, at first glance, seems to support the rival position. Imagine six persons in a hospital that need urgent assistance. If the doctor helps five persons the sixth would die; on the other hand the assistance to that person will render impossible assistance to the others. So, the doctor's dilemma is whether to help five persons or one. Harman thinks that everybody would agree that the doctor has to help five persons. According to this example, Harman thinks, we could try to formulate a moral principle that says that it is justified to sacrifice one person for saving a larger number. But, it is possible to formulate a counterexample. Let's imagine that we can save five persons if we take some vital organs from a healthy person. But, as Harman claims, nobody would accept this solution. This example can be displayed to show that it is possible to put moral principles to the test.

Nevertheless, there are some very important differences between the way of verifying scientific hypothesis and moral principles. Harman claims that we can say that observations in sciences are caused by real world, but that it is not possible to say that this happens in morality, too. The reason for that, Harman claims, is that the moral judgements are nothing but expressions of the interested persons. It would not be honesto accuse Harman of not considering the fact that even observations in science are, in the great part, theoretically determined. Nevertheless, there is a difference.

"Observations plays a role in science that it odes not seem to play in ethics. The differences is that you need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral facts to explain the occurrence of the so-called moral obserations I have been talking about. In the moral case, it would seem that you need only make assumptions about psychology or moral sensibility of the person making the moral observation. In the scientific case, theory is tested against the world".⁶

So, in science the observation has influence on the theory because it is

⁵ Harman, G. 1971, "The Nature of Morality", in G. Sayre-McCord (ed. by), 1988: *Essays on Moral Realism*, Cornell: Cornell University Press; see also Harman, G. 1986, "Moral Explanations of Natural Facts: Can Moral Claims Be Tested Against Moral Reality?", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement 14: 57-68.

⁶ Ibid. 121.

caused by the facts in real world. On the contrary, moral observations are not explained by the facts in the world, and, so they can't have an equivalent influence on the moral theories.

We can illustrate this with an example. Imagine that we saw a group of boys putting a cat to fire. Harman is expecting his readers to condemn such action. Nevertheless, Harman claims that we would express a similar judgement even if the action were not morally wrong. This shows the insignificance of the moral fact to the moral judgement.

It is possible to reformulate the example so it shows another important fact. Helen and Mary are observing a group of children. While Helen experiences a strong feeling of condemnation, Mary does not. What is important in this case, from Harman's point of view, is that they have no way of determining which judgement is right and which one is wrong. The attempt made by a Harman's opponent, Sturgeon (1986), is not successful. He tries to add another epilogue to Harman's example. Let's imagine that Mary respects Helen very much; so, when Mary sees that Helen's judgement is opposite to hers, she will change her attitude.⁷

The example is not well founded. In order to be convincing, Sturgeon will have to find an example in which Mary would change her attitude as a consequence of a direct observation of the situation and not just seeing what the other person thinks about the event. In order to counter Harman, it would be necessary to explain Mary's change of view by the moral fact. Sturgeon is only showing her change under the influence of her attitude towards Helen.

Let's return to Harman. His claim is that moral judgements are not objectively justified because moral observations are not obtained by moral facts, but they are the results of psychological and emotional states. Now, we can ask Harman to explain more precisely how moral judgements originate. He is convinced that an insight into their origin can found moral relativism. Let us now look at his paper *Moral Relativism Defended*.⁸ The argument is very important, because if we could show that this part of Harman's project was not successful, the whole project could be jeopardized and it would be possible to try to find another foundation for morality.

Harman's starting position is the presupposition that a morality of a Kantian kind, according to which rationality can be sufficient for acting, is wrong. He prefers a morality of Humean kind, according to which reasons for acting are to be founded in goals, desires, or intentions. Harman consciously starts from this

⁷ Sturgeon, N. L. 1986, "Harman on Moral Explanations of Natural Facts", *The Southern journal of Philosophy*, Supplement 14: 70-74.

⁸ Harman, G. 1975, "Moral Relativism Defended", in L. P. Pojman (ed. by) 1989, *Ethical Theory: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Belmont, California: Wadsworth.

standpoint taking it just as a presupposition and he is not offering reasons to justify it.

So, the foundation of morality is to be found in connection with goals, desires, etc.. Nevertheless, they alone are not sufficient for this foundation and we need to make a further step. The second step in the explanation consists in an agreement between all the interested parties. They make the agreement because every subject wants to protect his interests. To this end he starts negotiations with other subjects that are in a situation similar to his. Eventually they arrive at a compromise and an implicit agreement. The agreement will represent the moral system of the group. It is evident that this explanation of morality is connected to the relativism, because different groups arrive at different conclusions.

I have found just one positive argument in Harman's papers, supporting the negative, in order to justify his theory. Harman claims that his interpretation helps us explaining some aspects in moral debates that otherwise would not be comprehensible. We can return now to the preceding example, situated in the hospital. The example has shown that moral statements are reputed to be more reliable about situations in which there is the problem of protecting somebody, then in the problem of helping somebody. Harman explains this fact by saying that moral judgements that tend to protect somebody correspond to the interests of everybody: the interests of the strong as well as of the weak, of the rich as well as of the poor. On the other contrary, judgements which express duty to help others appeal only to the persons who need help and irritate the persons who have duty to help.

I think that Harman is wrong. It is true that judgements which force us to offer help correspond only to the interests of persons that need such help and that they are contrary to the interests of the persons that have to help. But, it is not true that judgements that protect from harm are in everybody's interest. Myke Tyson doesn't need to find an agreement with me about a principle which could ban the use of physical strength against other people and so doesn't any rich man that could pay for protection. In this way we can see that even norms which protect from harm do not serve everybody's interest. So, Harman's explanation of situations of the kind of the hospital example fails. It was the only positive argument in favour of his interpretation of the foundation of morality, so the whole attempt is in jeopardy.

We have seen that Harman has no valid explanation for the existence of moral judgements. By this fact the attempt to formulate the defence of their objectivity is made possible.

4. We shall follow a coherentistic strategy, applying to ethics the approach of Bonjour's *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.⁹ First, I don't claim that all moral judgements can be justified, but only the one expressed by people who satisfy requirements of cognitive reliability. In Bonjour's— words: "The point for the moment is that a person who meets all of these conditions will then, in the positive case, be in a position to offer the following general sort of justificatory argument for his cognitively spontaneous belief:

"(1) I have a cognitively spontaneous belief that P which is of kind K.

(2) Conditions C obtain.

(3) Cognitively spontaneous beliefs of kind K in conditions C are very likely to be true.

Therefore, my belief that P is very likely to be true.

Therefore, (probably) P."¹⁰

This was the first step in our justification of moral judgements. Then, we may request that other steps be taken which secure the coherence of the judgements which have been selected by the first criterion, we have to secure the coherence of judgements with each other and with the explanatory statements. If this coherence obtain and we shall have no alternative explanation of this case, we shall assume that the judgements are justified.¹¹

The first step was used as providing a principle of selection between the judgements as a kind of a principle of methodological conservatism, according to which every judgement for which there are no reasons for rejecting, may be considered, at least temporarily, to be true. At the same time, it can also be used for an elimination of explanation of the coherence of the the judgements with reasons other than their truth, e.g., by some deformations in the subjects, as, in the case of physical perception this can be made with colour-blind people, who have coherent (at the first level of ours) perceptions, but in the case of which it is possible to explain the coherence by the deformation of their visual system, which deforms uniformly all the visual perceptions.

The wider coherence is fundamental, because it puts us in the position to explain a situation which would be very implausible, if "explained" by chance. One of the plausible explanations would be that the judgements cohere because they are true. It is not an unusual method since it is very frequently used. Most commonly in the court of justice, where the judge listens to all the witnesses and, if all of their versions are coherent he will conclude that they are telling the truth, independently of the initial reliability of the witnesses.

⁹ B o n j o u r, L. 1985, *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press

¹⁰ Ibid. 123.

¹¹ Ibid. 148.

Now, returning to the principal discussion. Harman said that it was not possible to justify the objectivity of moral judgements, because, he claimed, there were no moral facts that could explain their existence. But, after the failure of Harman's attempt to explain the existence of coherent moral judgements, the only solution that we have for explaining why we do have coherent moral judgements is that they are true. Thus the truth is the only plausible reason that we have. This also points to the failure of Harman's attempt to neglect the identification of the role of observation in science and judgements in morality.

5. However, there are some reasons why judgements in morality are less reliable than observations in science. The reason is that in the case of physical observations we have some sufficiently precise explanations of their functioning and of their correlation with the real world. There are scientific explanations of how we have perceptions. In morality we are not in such a situation. The most important reason that we have for believing that our moral judgements are true is that we have no (at least we don't in the discussion with Harman) good reason to believe the contrary. But, in moral philosophy there is no consensus about the explanation of how we make moral judgements, or even what it means for a moral judgement to be true (to refer to natural world or something else), even if there are good candidates for answering these questions.

A similar request would follow even from the strategy of justifying judgements proposed by Lycan, according to whom the justification has to pass three steps.¹² The first is the fulfilment of the criterion of methodological conservatism and the second the request of the reciprocal coherence of the judgements. These criteria are the presuppositions for the persons to be justified in claiming some judgements. But, there is also the third request, that is, to be able to explain the mechanism of forming moral judgements, in order to show the correlation between these judgements and some kind of moral facts, as is mostly the case for the physical perceptions. Lycan says:

"if our overarching total theory can explain not only one of our spontaneous beliefs but how it is produced in us, and if the latter explanation involves the truth of the belief, then the belief is fully justified, perhaps to the point of counting as an item of knowledge. Its is in this way that an initial spontaneous belief gets swept up into a coherent global explanatory structure."¹³

So, the justification of moral judgements is not equally founded as the

¹² Lycan, W. G. 1986, "Moral Facts and Moral Knowledge". *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Supplement 14: 79-94.

¹³ *Ibid.* 85.

one of physical observations is. Nevertheless, it is sufficient for taking reliability of moral judgements as a working hypothesis in constructing a moral theory in the sense that, whenever we have no theory that could definitely confute the theories that cohere with them in the best way, in process of reflective equilibrium.

Harman claims that our moral judgements cannot be justified, because, even if moral facts were different from what they were our moral judgements wouldn't be different. I think that this could be a sufficient reason for skepticism, contrary to Sturgeon's opinion.¹⁴ But if we had a coherent set of moral judgements, the threatening counterfactual conditional would not be sufficient for Harman's goals and he would not be sufficient for Harman's goals and he would have to explain the existence of our actual coherent set, what he has not done so far. Harman might be successful when he is taking singular moral statements in isolation. But, from a coherentistic point of view, it is important to analyze larger sets of statements. In this case Harman's job would be more difficult, because of considerations of the greatest coherence. He should explain first and second level coherence, which he has not fulfilled. That's how we could show the failure of one of his basic arguments. What I want to note in particular is that, with the strategy that we have presented, we can try to contrast one of the basic arguments of Harman's, that is, the argument that when two persons are in disagreement about a moral judgement there is no valid appeal to moral facts for convincing the rival of the validity of his opponent's judgement. We have seen that even at the actual level of the development of moral philosophy there are some valid criteria. These are: the criteria of cognitive reliability and the criterion of the best coherence. Having these criteria at their disposal, the persons discussing a moral question could find the best set of moral statements. My claim is that by applying these criteria we can make moral judgements converge in a great extent. This is just a hypothesis which has to be corroborated with larger empirical evidence, the same as the hypothesis that the greatest part of moral disagreements would disappear if there were a greater agreement about non-moral facts. I am not claiming that there will be no disagreements at all. Some amount of them would not endanger moral judgements particularly, because there are disagreements even about perceptions, e.g., in the case of optical illusions, as there are in theoretical debates about physical reality.

6.I shall conclude the paper by presenting a pragmatic reason in favour of accepting the objectivity of moral judgements. It is connected with the idea that moral relativists develop their theory assuming that groups with different moral

¹⁴ Sturgeon, N. L. 1989, "Moral Explanations", in Sayre-McCord, op.cit. 253.

systems live separated. But this is not the case. On the contrary, when there is a conflict of morality we have the most interesting situations. moral relativists don't give answers to the such interesting situations in moral discussions. Let us take a closer look.

The relativist's claim may be correct if civilizations existed in isolation and were characterized by total unanimity of their members. So, when relativist speaks of a "civilization different from our one" he would consider extreme cases, like an imaginary civilization where everybody was considered to be nothing but a mere "instrument in the hands of God".

But, this is just an implausible idealisation. First, even if we look in the past, it is not easy to find a community within which there is a total consensus. Second, the problem is particularly acute in contemporary world, where there is a steady communication between different cultural groups and a man can be a part of different class groups, e.g., he can be a worker and a Catholic. The questions that trouble the relativist are at least two. First, if an individual is a member of different groups, which rules is he to follow? In our example, has he to act primarily as a worker, i.e., follow the moral code dominant in the working class, or he has to behave primarily as a Catholic? Second, when there is a conflict of moralities of different groups or when there are some dissidents in a group, how are we to resolve such conflict? There are no satisfactory answers available. In the first case, there are no possibilities to ask an individual to consequently follow a moral code, so, in every situation he could do whatever would be in his actual interest; so, what kind of morality is that?

In the second case the only way to resolve the conflict is by use of power. In this way morality disappears and it really begins to be nothing but the way in which the dominant group justifies its power over other groups; accepting relativism, we will reduce morality to the problem of getting and "justifying" the power.¹⁵

It seems, then, that objectivism would be a preferable position. This is not a direct defence of the reliability of considered judgements, because they don't represent the only way to found objectivist ethics; we suppose that it can be done even through the theoretical reasoning alone. But, in this way we can start the argumentation that will try to show a connection between the objectivity of ethics and the possibility of knowing its statements even before we undertake philosophical reasoning.¹⁶

¹⁵ See also P o j m a n, L. P. 1989, "A Critique of Ethical Relativism", in L. P. Pojman (ed. by) op. cit.

¹⁶ I would like to express my thanks to Nina Kudiš, Snježana Prijčić, Gordana Dabo, Nenad Mišćević, Miomir Matulović, Petar Pavešić and Boran Berčić for comments and advice they have provided in connection with this paper.

.Elvio Baccarini: MOŽE LI SE OBJEKTIVNO OPRAVDATI MORALNA
SVOJSTVA

S a ž e t a k

Razvija se pokušaj opravdanja spontanih moralnih vjerovanja, na anti-relativističkoj poziciji. U tim pokušajima, vodi se polemika sa G. Harmanom, posebno s njegovom tezom da je moral samo rezultat implicitnog stajališta, pozivanjem na koherenciju i pouzdanost; autor završava tekst pozivanjem na pragmatične aspekte koji govore protiv relativizma.