

Harman, Gilbert. Explaining Value and Other Essays In Moral Philosophy.

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Explaining Value and Other Essays In Moral Philosophy is a very useful collection of some of Gilbert Harman's previously published papers. The book has four parts (the first being the longest): I. Moral Relativism, II. Intrinsic Value, III. Virtue and IV. Explaining Value. Harman begins (Essay 1, "Moral Relativism Defended") with an argument that relativism can explain otherwise puzzling features of our moral outlook – e.g., the weight of the harming/non-helping distinction.

In Essay 2 ("What is Moral Relativism") Harman distinguishes three conceptions of relativism (normative, moral, and meta-ethical) and argues that none is vulnerable to familiar charges of incoherence. Harman grants that moral differences must be explained by non-moral differences captured by universal principles but argues that this does not undermine *moral* relativism if those principles are non-moral (he argues that they are principles of rationality). Essay 2 also argues for normative moral relativism (according to which different people can be subject to different ultimate moral standards). The argument's premises are (1) a moral demand applies to someone only if she accepts it or would accept it apart from non-moral defect(s), and (2) any moral demand is such that some moral agent's non-acceptance of it does not result from non-moral defect(s).

In Essay 3 ("Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics") Harman argues against the "naïve view of morality," according to which certain demands are absolute (everyone accepts them or has reason to accept them), universal (applying to everyone), and agent-centered (are the source of all moral reasons). In effect, Harman redeploys Essay 2's positive argument for relativism as an argument against absolutism.

In Essay 4 ("Justice and Moral Bargaining") Harman critiques prominent anti-relativistic accounts. Expressivism, Gewirth's Kantianism, Nagel's account in *The Possibility of Altruism* and Kohlberg's account all come under attack. These critiques are followed by intriguing speculations about the consequences of relativism's widespread acceptance.

Part I ends with a methodological contrast (Essay 5, "Is There a Single True Morality?"). Harman distinguishes "naturalism" from "autonomous ethics." The naturalist concentrates on reconciling value and duty with science whereas autonomous ethicists concentrate on ethics proper. Harman argues that resistance to relativism stems from autonomous ethics.

Part II discusses intrinsic value and higher-order desire theories of value. Essays 6 and 8 should be read together because Essay 8 finds Harman explaining why he rejects some of the main ideas from Essay 6. In Essay 6 (“Toward a Theory of Intrinsic Value”) Harman argues that some value is “evidential,” like the value of good news. In Essay 8 (“Intrinsic Value”) Harman rejects this argument because it confuses value with desirability. Essay 7 (“Desired Desires”) makes the nice point that higher-order desire theories look much less plausible once one considers whether the higher-order desires are instrumental. Some discussion of recent work on the distinction between being valuable as an end and being intrinsically valuable (most notably, Christine Korsgaard’s “Two Distinctions in Goodness, *The Philosophical Review*, 92, 2, April 1983, pp. 169-195) would have been helpful here.

In Part III, Harman takes aim at virtue ethics. Essay 9 (“Human Flourishing, Ethics, and Liberty”) argues that moral theories taking flourishing as their key concept tend toward consequentialism and its problems. Essay 10 (“Moral Philosophy Meets Social Psychology”) argues for the more radical conclusion that character traits are a myth.

Part IV explores ways in which philosophers might help explain why we have the moral attitudes we do. Essay 11 (“Moral Agent and Impartial Spectator”) argues that Adam Smith’s account of our moral sentiments is more plausible than David Hume’s and Frances Hutcheson’s accounts. Essay 12 (“Explaining Value”) argues that philosophers are well-situated to help test descriptive theories about our moral attitudes. Finally, Essay 13 (“Moral Philosophy and Linguistics”) develops the intriguing idea that moralities that are superficially very different may share a “universal grammar of morality.”

I end with a discussion of two assumptions crucial to Harman’s defense of relativism:

- (1) There is reason for A to ϕ only if A would decide to ϕ if A suffered from no non-moral failures (see pp. 86-89).
- (2) There are two fundamentally different kinds of ‘ought’ judgements: ought-to-be judgements and ought-to-do judgements. An ought-to-be judgment can never entail an ought-to-do judgment (see, e.g., pp. 4-8).

As Harman repeatedly argues (pp. 30-34; pp. 86-87), from (1) and the plausible premise that no moral code is such that nobody could flout it without non-moral failing, it follows that no moral code is such that there is reason for everyone to follow it. However, (1) seems to contradict certain common sense verdicts. I ought not torture the cat even if torturing it involves no non-moral failing. Harman replies

that this conflates an “ought-to-be” with an “ought-to-do.” According to Harman, claims like “I ought not torture the cat” are true in such cases only if they mean that it ought to be the case that the cat is not tortured, from which no “ought-to-do” follows. Here Harman relies on (2)’s sharp distinction between “ought-to-be’s” and “ought-to-do’s.”

(2) rejects the idea that ought-to-be claims can entail ought-to-do claims. However, plausible analyses not discussed in Harman’s essays suggest otherwise. For example, perhaps, ‘X ought to be the case’ just means ‘*if* anyone can promote X then there is reason for them to do so’. This preserves a distinction between the two kinds of judgments since unconditional ought-to-be’s do not guarantee any unconditional ought-to-do’s, but unconditional ought-to-do’s do. If any such account is correct then (2) is false and hence of no help in defending (1).

Harman remarks that, “it sounds odd to many of us to say that Hitler morally ought not to have ordered the extermination of the Jews,” because Hitler had no reason to act otherwise, in the sense that Hitler was “beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations.” (p. 7) On Harman’s account, we can criticize Hitler in terms of ought-to-be’s but not in terms of ought-to-do’s. This argument seems unconvincing because most people lack Harman’s intuition about Hitler even when focusing on the ought-to-be/ought-to-do distinction. However, the argument reveals a deeper source of Harman’s relativism. Harman’s intuitions about Hitler make sense if you accept his view that normative reasons depend on contingent motivations, and this view also makes (1) look very plausible.

If we reject Harman’s view of the connection between normative reasons and motivations then (1) looks much less plausible. However, rejecting (1) seems incompatible with naturalism. For rejecting (1) presupposes the possibility of irreducibly moral mistakes. However, expressivism can make naturalistic sense of such mistakes. To say there is reason for a person to do something is, according to expressivism, to express your approval of her doing it, and you can express such approval even when her not doing it reflects no non-moral mistake. So expressivists can emphasize the autonomy of ethics (in one sense) without non-naturalism, challenging the main argument of Essay 5.

Harman objects to expressivism on independent grounds. He argues that “it is no answer to the question...‘Why should I care?’ that the speaker cares...to allow no other account of this question is to define a legitimate question out of existence.” (p. 60) Ironically, Harman’s argument is similar to the Open Question Argument, which the expressivist might deploy against Harman’s account of reasons. However, Harman seems to mischaracterize the expressivist’s construal of a reply to questions like,

"Why should I care?" On an expressivist account, my reply would *not* be to report my disapproval of her action; I would not say, "You should care because I do." Instead, I would *express* my attitudes by saying something like, "You should care because its torture." The expressing/reporting distinction is supposed to explain how moral judgments emphasize the relevant features of actions rather than the speaker's attitudes. This difference in emphasis makes it less clear that the expressivist's analysis of our answer to such questions is "no answer."

The roots of Harman's opposition to expressivism and defense of relativism run deeper still. In one sense, Harman is more Kantian than the expressivist. Although he never says so, Harman seems attracted to the Kantian idea that practical reasons must derive from rationality in the sense that there is reason for someone to do something only if it would be irrational of her not to do it , at least if she was informed, etc. (see pp. 30-31). However, unlike Kant, Harman seems to favor a broadly instrumentalist belief/desire theory of practical rationality. This seems to be why Harman thinks reasons must stem from desires, which is why he accepts (1), which is why he accepts moral relativism. The expressivist, by contrast, denies Harman's starting point – the thesis that all practical reasons must derive from rationality. Perhaps one interesting lesson to be learned from these essays is that relativism's plausibility depends on this Kantian view about the connection of reasons to rationality.

I have barely scratched the surface of Harman's rich discussion of relativism, itself just one of many issues covered in these essays. Any student of meta-ethics who does not already have these essays should want this book.

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