

HANDOUT 21

RELATIVISM: HARMAN

RELATIVISM RESISTED. We recall that a major motivation for relativism was the fact of moral diversity. But why should this count as evidence? Moral diversity reflects moral disagreements. As we learn to use our reason, and to the extent we are prepared to use our reason, disagreements can be resolved by gathering more evidence and using our reason to evaluate this evidence. 20

Two replies can be offered. First, if we try to resolve disagreements, the likely outcome is that they will be perpetuated, rather than resolved. Second, relativism can offer a *more* efficient way of resolving disagreements.

AFFECTIVE ATTITUDES. Some disagreements involve purely affective attitudes. If my preference is to go out, and your preference is to stay home, then my utterance: 21

(21-1) Rain is good

does not have to initiate a cognitive disagreement resolvable by argument. (21-1) may be taken to be an elliptical form of:

(21-2) Rain is good for *me*.

You may agree with that. But there is still a divergence in affect: I like the rain, you don't. We disagree in our preferences, but we might still accept each other's preferences at face value.

On other occasions, we may wish to change each other's to our preferences. Harman cites value disagreements. When you say: 21

(21-3) Vegetarianism is good,

you don't mean that it is good only for you. It is still not unrestrictedly, absolutely good. You probably mean something like:

(21-4) Vegetarianism is good-for-people (though bad-for-lions).

So when I express my preference for meat, you might wish to convert me.

BARGAINING. How does this typical moral conversion work? Perhaps by analogy with cooperative bargaining. When you sell me a car, you don't simply try to 'forcibly' convert me into buying it for a million dollars. You make an offer, I make a counter-offer, you make a counter-counter-offer, and so on. We bargain by trying to coordinate our preferences. In effect you tell me: 23

(21-5) If you wish to buy the car, you have to accept my offer,

and I tell you:

(21-6) If you wish to sell the car, you have to accept my counter-offer.

Remark 1. Compare Fichte's remarks on coordination between rational agents.

So with vegetarianism too, you may give me reasons why to become a vegetarian. Perhaps of this sort:

(21-7) If you wish to stay married to me, you will not eat meat.

If you wish to prevent climate change, you will not eat meat.

Of course here it seems that you are bargaining not on your *own* behalf, but on animals' behalf. Are you an authorised representative of animals? Let's return to this point in a moment.

MORAL CONVENTIONS. The proposal is that moral principles adopted in a given community are a result of bargaining between its members. This is an idea going straight back to Plato (Glaucón on the origin of justice in *Resp.* II). At first it may be hard to see how all of the morality may be represented as a result of bargaining. So begin with some ostensibly non-moral examples.

Example 2 (Party interaction). Suppose we are at a party dancing and I ask you a question, say, 'What's the time?' Suppose that at that moment your burning desire is to keep dancing without interruption. You wish I didn't ask that question, so ignoring it altogether is best-for-you. On the other hand, looking up at the mobile phone in your bag across the room is way too troublesome. This is worst-for-you. So should you choose to ignore me? Well, you have to consider that if you are rude, I will stop dancing and will never talk to you again.

Or maybe I will ask someone else, and that's even worse. So you choose *politeness*, something in between. Thus you say, 'I think it's 11pm, but I'm not sure'. You have just bargained. I wanted a good (information), you offered it to me (of this quality, at this price). And I may bargain back. I may ask again, 'But what's the time exactly?' This is mildly rude, of course. So you can offer, 'I will look at my phone, but only if you promise to never talk to me again.' As we see, my rude bargaining was a failure. I *may* indeed get what I want, but at a steep price.

Note that in this example we need not suppose that the actors operate based on some principles of politeness. Ideally they have not even a concept of polite or impolite behaviour. Instead, we wish to show how a particular pattern of behaviour emerges as a result of bargaining. Such a behaviour delivers an outcome that satisfies both parties—in the sense that it would be costlier for both of them to quit this behaviour (Nash's equilibrium). In time this pattern will be elevated into a rule ('It is polite to always try to answer a question, but it is impolite to press with your questions' etc. etc.).

This was an example of how politeness may be considered a result of bargaining. Let us turn to characteristically moral problems, such as keeping promises. The extension is straightforward.

Example 3 (Promises). Suppose I borrow money from you and *promise* to return it by 10am. The time comes, but of course, I very much want to keep the money. But what are the costs? You might never lend me again, or you might kill me, or.... Suppose that keeping the money and staying alive is best-for-me and keeping the money and being dead is worst-for-me. Returning the money and staying alive is in the middle. Considering the situation from the lender's perspective too, we see that the equilibrium is reached at that point exactly (keeping the promise).

Question 4. Complete Example 3 by examining the lender's perspective.

