

## **A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF GILBERT HARMAN'S INTERNALIST THESIS OF MORAL RELATIVISM**

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Gilbert Harman, an American ethicist of our days, defends in a new way the age-old thesis of moral relativism, which is often viewed as 'a kind of philosophical folly'<sup>1</sup>. This article is an attempt to bring forth a general outline of Harman's version of moral relativism, which is essentially an internalist thesis in that it tries to explain our moral beliefs "in terms of our upbringing and our psychology, without any appeal to an independent realm of values and obligation"<sup>2</sup>. Apart from an explicatory role this writing plays, it also tries to critically assess Harman's internalist contentions in the light of the discussions made by several critics and philosophers. We shall first draw in a nutshell an outline of his thesis in general and then in the section that follows shall discuss his internalist position in particular, followed by a critical evaluation of his views.

### I

Harman, as one of the most influential contemporary voices of moral relativism argues that this thesis is to be understood as a logical consequence of the naturalist attitude towards the world. Given the truth of the scientific conception of the world, ethics so far it strives to be objective, absolute and universal, rests on false presupposition. He, however, believes that a plausible version of naturalism involve a moral relativism that says that different people are subject to different moral demands and not subject to 'a single true morality'. The moral requirements are shaped by the moral conventions of the agents in which they participate. Thus morality arises out of established conventions or agreements among various groups of people. Now different groups of people subscribe to different conventions and have different understanding of moral requirements. Therefore, the moral worth of actions reflected in moral judgments about the rightness or wrongness of actions is relative to a moral framework and no moral framework is objectively privileged as the true one.

Regarding this aspect moral relativism is distinguished from moral absolutism on the one hand, while on the other, it is to be distinguished from moral nihilism. Unlike nihilism, it asserts that morality should not be abandoned. Even in some of his later work (1996) Harman claims that "Relative moral judgments can continue to play a serious role in moral thinking."<sup>3</sup> Harman's argument for moral

relativism rests on the property of what he calls ‘inner judgments’. It has the feature that where the agent has reason to do something, the speaker also endorses those reasons. For according to Harman, it would be quite odd to maintain that to say that an agent ought to do something when he has no reason for doing it. Now, he claims that inner judgments are to be understood only in the context of moral agreements. Moral agreements, which provide the agent’s motivating attitude to perform certain actions, come about when the agent along with a number of people come about to subscribe to a set of norms. Harman in a number of places (1975: 4-11, 1977: chapter8-9) defends moral relativism, at least in part, on internalist grounds. In the same line with Mackie he maintains that moral requirements must provide reasons for action and moral obligation must be relativized to people’s desires and aims, and hence, moral relativism is true.

David Copp notes that Harman’s position, “if successful, would accomplish several noteworthy goals. It would establish a ‘previously unnoticed distinction between inner and non-inner moral judgments’ [Harman (1975), p.22] and a theory of the logical form of inner judgments. It would substantiate thereby a species of internalism, and it would show that there is a coherent thesis which is an interesting version of moral relativism.”<sup>4</sup> Anyway how far Harman’s internalist thesis is tenable can only be evaluated if we first proceed to enter into his position in a greater detail.

## II

Harman’s thesis can be termed as a species of internalism , because it implies that a person ought morally to do something only if he has certain desires, intentions and goals, or, more generally, certain motivational attitudes that give him reason to act in that way. We may be reminded that internalism in ethics, broadly speaking, “is the view that there is an internal or conceptual connection between moral considerations and action or the sources of action.”<sup>5</sup> It has often been formulated as a thesis about the connection between morality and motivation. Brink identifies some distinguishable components of this thesis. The first is that moral considerations necessarily motivate or provide reason for action. Besides it is held that it is the concept of morality that provides reason for action, so the motivational power is inherent and in a sense a priori. From this it may also be held that rationality or the motivational power of moral considerations cannot depend on external considerations such as the fact about agents or what the content of morality turns out to be. Now

this thesis may be understood as internalism about motives and internalism about reasons for actions. Without entering into the details of this distinction, we here just point out that Harman's position belongs to the variety of internalism about reasons for action.

Harman in his well-known article "Moral Relativism Defended" tries to formulate moral relativism as "a soberly logical thesis - a thesis about logical form"<sup>6</sup> and wants to reach the contention that "morality derives from an implicit agreement and moral judgments are true or false only in relation to such an agreement"<sup>7</sup>. We have just mentioned that Harman bases his argument for moral relativism on what he calls "inner judgements". Such judgments are judgments to the effect that someone morally ought or ought not to have done something, or that someone is morally right or wrong to have acted in a certain way; and not judgments to the effect that someone is a savage, an evil or an enemy. Again the judgment that certain institution is unjust is excluded by Harman from the purview of inner judgments for the reason that according to him we can "make inner judgments about a person only if we suppose that he or she has reasons to be motivated by the relevant moral considerations."<sup>8</sup> Those who lack such motivating reasons are not susceptible to inner moral judgments, but to some other judgments.

In distinguishing between inner judgments from other types of non-inner moral judgments Harman points out that judgment in assessment of an agent, but not in relation to some of his actions may be termed as 'personal assessment', while judgments in assessment of a situation or an action which are not also in assessment of an agent may be called 'action assessment'. Both these types of judgments are excluded from Harman's conception of inner judgments. Now Harman gives three examples to illustrate his position; the first two are imaginary, while the third one is regarding the historical figure Hitler. The first example is regarding some intelligent beings from outer space, may be from Mars, landed on earth, which have no concern for human life and happiness go on injuring people; while the second concerns the case of a contented employee of Murder Incorporated, who was raised from his childhood to honour his own murder group, but showing nothing but contempt for the rest of the society gets the assignment of killing a bank manager Mr. Orcutt. Now the question that Harman raises is that: can we really say that they morally ought not to

have acted in that way? That they were morally wrong to have done the harm they do?

Harman answers in the negative, because he points out that injuring human life mean nothing negative to those creatures, which might have given them any reason to avoid such harms. Although we might judge that they are dreadful enemies or an enemy for our peace-loving society and so must be resisted; but it would be pointless to hold that it would be wrong for them to attack human beings. To say such things would imply that our moral considerations carry some weight with them, but actually they do not. The considerations held by us do not give them sufficient moral obligation not to engage in the kind of activity in which they involve themselves.

The third example is regarding the historical figure Hitler, who, as we all know, ordered the extermination of the millions of Jews. Harman maintains that although we can recognise that Hitler was an evil man, that what he did should never to have happened, but it sounds ‘odd’ to say that it was morally wrong of Hitler to have done so. Oddity, according to Harman affects the purported judgment as it sounds ‘too weak’ a thing to say, because in acting what he did “he shows that he could not have been susceptible to the moral considerations on the basis of which we make our judgment. He is in the relevant sense beyond the pale and we therefore cannot make inner judgments about him.”<sup>9</sup> In the absence of the relevant motivational attitude, Harman maintains, it makes no point to attribute a judgment involving ‘moral ought’.

Here it is necessary to mention that Harman draws a distinction between two usages of ‘ought’- the ‘normative ought’ and the ‘moral ought’. To take the example of the employee of Murder Incorporated coming at the bank for killing the manager, somebody may judge that the assassin ought not to kill the people. Here the ‘ought’ judgment is used to assess the designated situation and thereby to hold that such situation should not take place; so it is a case of what ‘ought to be’ –the ‘normative ought’. On the other hand, a ‘moral ought’ is actually an ‘ought to do’ in so far as it is used to describe a relation between an agent and his purported action. Here the agent and his motivational attitude to do the action plays a significant role, whereas in the case of ‘normative ought’ no such role is assumed. Harman explicitly mentions that he is concerned only with this last sense of ‘ought’ that is, the ‘moral ought’ in discussing his thesis of moral relativism.

Now, he talks about two important characteristics of inner judgments. The first characteristic as just discussed above is that they imply that the agent has reasons to do the thing under consideration. The second, to be discussed below, is that the speaker in some sense endorses the agent's reasons and supposes that the audiences also approve them. He explains the second point thus: "If S says that (morally) A ought to do D, S implies that A has reasons to do D that S endorses. I shall be concerned only with any speaker, S, who assumes, controversially, that such reasons would have to be their values, goals, desires, or intentions that S takes A to have, and that S approves of A's having those values, goals, desires, or intentions because S shares them. So if S says that (morally) A ought to do D, there are certain motivational attitudes M which S assumes are shared by S, A, and S's audience."<sup>10</sup> Harman wants to argue that the shared motivational attitudes M are to be identified with intentions to keep an agreement, supposing that others similarly intend. "For I want to argue that inner moral judgments are made relative to such an agreement...I want to argue that the source of the reasons for doing D that S ascribes to A consists in A's sincere intention to observe a certain agreement."<sup>11</sup> From what has been quoted above, it may be maintained that Harman conceives of inner moral judgment in the backdrop of a speaker- hearer community and the relevant approval by the speaker regarding moral matters is assumed.

As we have just seen that according to Harman, an inner judgment implies that the agent has reasons for action that are endorsed by the speaker. Now the question is: how should this implication be understood or explained? It seems that Harman does not always clearly sort out remarks about the relevant implication. In this regard it would be of help to follow the discussion of David Copp<sup>12</sup>. Copp maintains that Harman, on the one hand, may suppose the implication in question to be "a conversational implication", thereby excluding it from being relevant to a theory of logical form, and just meaning that the speaker in making an inner judgment implies that he shares the relevant attitude with the agent. On the other hand, Harman's position could be that "although this implication is a case of logical implication which should be reflected in an account of the logical form of inner judgments, his theory is not meant to be a complete account of this."<sup>13</sup> Now from Harman's writings the first reading seems to be the intended one. It seems that whether a judgment is an inner judgment is not merely a matter of its logical form,

but it is necessary to establish what the speaker implies in order to establish that he implies endorsement of the relevant attitude. One may contend that the common examples of immoral actions may be, by some cynical politicians, who are chiefly interested in acquiring power without proper concern for the public consideration, but contrarily, doing harmful things for the society - are they not really morally wrong?

In answering, Harman takes a rather extreme position in so far as he maintains that to respond affirmatively in such cases is actually to beg the question. To explicate his position, he distinguishes between “two conceptions of moral reasons, two senses in which someone might be said to have moral reason, a ‘neutral’ conception of moral reasons and an ‘evaluative’ conception.”<sup>14</sup> In the first conception of moral reasons it is claimed that if an agent does not do a postulated action then he either lacks certain nonmoral information or suffers from certain defects of the weakness of will or fails to appreciate certain reasoning or something like that. In the evaluative conception of moral reasons, on the other hand, an agent’s doing an action is evaluated, without thereby committing that any failure to do the postulated action necessarily indicates the defects just mentioned above. He asks thus: “why should an agent care about what the speaker takes to be reasons for the agent to accept a given rule, if the relevant considerations carry no weight with the agent?”<sup>15</sup> According to Harman, if it is true that different people are subject to different moral considerations, then it is also true that they have reasons to observe different moral requirements. Since moral requirements are varied there cannot be one single true morality applicable to all human agents. Thus it is claimed that the demands of moral relativism in this regard champions over that of moral absolutism.

### III

It is undeniable that the relativistic conception of morality gets a new shape in Harman’s thesis. He tries to establish his philosophical position free from the charge of inconsistency often raised against it. It seems to us that whether or not there are some basic moral demands that apply to everyone is a big question not to be dismissed so easily. But, in any case, his internalist thesis of moral relativism draws several objections. For the sake of brevity, we here present only a few of them. In addressing Harman’s initial thesis about the logical form of inner judgments, David Copp raises some issues merit discussion.

First, the division of moral discourse into internalist and non-internalist domain can be put into question. For Harman, inner judgments go with internalism. But Copp maintains that we may often “be inclined to justify an inner judgment on the basis of personal assessments and action assessments.”<sup>16</sup> For instance, we may approach to judge that a person was bad on the ground that what he did was wrong; thus in a way, we may conclude that it was wrong of him to do it. Harman would be committed to reject this pattern of reasoning as they are not internalist in nature. Let us suppose that someone judges that Hitler was evil, because Hitler did A, and people commonly think this act was evil. From this might it not really be judged that it was wrong of Hitler to do A? Harman would answer in the negative. This is so, because if the judgment that it was wrong of Hitler to do A is an inner judgment, then this judgment would be false on the ground that Hitler lacked requisite motivational attitudes. On the other hand, if the judgment was not an inner judgment, Harman would reject the inference and the resulting conclusion that it was wrong of Hitler to do A, because the conclusion would imply, while the premise would not imply that Hitler had relevant attitude. Copp contends that “both options distort the logic of ordinary reasoning about these matters. Since a theory of the logical form of moral judgment is to account for the logic of moral discourse, this is a serious failing.”<sup>17</sup> Harman’s plausible reply might be that, to a relativist the above pattern of reasoning would not seem acceptable. But to this Copp resists that the relativist’s claim is not strong enough to rule out the contending patterns of reasoning as invalid.

Besides on our ordinary understanding of morality, Copp goes on, a person’s lacking an appropriate attitude does not exempt him from the charge of wrong- doing, because it may so happen that he is at fault for lacking the attitude. For this reason Hitler cannot rebut our charge against him that he has done wrong in ordering the genocide. The critic contends that the problem with Harman is not that he does not understand this point, but that “he is committed to denying it by his theory of logical form. As a result instead of addressing the substantive issue mentioned above, Harman obscures it. He would have to say either that our ordinary views on this issue are contradictory (see NM, p. 89), or that our assessment of Hitler, for example, is not an inner judgment”<sup>18</sup>, because we are not ready to withhold it on the ground that ‘Hitler was beyond the pale’. If the former reason is upheld then it would undermine

the plausibility of Harman's thesis, because in the language of Copp, "other things being equal, a theory of logical form is flawed if it rules a seriously held substantive moral view to be inconsistent. The latter response would undermine the interest of Harman's theory. In effect, it would make the theory true by stipulation, and it would leave open the possibility that our moral code never issues in inner judgments."<sup>19</sup> Neither response open to Harman would count as satisfactory in the face of the objection that lack of any appropriate motivation cannot be treated as a sufficient defence from a charge of wrongdoing.

In assessing Harman's thesis Prof. B.K. Matilal points out some serious shortcomings. Harman openly admits that people like Hitler or the members of the Murder Inc. can only be called evil, but cannot be judged as wrong-doers in our vocabulary. In fact he considers this view to be partly supportive of the position that psychologically speaking it is more satisfying to call Hitler evil than to state that what he has done is simply wrong. Against this view Matilal objects that "what is psychologically satisfying may not be a good evidence for a correct doctrine. How can we separate the concept of evil from that of wrong-doing?"<sup>20</sup> Matilal further argues thus: "Harman uses science fiction (Martians), common fictions (Murder, Inc.) and 'fictionalized' history (Hitler) to individuate group moralities. Our point is not that such groups or persons do not exist in our midst (with the exception of the Martians) but that unless we 'fictionalize' or imagine them to be entirely beyond our pale, i. e. entirely unlike us, the argument loses its substance. These creatures have to share with us only a narrow form of rationality (to make the so-called 'inner moral judgments' possible) but nothing much else. We may decide to call them monsters (Hitler), mentally deranged or impaired persons (Murder, Inc.) or subhuman, but then we have already judged them by our own moral standards."<sup>21</sup>

Besides Matilal observes that Harman's version of relativism shifts our attention from the act to the agent, and for this reason this theory may be said to be agent-centred. But if an alternative explanation of the phenomenon on which Harman's argument depends – the phenomenon of conflict-free conviction of a moral agent in his own framework – can be made plausible, then such relativistic theory can be shown to have little purchase. Harman finds it unfair to morally condemn a person for doing something by using a moral standard to which that person is not committed.

But against this position Matilal draws our attention to the fact of multiplicity of our commitments and also to the fact of multiple group membership. The member of Murder, Inc. is not only a member of that group, but may also be a father, a son or a lover and in such different roles he must have different commitments. So what is the point of bracketing out all other commitments and making him immune to any moral compunction as to whether to kill the bank manager?

In this regard Matilal draws a parallelism with Arjuna, the great warrior, in the celebrated Hindu text the Bhagavad-Gita, who faced deep moral conflict in the eve of the battle of Kuruksetra whether to kill his revered relatives in the battlefield or to accept a more modest life. He was suffering from the relative pressures of several commitments or 'dharmas', for example, as a member of the royal family, as a devoted grandson or as a warrior. Finally he overcame the moral dilemma from which he was suffering in the advice of Lord Krishna, who asked him to accept the ethical code of the Ksatriya caste in this case. The common people as well as the great Arjuna cannot but feel commitments to a number of norms. Now, according to Matilal, "multiplicity of commitments is a well- attested phenomenon, but this cannot be a sufficient ground for any significant form of relativism."<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

It comes to us that Harman's internalist thesis although presents itself as a viable alternative seems not to be well defended so as to bear the challenges raised against it. So if his relativistic position is to attain some significant place in the metaethical discussion, it seems that it must also be supplemented with an adequate explanation of moral norms or principles that people commonly share among them. The diversity of moral views is a familiar phenomenon, and Harman offers his relativistic position as the best explanation of it; but that should not give one proper ground to overlook the similarity which is also present among people. Why certain requirements give moral reasons for action? Why are there certain requirements to which most people are committed? Are there certain common human needs that act behind these reasons? These are some of the important questions that should be properly addressed in any discussion on moral relativism. Apart from the critical notes mentioned above it has to be pointed out that Harman, keeping his relativistic

stand, should have been careful enough in taking into consideration at least some of these issues.

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