INNER JUDGMENTS AND MORAL RELATIVISM

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Moral relativism, it seems, is one of those things that never quite die. It fades away at times under the pressure of criticism, but always seems to resurface whenever a new argument is found for it. A little over a decade ago, in a paper entitled "Moral Relativism Defended,"1 Gilbert Harman presented such an argument, one which has indeed revived both an interest in and a respect for the thesis it defends.2 The fact that it has had this effect is one reason it invites critical attention; another is that in spite of such attention as it has already received,3 two of the simplest and most forceful objections to which it is open have not been raised. In what follows I intend to raise them, and show how resistant they are to available counter-objections. Ultimately I want to show that Harman's argument is seriously flawed; thus, that any respect it may have kindled for moral relativism is unwarranted. I will begin this task with a careful exposition of the argument itself.

I

To begin very generally, Harman's argument is linguistic in nature, and takes the form of an inference to the best explanation4: It rests on some simple, noncontroversial facts about certain moral judgments -- "inner judgments," Harman calls them5 — and presents an explanation for these facts which maintains that the judgments are "relative" in a certain way.

Inner judgments are those which morally evaluate an agent in relation to an action — those of the form,

1. $A$ was right (wrong) to do $D$;
2. $A$ ought (ought not) to do $D$; or
3. It was right (wrong) of $A$ to have done $D$;

where "$A$" stands for some moral agent and "$D$" for an action performed (or that might be performed) by the agent.6 The facts Harman presents regarding these judgments have to do with their appropriateness or
inappropriateness when we utter them. An inner judgment, he says, will in certain circumstances sound "odd" or "weak," or constitute a "misuse of language." He illustrates this with examples:

For example, it sounds odd to say that Hitler should not have ordered the extermination of the Jews, that it was wrong of him to have done so. That sounds somehow "too weak" a thing to say. Instead we want to say that Hitler was an evil man...and we can say without oddity that what Hitler did was wrong. Oddity attends only the inner judgment that Hitler was wrong to have acted in that way. That is what sounds "too weak."

Again, suppose that a contented employee of Murder, Incorporated was raised as a child to honor and respect members of the "family" but to have nothing but contempt for the rest of society. His current assignment, let us suppose, is to kill a certain bank manager, Bernard J. Ortcutt. Since Ortcutt is not a member of the "family," the employee in question has no compunction about carrying out his assignment. In particular, if we were to try to convince him that he should not kill Ortcutt, our argument would merely amuse him. We would not provide him with the slightest reason to desist unless we were to point to practical difficulties, such as the likelihood of his getting caught. Now, in this case it would be a misuse of language to say of him that he ought not to kill Ortcutt or that it would be wrong of him to do so.

The judgments spoken of here — "It was wrong of Hitler to order the extermination of the Jews"; "That employee of Murder Incorporated ought not to kill Ortcutt" — are indeed linguistic oddities, and their oddity can be “heard” perfectly well if we turn them over in our minds a bit; thus there is nothing controversial about the facts from which Harman’s argument proceeds. The only thing in question is how to explain these oddities. Now it might seem that the explanation is very simple, that the judgments sound odd or weak because of the magnitude of the crimes they pertain to, but Harman argues against this hypothesis. Stalin, he points out, ordered the deaths of as many people as Hitler did, but given certain assumptions about Stalin — e.g., that he was only trying to avoid a worse alternative, and that he carried out his action with reluctance and anguish — an inner judgment about him will not sound as odd as a similar judgment about Hitler. Thus, it cannot be the enormity of Hitler’s deed which explains the oddity of the judgment about him; the correct explanation must lie elsewhere.