Two Kinds of Moral Relativism

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Discussions of moral relativism commonly distinguish between *normative relativism* and *moral judgment relativism* without highlighting the differences between the two. One significant difference – a difference between normative relativism and the most prevalent *type* of moral judgment relativism – is not immediately obvious, and has not been explained in print.[1] It warrants a brief discussion.

1.

I will contrast the following positions:

NR: Different people can be subject to different ultimate moral demands. That is, for any person *A* who is subject to a set of ultimate moral requirements, a person *B* could exist who is subject to an entirely different set of such requirements.[2] (In this essay, "person" means "rational adult human being in full possession of his or her faculties.")

MJR: Any moral judgment that prescribes or recommends that a person *A* perform some action *D* – for instance, "*A* morally ought to do *D*" or "It would be morally right of *A* to do *D*" – is true only if *A* has a specific property *P* that is "non-universal," meaning that there could

[1] Or at least I have not found it explained in print. The term "moral judgment relativism," by the way, was brought into vogue by Gilbert Harman (in "What is Moral Relativism?" in *Values and Morals*, ed. Alvin I. Goldman and Jaegwon Kim [Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1978], pp. 143–61), who used it broadly enough that it extended to some moral theories traditionally classified as non-relativistic (including Firth's ideal observer theory). My definition remedies this problem, yet captures the brand of relativism Harman defends.

[2] Normative relativism is not always formulated this way (see, for instance, Paul Taylor, *Problems of Moral Philosophy* [Belmont California: Dickenson, 1967], pp. 44f). But usually the alternative formulations differ from NR only in being variations of that thesis (this is true of Taylor's formulation), or in being imprecise statements of it. For two philosophers who use NR, see Harman, "What is Moral Relativism?" p. 143, and Paul Moser, "A Dilemma for Normative Moral Relativism," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 207. These authors distinguish between a strong and a weak form of normative relativism, and use NR to refer to the strong form. The weak form will receive no attention here.

> be a person *B* who is without that property – a person, therefore, of whom a similar judgment (say, "*B* morally ought to do *D*") is false.[3]

Three things are worth noting. First, depending on the version of MJR in question, *P* might be the property of *being in group x*. On the other hand, it might be the property of *having such-and-such a desire*.[4] The possibilities are endless, as long as the property in question is non-universal. If it is not, the result is a relational view of moral judgments, but not a genuine form of relativism.[5]

Second, MJR is not moral judgment relativism *per se*; it is only a narrow version of that view. For one thing, it does not concern every class of moral judgment. Narrow or not, it is one of the most frequently discussed brands of ethical relativism.[6]

Finally, in NR the word "ultimate" is crucial. The idea is that two people can be subject to different moral demands, where the difference cannot be explained by a more fundamental moral requirement that is shared by both people, and that yields different ethical demands owing to differences in situation.[7] In other words, normative relativism must be distinguished from the uncontentious view commonly called "situational relativism."

2.

It's not hard to find differences between NR and MJR, but some of them are insignificant. For instance, NR speaks of moral *requirements*, whereas MJR speaks of moral *judgments*. This difference is unimportant because if *A* is morally required to do *D*, then a judgment of the kind mentioned in MJR is true; and conversely, if such a judgment is true, then *A* is a morally required to do *D*. The second part of this statement does not square with the ordinary meaning of "moral requirement,"[8] but it follows from the meaning we must give that term if NR is adequately to state the normative relativist's position.

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[3] Some philosophers would replace "a person *B* . . ." with "an *ordinary* person *B* . . ." (See my "Moral Relativism, Internalism, and the 'Humean' View of Practical Reason," *The Modern Schoolman* 69 [1992]: sec. 5; and W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* [New York: Macmillan, 1937], pp. 273, 294.) I will ignore this complication in what follows.

[4] See Gilbert Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975): 9.

[5] See Henning Jensen, "Gilbert Harman's Defense of Moral Relativism," *Philosophical Studies* 30 (1976): 401f; and my "Inner Judgements and Moral Relativism," *Philosophia* 18 (1988): 175.

[6] For example, a variation of it is defended by Gilbert Harman (in the works cited in notes 1, 4 and 9), and either criticized or discussed by the following, among many others: Jensen, "Gilbert Harman's Defense of Moral Relativism"; Tilley, "Inner Judgements and Moral Relativism"; Tilley, "Moral Relativism, Internalism, and the 'Humean' View of Practical Reason"; David Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1989), ch. 3; and Bonnie Steinbock, "Moral Reasons and Relativism," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 15 (1981): 157-68.

[7] See Harman, "What is Moral Relativism?" p. 143.

[8] For instance, to say that *A* was morally right to do *D* is not to imply that *A* was morally *required* to do *D*.

Normative relativists, no less than moral judgment relativists, intend their position to entail a relativistic view of the judgments spoken of in MJR.[9] Hence we must understand "moral requirement," as it appears in NR, to refer to something an agent has whenever such a judgment is true of the agent. (In a similar vein, let us use "normative requirement" to mean something a person has just in case a judgment of the form, "You ought to do *D*," or "You'd be right to do *D*," is true of the person.)

The upshot is that with a little ingenuity, we can recast NR so that it speaks of moral judgments, or restate MJR so that it speaks of moral requirements. In fact, from here on I will have the following in mind when speaking of MJR:

> A person is morally required to do *D* only if that person has a specific property *P* that is "non-universal," meaning that another person could exist who is without that property, and hence without any moral requirement to do *D*.

There is, however, at least one significant difference between NR and MJR. NR implies that for any person *A* subject to a set of ultimate moral requirements, a person *B* could exist such that (1) *B* is subject to none of the ultimate moral requirements to which *A* is subject, but (2) *B* is subject to a set of requirements that qualify as ultimate *moral* requirements. MJR, however, does not imply this. At best, it implies that for any person *A* subject to some ultimate moral requirements, a person *B* could exist with the first of the above properties, the property of lacking the requirements.[10] It does not imply that a person *B* could exist with *both* of the above properties. The fact that a person fails to have one set of moral requirements does not guarantee that he or she has some *other* set of moral requirements. Perhaps the characteristics that put the person beyond the pale of the first set of requirements ensure that he or she is beyond the pale of any requirements that qualify as moral requirements. Whether they ensure this depends, in part, on the distinguishing features of moral requirements, but on that subject MJR is silent.

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[9] This is true of the most well-known normative relativists, including Sumner, Herskovits, and Harman (who also defends moral judgment relativism). See, for instance, Harman's "Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 109–21; and Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1972), pp. 14f. Another example is furnished by Nicholas Unwin, "Relativism and Moral Complacency," *Philosophy* 60 (1985): 206. He clearly is defending normative relativism ("relativism implies with regard to the Eskimo. . . that the Eskimos' moral obligations. . . may be quite different from ours"), but he also says this: "Relativism as I define it. . . [is] a thesis about the variability of moral truth."

[10] To be accurate, it doesn't even imply this. But many versions of it do. Consider the version consisting of the following claims: first, every moral requirement is relative to the presence of a desire capable of moving the relevant agent to perform the prescribed action; and second, no particular desires are essential to being a person (see Harman's "Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics," and his "Moral Relativism Defended," p. 9). If this view is correct (surely it is plausible), then for any person with some ultimate moral requirements, other people might exist who lack those requirements owing to a lack of the requisite desires. So there is no harm in saying that MJR "implies" the claim in the footnoted sentence, as long as this is shorthand for the point that some *versions* of MJR guarantee that claim.

To see this more clearly, suppose the following:

(A) Some people have a normative requirement to perform actions of type *F*. (Perhaps *F* has something to do with promoting human well-being.)

(B) A version of MJR is true, a version that makes moral demands relative to desires capable of prompting the enjoined actions. Furthermore, the claim it makes applies not only to moral requirements, but to normative requirements in general. So people have the requirement spoken of in (A) only if they have desires capable of leading them to perform actions of type *F*.

(C) The *only* way for a person to escape the requirement in (A) is to lack the desires mentioned in (B). This, together with (B), ensures that a person has the requirement in (A) if and only if the person has desires capable of prompting actions of type *F*.

(D) The distinguishing mark of a *moral* requirement (as opposed, say, to a prudential one) is that it's a normative requirement enjoining actions of type *F*.[11]

Three things follow: First, the normative requirement in (A) is a moral requirement. Second, people could exist who lack that requirement, but only if they have no desires capable of prompting actions of type *F*. But if they lack such desires, they have no requirements that qualify as moral requirements (given (B) and (D)). So, finally, any agents beyond the pale of the requirement in (A) are necessarily beyond the pale of moral demands in general, given the distinguishing mark of such demands. These agents do not have moral requirements different from the one spoken of in (A); instead, they have no moral requirements at all.

In sum, MJR, unlike NR, does not guarantee that for any person *A* subject to some ultimate moral demands, a person *B* could exist who, although having some ultimate moral requirements, has none of those to which *A* is subject. This is a significant difference. Imagine proponents of MJR defending their position by arguing that a person *B* might exist with none of the ethical requirements to which *we* are subject. These proponents are not compelled to show that *B* has some other set of ethical requirements. In other words, they can grant that there is a "single true morality"; they need only show that its requirements do not extend to everyone. Defenders of NR face a more demanding task. They must show that a person *B* could exist with none of the ultimate moral requirements to which we are subject, but they must take care not put the person beyond the reach of all moral demands. Person *B* must turn out to be subject to normative

[11] Cf. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 236, 239.

requirements that count as moral requirements. It's possible that the proponents of NR will succeed in the first of these tasks – and thus establish MJR – but fail in the second task, leaving their ultimate thesis unfounded.

For example, relativism might be defended by arguing that moral obligations are relative to motivational propensities, and that some sociopaths have motivational propensities so different from ours that they share none of our moral requirements.[12] Perhaps the defenders of MJR can make use of this argument, but the proponents of NR should be wary of it. If the argument is plausible, this may be because sociopaths, even if they count as "persons" in the sense stated earlier, have such bizarre motivational propensities that they lack any specifically *moral* requirements. If so, the argument does nothing to establish NR.

3.

To sum up: although NR and MJR both rule out the existence of basic moral demands that are universally shared, MJR differs from NR in being compatible with the view that there is a single true morality (albeit a morality that is not shared by all persons). One consequence is that arguments which support MJR do not necessarily support NR.

Why has this difference gone unnoticed? The answer, I think, is that we naturally suppose that all genuine *people* (rational adult human beings in full possession of their faculties) are necessarily *moral agents*, and as such have fundamental moral requirements (even if those requirements are not universal). If we assume this, MJR does not differ from NR in the way I have argued. MJR implies that for any person *A* with some ultimate moral requirements, a person *B* could exist with none of those requirements.[13] But if person *B* is just that – a person – and if any person necessarily has ultimate moral requirements, then to say that *B* does not share *A*'s ultimate moral requirements is to imply that *B* has a different set of such requirements (which is a far cry from having *no* such requirements). So MJR does not differ from NR in the way outlined in section 2.

But why is it natural to think that every person is necessarily a moral agent? The answer, I believe, is that we have been heavily influenced by the rationalist tradition in moral philosophy. Rationalists argue that some moral requirements are requirements of rationality, and as such are shared by all rational agents. A corollary of this position is that every full-fledged person has moral requirements. This tradition has been dominant for so long that many ethical theorists are in the habit of using "person" and "moral agent" interchangeably.

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[12] For an argument similar to this see Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended," pp. 5, 7.

[13] Note 10 is relevant here.

The question, however, is whether we can find any compelling argument for ethical rationalism. At any rate, moral relativists must reject that position, for it flatly contradicts their own. Thus, they should be suspicious of the philosophical commonplaces we have inherited from that tradition, including the assumption that every person is necessarily a moral agent. Once that assumption is challenged, the difference outlined in section 2 must be taken seriously.

I conclude that although we can explain why the difference between NR and MJR is generally overlooked, it shouldn't remain that way. It merits the attention of moral philosophers, particularly those out to establish ethical relativism.