Dissertation proposal: Defending metaethical relativism and why it is important

Research question
Can a relativist account of moral statements (such as 'S ought to do X' or 'It would be wrong for S to do X') capture the normative role of such statements in our moral thought and talk?

Background

Metaethical relativism is the idea that moral judgements can be either true or false (truth-apt) relative to a particular background frame of reference. This is an anti-realist perspective which denies the central realist idea that moral facts are objective and thereby independent from our respective beliefs, desires or theories about them. Instead, relativism declares that we ought to think of the truth value of moral judgements as dependent upon an agent or appraiser's world views (Sturgeon, 1994, p. 83). Therefore, rather than advancing a view of moral properties as objective and thus absolute and universal as we speak and think of such entities, relativism calls for us to analyse how these properties as subjective: entailing that what is true for one person or group of persons may well be false for another.

The given question has been selected in order to propose a dissertation which will advance the theory of meta-ethical relativism. This question was purposefully selected in order to briefly highlight the strength of meta-ethical relativism, particularly as advanced by Harman. It is hoped that this dissertation proposal provides a useful insight into how and why this dissertation will attempt to dismantle false claims against meta-ethical relativism and advocate it as the best going theory in explaining the way in which normative ethical statements operate.

Reasons for acting according to normative statements

In this paper, the focus will be on the normative role of moral judgements as prescribing how we ought to act and thus providing reasons for agents to act according to them. The normative role of moral judgements such as it is wrong for S to do X can be conveyed so judgements would prescribe for an audience how they ought to refrain from acting out X in virtue of its wrongness.

Absolutists like Boghossian (2006, 2011) would disagree with the argument of this paper; that moral relativism captures normative demand of moral judgements. Boghossian (2006, 2011) suggests that morality requires objectivity in order to effectively capture the normative role that moral judgements have in prescribing how people ought to act upon recognition of these judgements.

However, in this paper it will be argued that the way in which moral judgements prescribe behaviour is relative to the context in which the judgement is made. The argument will be that cultural relativism captures the normative action guiding role in moral language to the extent necessary. However, these judgements have to be made in context within one's own shared moral agreements for them to have the action guiding function of prescribing reasons for agents to conform to them (Harman, 1975, p. 6).

Defending Harman's relativism by addressing the question of normative ethical statements

Harman argues that the truth of statements like 'harming others is wrong', is not a universal truth but is true or false relative to a given society's shared intentions and motivations bound by an implicit agreement between agents of the society (Harman, 1975, p.12). Harman suggests that members of society in most cases, implicitly bind themselves to the shared moral agreements in order to advance their interests. So, morality is a bargaining process between agents in a society where agents agree implicitly to conform to moral principles in assumption that others will also do the same (Harman, 1975, pp. 11-13).

However, one may argue that this form of relativism assumes that members of society share an interest to be part of these agreements, neglecting the fact that agents may not conform if their interests are not advanced by such agreement. Therefore, one may question the nature of how these agreements can provide reasons for acting morally for the majority of people.

Nonetheless, Harman specifies that the reasons that the majority of people have to conform to the agreement is because the agreements are such that they are based on shared motivations by agents through their intentions (Harman, 1975, p. 15). The agreements are not literally binding but rather are an agreement of people's intentions to live in societal harmony with others in a way which will be beneficial for all members who conform. Therefore, most of the time, most people have reasons to act according to the moral agreements, providing others also intend to do so.

Conclusions and implications of this proposal

In summary, this dissertation will attempt to show the importance and validity of the meta-ethical advancement of the theory of relativism. This proposal has outlined briefly how this is an important topic which needs to be further highlighted. This research paper has briefly highlighted the theory advanced by Harman who has tried to advocate for a theory of

relativism in thinking about ethical statements. Moving forward with this research, this paper will utilise mostly the work conducted by Harman and other meta-ethical relativism to advance the main argument that moral relativism is the best theory which captures the normative role of ethical statements. This research will be conducted by way of triangulation of existing moral philosophy as well as meta-ethical literature regarding the subject of normative ethical statements and how to best explain them in order to reach a conclusion which translates into an advancement of the theory of relativism over other metaethical theories, particularly by critiquing meta-ethical absolutism which is also briefly mentioned in this dissertation proposal.

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