

Relativism, Truth, and Testing: Response to Riva and Stich

Moral relativism is in the first instance a claim about how the world is (and isn't) rather than a thesis about language

Moral relativism is in the first instance a claim about moral right and wrong (etc.). It says there is relative right and wrong but not absolute moral right and wrong. An act is never morally right or wrong, period. It is only right or wrong in relation to one or another moral framework.

There is an analogy with relativism about simultaneity. There is relative simultaneity but not absolute simultaneity. Two (sufficiently separated) events cannot be simultaneous, period. They can be simultaneous or not only in relation to one or another inertial framework.

Less dramatically, motion is relative. There is no absolute motion. Something has motion only in relation to some background.

Moral Frameworks

A moral framework applying to a person P is a set of moral demands determining what it is morally right or wrong for P to do (in relation to that framework) such that P has strong reasons to adhere to those demands. Moral absolutism is the view that there is a single set of moral demands that apply to everyone and which everyone has strong reasons to adhere to.

[I discuss this further in "What is moral relativism?" in A. I. Goldman and J. Kim (eds.), *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht, Holland; D. Reidel: 1978) pp. 143-161.]

Implications for truth conditions are an issue for philosophy of language

Suppose moral relativism is true. What should we say about the truth conditions of judgments made by absolutists in ordinary life when the question of absolutism about relativism is not being discussed?

One view is that the commitment to absolutism is essential to (analytic of) the absolutist's use of moral concepts, so that, if relativism is true, all of the absolutist's judgments are false, or perhaps lacking in truth value.

A similar view about motion is quite implausible, it seems to me. People who make judgments about motion tend to be responsive to relative motion in respect of some salient framework, whether they realize it or not. It makes sense to count such judgments about motion true if and only if they correctly characterize such relative motion.

Similarly, people who make moral judgments tend to be responsive to relative right in wrong in respect of some salient moral framework, whether they realize it or not. It makes similar sense to count such moral judgments true if and only if they correctly characterize such relative right and wrong.

Stich's Grandmother

It is true, as Stich notes, that "If you ask my Grandmother (or a philosophically naïve freshman who has just signed up for his first philosophy course) 'How does S have to be understood for the purpose of assigning truth conditions?' they would not have any clear idea what you are talking about." But Grandmothers and naïve freshmen are quite good at assessing whether or not a speaker is right in his or her judgments of motion.

Riva's point about definite descriptions

Riva notes a similar issue that comes up concerning definite descriptions. Someone at a party says, "The man drinking the martini is a philosopher." Suppose that the person the speaker is referring to is a philosopher but is actually drinking water from a martini glass. Then although what the speaker says is false (or at least not true), it could be quite misleading simply to say that the remark is false, because that might mislead the audience into thinking that the person referred to is not a philosopher. And matters are even more complex if there is someone else at the party drinking a martini.

Riva wonders why we couldn't similarly take it that the absolutists moral judgments are all false (or not true) while also allowing that it would be misleading to call these judgements false, since that might be to mislead the audience into thinking, well, into thinking what? That the judgments were false relative judgments?

Perhaps Riva and I can agree that there are predicates T1 and T2 such that the absolutist's judgments are never T1 and are T2 just in case they are correct in relation to the absolutist's moral framework. Then the issue is which of T1 and T2 is "true".

It is interesting to consider how Riva's suggestion works as applied to judgments about motion made by someone who has not appreciated at a theoretical level that motion is always relative to some background framework.

Stich on deflationism

Stich says that a deflationist theory of truth treats as "analytic" instances of

(T) ' p ' is true iff p

Suppose there are two moral absolutists, Jack and Jill. Jack has a vegetarian moral framework and Jill does not. Jack says, "Eating meat is morally wrong." Jill says, "Eating meat is not morally wrong." Both of these judgments are T2 and so are true, according to me. But then from (T) it seems I am committed to a contradiction: eating meat is both morally wrong and not morally wrong!

My response is that (T) does not apply to indexical or other relative claims. If Jack says, "I am sick," I do not want to count his remark true just in case I am sick. If Jill on Saturn looks down on me on earth and says, "GH is moving" I do not want to count her remark true just in case GH is moving, because I judge whether GH is moving in relation to a framework salient to me and at the moment GH is not moving relative to that framework even though GH is moving relative to Jill's framework.

I should say that there is a possibly related issue as to whether one can start from moral relativism and introduce a "projectivist" terminology that is not relative that would allow me to assess the truth of Jack and Jill's claims in relation to my own moral framework. I have discussed this idea in Chapter 3 of Harman and Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*.

Testing for relativists

How can we tell whether someone is intuitively a moral relativist. Assuming the connection mentioned above between moralities and reasons, one test is suggested by class discussions I have had involving the following sorts of exchanges.

First type of exchange

Me: "Suppose Martians land on earth and prove to be invulnerable to any form of attack we possess. Suppose that the Martians do not care in any way about human beings and have no reason whatsoever to refrain from harming human beings. Might it be nevertheless true that the Martians ought morally to refrain from harming human beings? Would it be wrong of them to harm human beings?"

Student: "No, it would not be morally wrong of them to harm people. We can't say that they ought morally to refrain from harming people."

Second type of exchange

Me: "Suppose Martians land on earth and prove to be invulnerable to any form of attack we possess. Suppose that the Martians do not care in any way about human beings and have no reason whatsoever to refrain from harming human beings. Might it be nevertheless true that the Martians ought morally to refrain from harming human beings? Would it be wrong of them to harm human beings?"

Student: "Yes they ought morally not to harm people. It would be wrong of them to harm people."

Me: "Do the Martians have a moral reason not to harm people?"

Student: "Yes."

Me: "But you were asked to suppose that they had no reason whatsoever to refrain from such harm."

Student: "OK, I see. I guess that means the Martians do not have a moral reason to refrain from harming people."

Me: "Can it be wrong of the Martians to harm people if they have no reasons not to? Can it be true that the Martians ought morally to refrain if they have no reason to refrain? "

Student: "I guess not. So, it would not be wrong of the Martians to harm people and it is not the case that they ought morally to refrain from harming people."

Third type of exchange

Me: "Suppose Martians land on earth and prove to be invulnerable to any form of attack we possess. Suppose that the Martians do not care in any way about human beings and have no reason whatsoever to refrain from harming human beings. Might it be nevertheless true that the Martians ought morally to refrain from harming human beings? Would it be wrong of them to harm human beings?"

Student: "Yes they ought morally not to harm people. It would be wrong of them to harm people."

Me: "Do the Martians have a moral reason not to harm people?"

Student: "Yes."

Me: "But you were asked to suppose that they had no reason whatsoever to refrain from such harm."

Student: "I thought you meant no reason of self-interest. I don't see that it's possible they could have no moral reason to refrain from harm."

Discussion

The third type of exchange very strongly suggests that the student is not a moral relativist. The first strongly suggests that the student is a moral relativist. I am inclined to think that the second sort of exchange is possible only for moral relativists.