Melissa Kwan

Prof. Selim Berker, TF Zachary Gabor

Philosophy 173: Metaethics

6 November 2019

A Moral Bargaining Account of Animals

In "Moral Relativism Defended," Harman advocates for a version of moral relativism centered on moral bargaining. He believes that our moral standards are best understood as *implicit agreements* between members of a society, or "intentions to adhere to a particular agreement on the understanding that others also intend to do so."[1] He thus argues that our moral standards are inextricably tied to our beliefs about others; the implicit agreement works only if everyone believes that everyone else will uphold their end of the bargain. The participants can take part in these moral agreements without explicit "intentions" to do so, as they reach compromises without even realizing that they are engaged in this bargaining process.[2] While Harman believes that self-interest is the primary issue in moral bargains, he argues that *coherence* and *conservatism* also play a role in our moral reasoning: we revise provisions that seem "arbitrary," and we prefer to keep the moral status quo.[3] Thus, Harman's relativistic account of morality combines social convention and rational revision.

Harman argues that his form of relativism better explains facets of our moral practices that might seem puzzling on another account. In this essay, I will examine how his account fares against our moral attitudes towards animals. Since animals cannot bargain with humans, the moral status of animals could not have arisen through a push-and-pull of competing interests.

---

[1] Harman 12.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Ibid. 20.

Instead, Harman explains our moral attitudes toward animals as a matter of *coherence* with our other moral attitudes: a consideration separate from bargaining. **I will argue that while coherence might explain the genesis of our moral attitudes towards animals, it is insufficient to explain how such attitudes propagate and persist. I will then extend Harman's bargaining account to explain how these attitudes towards third parties might establish themselves in our moral frameworks.**

In his explanation of our attitudes towards the moral status of animals, Harman eschews the bargaining story in favor of "explanatory coherence."[4] Since people and animals are similar in many ways — for example, both are sentient beings — Harman argues that an account that prohibits cruelty towards humans and permits cruelty towards animals would be "arbitrary" and "lack generality."[5] To avoid these explanatory flaws, he argues, we reason that we should treat animals as having a similar moral standing as people. However, Harman notes that coherence lacks the power of self-interest. That explains why our standards towards animals are "weak and wavering" compared to our standards towards other people: animals have no way of defending their interests, and coherence is easily overridden.[6]

While coherence might explain why attitudes towards animals are adopted in the first place, it does not explain how they persist over time. Harman is correct in arguing that coherence is a relatively weak force compared to bargaining, as the pressure to uphold explanatory best practices is surely weaker than pressure from an agent with bargaining power. Indeed, if coherence played a stronger role, we would have more coherent views about animals than we currently do. For example, we have inconsistent attitudes towards different species depending on

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

seemingly arbitrary distinctions like "cuteness." If we accept the principle of treating all people equally, it does not make sense that we advocate for the rights of cute animals more vocally than we do for non-cute animals.

However, coherence alone is *too* weak to enforce the standards that we currently have. If we rely solely on coherence, we assume that each member of society independently adopted an explanatorily general account toward animals. However, it is highly unlikely that each individual performed a separate explanatory analysis on our moral attitudes towards animals. Moreover, such an account fails to explain why we enforce such verdicts *socially*: for example, we are indignant when others mistreat animals. The proliferation and continued influence of these attitudes are more likely products of moral bargaining than they are of individual moral reasoning. While bargaining is most intuitively applied to parties that are competing over resources, I propose an extension to Harman's account that explains how to handle cases that involve third parties.

The extension goes as follows: coherence can explain the genesis of the moral belief. Once a critical mass of people shares a belief, that group has the moral bargaining power necessary to disrupt the inertia of the status quo and shift the moral balance. Once the belief becomes standard, even members who are indifferent to the belief will uphold it to signal their commitment to the overall agreement. In this way, beliefs that primarily concern third parties can propagate and persist in our moral bargains.

Imagine that each member of a moral community has a certain amount of "bargaining capital": influence to wield against competing factors, whether they be conflicting interests or inertia. Different members of the community may have different amounts of bargaining capital,

leading to verdicts that reflect the power imbalance. Nevertheless, all the members have incentive to optimize the bargaining capital they do have by using it on issues that matter the most to them. Likewise, they will not spend unnecessary effort combating standards that do not mean much to them. For example, suppose that some members of a society enthusiastically adopt a moral belief X. If person Y is indifferent to X, Y will not waste his bargaining capital trying to actively undermine the belief. Faced with indifference and not opposition, the supporters of Y can use their collective bargaining capital to overcome the inertia of the status quo. In this way, attitudes towards third parties can be integrated into the social moral framework without requiring buy-in from every individual.

The persistence of these beliefs lies in the power of social signalling. If some people are indifferent to a belief, they will still uphold their end of the moral bargain — if they didn't, their deviance would signal their disregard for the overall authority of the system. If one deviates from one aspect of the moral standard, others might have reason to suspect that they will deviate from a different aspect as well. The element of certainty around reciprocity would dissolve, undermining the foundation of the implicit agreement. Due to the effects of social signalling, people are incentivized to behave according to moral standards even if such standards do not *directly* concern anyone in the community. For example, suppose that a person is indifferent towards the moral permissibility of lighting a cat on fire despite her society's prevailing belief that it is impermissible. Despite her indifference, it is still in her best interest to avoid lighting cats on fire due to the consequences of violating the bargain: it would signal that she does not feel bound by at least a part of the moral standard, and others are free to speculate whether she feels bound by *any* part of the standard. In fact, people who are indifferent to a popular new

provision will likely accept it on good faith just to uphold their part of the moral bargain. Thus, the *overall* bargain matters in addition to the content of any individual standard. In this way, third-party measures can gradually become part of the status quo, where the power of the system ensures that they endure. This cycle of genesis, propagation, and standardization can explain how attitudes towards animals have become more liberal over time despite the fact that animals cannot bargain and that we are not all animal rights advocates. If most people feel largely indifferent but a critical mass of activists agitate for more progressive policies, those who are indifferent will eventually adopt the principles in an attempt to uphold the overall system. Naturally, when consistency begins to conflict with opposing interests (for example, the desire to eat meat), we settle on less progressive verdicts. Coherence in conjunction with social standards yields changing bargains, allowing morality to evolve over time.

Crucially, only beliefs that are part of the implicit agreement can be effective social signals. People may have beliefs that are individually binding, but they cannot hold others accountable for not holding those beliefs if they are not part of the bargain. For example, consider an isolated vegetarian who lives in a society that views eating meat as permissible. She may certainly condemn non-vegetarians based on her own moral principles. However, because her peers are not deviating from the accepted moral bargain, she cannot use meat consumption as evidence that they might deviate from society's social standards. A critical mass of the community must hold a belief in order for their bargaining power to overcome the inertia of the status quo. Only then does the belief become a crucial part of the system, allowing it to be upheld on social grounds as described above.

Bibliography

Berker, S. “Lecture 14: The Motivational Argument for Relativism.” Philosophy 173, 17 Oct 2019, Harvard College. Lecture.

--- “Lecture 15: Harman’s Social Custom Relativism.” Philosophy 173, 22 Oct 2019, Harvard College. Lecture.

Harman, Gilbert. “Moral Relativism Defended.”