

## Contextualism and moral intuition

The problem of establishing a correct meta-ethical framework is one that has never been solved; however, one step that can be taken in order to shed some light on the issue is to study how different moral frameworks fit our moral intuition. To this end, in their paper “Folk Moral Relativism,” Sarkissian and the other writers claim that some light on people’s moral intuitions can be shed by performing experiments. Their study shows that people show belief in objective moral truths when considering individuals from their own culture, but their view become more complex once they start thinking outside of that box (Sarkissian et al., p. 482). Following this “Folk Moral Relativism” paper, it appears that people’s moral intuitions largely depend on the context of discussion. In other words, if a person makes a general moral claim, such as “Slavery is wrong,” most people think it is permissible for the statement to have different truth values if it is referred to different cultures or moral codes.

A meta-ethical framework that fits very well this intuition is hermeneutic thoroughgoing relativism, or contextualism. In this paper, I intend to give further motivation for contextualism, showing that it is a very well-fitting framework for many of our common moral intuitions. I also intend to consider the some of the critiques to this framework and respond to them.

First of all, I intend to define contextualism. With this term, I refer to a theory according to which moral claims of the form “X is wrong” or “X ought to Y” are

incomplete, and cannot be objectively determined to be right or wrong unless additional arguments are added. Thus, when a person says “killing is wrong”, the corresponding complete statement would be “killing is wrong in the context of some moral code M”. We already see how this perfectly fits the intuition that we get from the “Folk Moral Relativism” study. As part of that experiment, students were asked to rank their agreement with a statement like the following: “Given a transgression (such as, a person buying a knife and testing its sharpness by stabbing a random passerby), if two people have different views on the morality of it, at least one of the two people must be wrong.” If the two people are part of the same culture, then the subjects showed high levels of agreement with the statement. However, if the two people speak from different contexts, people show to agree considerably less (Sarkissian et al., p. 488). A hypothesis that fits this result well is, then, the following: since the statement “stabbing random people to test knives is morally wrong” is lacking a context and therefore is incomplete, people try to fill this gap (more or less consciously) with the most likely argument. Then, given two people from the same culture, it is very reasonable to expect them to talk in the context of the same moral code (so, their disagreement is due to one of them misinterpreting the code and thus being wrong). On the other hand, when the two people are a standard student and a Pentar (a rational alien whose only goal is to maximize the number of pentagons in the universe), the intuitive assumption is that the moral codes providing the context are very different and it is possible for one of them to allow stabbing random people to be permissible. Here, nothing seems to imply that either person is wrong.

Considering the morality of the Pentar's actions leads to another scenario (similar to one highlighted by Gilbert Harman) that is more problematic for objectivistic moral frameworks but easily explained by relativistic ones such as contextualism. Suppose that the Pentars were to invade our Earth and that they started killing people in the attempt to make them pentagon-shaped. It would be odd for some inhabitant of the Earth to state that the aliens ought not to kill the humans, because Pentars are completely unmoved by any of the reasons that make us think that killing is wrong. Since we know that the aliens have no reasons to stop killing humans, it is somewhat odd and unintuitive that we would say that it is morally wrong for them to do so (Harman, p.4). This oddness is problematic for the objectivist: since the Pentars are rational agents, the universal moral facts that apply to us must apply to them as well. Therefore, if there is some moral fact that makes it reasonable to say "Humans ought not to kill humans" then it should be equally reasonable to state that "Pentars ought not to kill humans." On the other hand, in a contextualist view, there is no reason that enforces the moral facts that apply to us to be the same as the ones that apply to Pentars; thus, there is no oddness to resolve.

One last argument to show how contextualism offers a strong explanation of our moral intuitions regards disagreement. It is empirically observable that there are disagreements on moral "facts" between different societies, and even more so if we compare today's societies with ones from the past. Despite centuries of debate, on many questions no agreement has been reached, which makes it implausible that these disagreements are based on logically resolvable mistakes on someone's part. If there were objective moral facts, such as "X is wrong," then anyone that claims "X is

right” would be making a factual or a logical mistake, that should eventually be solvable. What seems more intuitive is that at least in some cases the disagreement between two people is faultless (i. e., neither person is really saying something wrong), which is perfectly explained if we intend the statement “X is wrong” as an incomplete one, lacking some argument “according to moral code M.”

As Boghossian points out, however, disagreement also offers a starting point for a critique of contextualism. We can explain Boghossian’s argument as follows: suppose that we have two people, one of which asserting that “Slavery is wrong” and the other one saying that “Slavery is not wrong”. Intuitively, there is a sharp disagreement about the wrongness of slavery between the two speakers. However, if we are to restrict ourselves to the corresponding complete statements (according to contextualism), we end up with a comparison between statements such as “Slavery is wrong according to moral code M” and “Slavery is not wrong according to moral code M” or “Slavery is not wrong according to moral code M\*.” Now, someone claiming that slavery is not wrong according to M is disagreeing with someone that says that slavery is wrong according to M, but this disagreement is merely about the logical properties of M, not about slavery. On the other hand, the person that makes a claim about slavery in M\* is just not disagreeing at all, since any statement about M is compatible with a statement about M\*. This means that contextualism doesn’t match our intuition, since the disagreement about slavery is nowhere to be found (Boghossian, p. 58).

To make Boghossian’s point clearer (and show why it does not actually highlight any inconsistency between our intuitions and contextualism), we once

again go back to the “Folk Moral Relativism” study. Boghossian states that our intuition is that if two people say “slavery is wrong” and “slavery is not wrong,” there is, intuitively, disagreement. Similarly, one could say that two people saying “January is a winter month” and “January is not a winter month” are, intuitively, disagreeing. However, if we learn that the two people live in different hemispheres, this intuition immediately fades; similarly, we stop perceiving the necessity of disagreement about slavery if we imagine that the two speakers come from completely different societies. What happens, then, if we consider two people from the same culture? Take for example two twins, who have been raised in exactly the same way but only one of them says that slavery is wrong. Suppose, further, that both claim to give utmost importance to their country’s moral standards and practices; clearly the disagreement is undeniable. It is, however, no longer that intuitive that the two are disagreeing about slavery. In fact, it seems more likely that the two have different interpretations of the moral standard they strive to follow. In neither case, then, our deeper, contextualized intuition is that the disagreement is about slavery. Just like we tend to exhibit objectivistic views in front of underspecified scenarios, that first intuition fades as we understand the situation the speakers are truly referring to.

We may also want to consider the case where two people are making opposing normative claims: for example, when someone says “X ought to Y” and someone else responds “X ought not to Y”. The disagreement is obvious and there is no faultlessness in it, since there may be at most one obligatory course of action for X to take. In this case, however, the disagreement comes from the fact that at least

one of the speakers is wrong because they both think they know what context is relevant to X, and they cannot both be right.

To conclude, the purpose of this paper was to give motivation for contextualism and respond to its critique by Boghossian. Thanks to the study by Sarkissian et al. on Folk Moral Relativism, it is apparent that contextualism fits our moral intuitions well, even in the case regarding disagreement that Boghossian uses as a counterexample.

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