

*Naturalism, absolutism, relativism**Michael Smith*

Gilbert Harman begins his essay "Is There a Single True Morality?" by telling us:

As far back as I can remember thinking about it, it has always seemed to me obvious that the dictates of morality arise from some sort of convention or understanding among people, that different people arrive at different understandings, and that there are no basic moral demands that apply to everyone. (Harman 2000a: 77)

Having said this, however, he immediately admits that this opinion is not shared by many of his philosophical colleagues, and he goes on to explore the issue that divides them. Harman's hypothesis is that they have different attitudes towards naturalism. Naturalism, he tells us, decisively favors the view that basic moral demands apply only to some. He therefore spends the bulk of his paper trying to make out that connection. This is an extremely important conclusion, if it is correct, so my aim in what follows is to consider the arguments Harman provides to support his hypothesis. To anticipate, I will argue that the view that moral demands apply only to some gains no support from naturalism, and I attempt to identify where the real source of support for that view lies.

## 12.1 ABSOLUTISM VERSUS RELATIVISM

Let us begin by clarifying the two views about morality that are up for discussion. As we have already seen, one of these is the view that basic moral demands apply only to some, not to everyone. Harman calls this view

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Conference in Moral Philosophy, University of Reykjavik, and at the Institut für Philosophie, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. I am grateful to all of those present on these occasions who gave me such helpful comments. I am also grateful to the editors for their advice on the penultimate version. My research was supported by a Research Award from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

"moral relativism." The alternative to relativism is a view that Harman calls "moral absolutism":

[L]et me stipulate that I will take moral absolutism to be a view about the moral reasons people have to do things and to want or hope for things. I will understand a belief about absolute value to be a belief that there are things that everyone has a reason to hope or wish for. To say that there is a moral law that 'applies to everyone' is, I hereby stipulate, to say that everyone has sufficient reasons to follow that law. (Harman 2000a: 84)

Harman's stipulative definition of "absolutism" helpfully clarifies what he finds appealing in relativism.

When Harman says that it seems obvious to him that there are no basic moral demands that apply to everyone, what he means is that it seems obvious to him there is nothing that everyone has sufficient reason to hope or wish for (no absolute moral values) and that there is nothing that everyone has sufficient reason to do (no absolute reasons to follow the moral law). The appeal of relativism over absolutism, for Harman, therefore lies in its more plausible theory of what we have reasons to do and hope and wish for. According to relativism, though moral values do entail sufficient reasons to hope or wish for the things that are of moral value, and though the moral law does entail sufficient reasons to do the things that the moral law requires us to do, what is entailed is that only some people have sufficient reason to hope or wish for or do these things.

Though the contrast between relativism and absolutism may seem stark when it is put like this, we should note an ambiguity. Does the moral absolutist hold that there are things that *every human agent that we know about* has sufficient reason to do and hope and wish for? Or, more strongly, does he hold that there are things that *every possible human agent* has sufficient reason to do and hope and wish for? Or, more strongly still, does he hold that there are things that *every possible rational agent* – here we remove the restriction to humans – has sufficient reason to do and hope and wish for? Since "absolutism" has been defined by stipulation, and since Harman doesn't say which of these interpretations of "everyone" he has in mind, we will need to decide for ourselves.

My proposal is that we read Harman's stipulative definition of absolutism as charitably as we can, given the argument that he is hoping to put forward. We should therefore suppose that he has in mind absolutism of the very strongest kind. This is because if absolutism is simply the weak claim that there are things that every agent we know about has sufficient reason to do and hope and wish for, and if naturalism tells even against this weak claim, then it follows that it also tells against absolutism when

it is interpreted in the very strongest way. The opposite, however, is not true. Interpreting absolutism in the strongest way thus makes it easier for Harman to confirm his hypothesis that naturalism tells against absolutism and in favor of relativism, not harder.

Moreover, though absolutism interpreted in this strong way is a radical view, it is also a very familiar view in metaethics. Absolutism, so interpreted, is a version of the view, endorsed by moral rationalists, that moral requirements are requirements of rationality or reason, and hence are binding on rational agents as such. Basic moral demands, according to the rationalists, aren't just necessary, but are also knowable a priori, as knowledge of them follows from knowledge of what it is to be a rational agent. This is why they apply to all possible rational agents. Since I take it that this is the view that at least many of Harman's philosophical colleagues hold – I have in mind especially those inspired by Kant, theorists like Nagel (1970), Darwall (1983), and Korsgaard (1996), and those inspired by the Brentano/Ewing suggestion that there are fittingness relations between facts and attitudes, theorists like Scanlon (1998) and Parfit (2011) – it is worthwhile keeping both of these two kinds of moral rationalism, and the contemporary moral rationalists who hold these views, firmly in mind when we consider the bearing of naturalism on absolutism. These, I take it, are Harman's real stalking horses.

At this point, let me lay my own cards on the table. Though it seems to me quite plausible to suppose that there are moral demands to do or hope or wish for things just in case there are reasons for every possible rational agent to do or hope or wish for them, I am not sure whether we should accept the radical kind of absolutism that Harman describes (see especially Smith 1994: 182–84). I will explain my misgivings presently when I say something about his insistence on connecting absolutism to the view that there are *sufficient* reasons to do or hope or wish for things, rather than just *pro tanto* reasons. Moreover, though this means that I agree with Harman that there is a connection between demands and reasons, it is important to remember that both he and I therefore rule out of court a certain kind of view about the nature of moral demands, a view that is thoroughly naturalistic but not relativistic. I have in mind the account of moral demands that Peter Railton outlines and defends in his "Moral Realism" (1986).

Railton begins that paper by providing a naturalistic account of what it is for something to be good for an individual, and he then makes that naturalistic account of the good for an individual do work in his account of what a moral demand is. According to Railton, the claim that morality

demands that we do, or hope, or wish for something is simply a claim to the effect that it would maximize individual good, impartially considered, if we were to do or hope or wish for that thing. Since this account is unrestricted in its scope, it is reasonable to suppose that it applies to everyone, where "everyone" is interpreted as broadly as possible. All possible rational agents fail to comply with a moral demand when they fail to maximize the individual good, impartially considered, or so Railton seems to suggest. Importantly, however, it is also an account of moral demands which leaves it open that rational agents have no reason at all to do or hope or wish for the things that morality demands of them. To repeat, Harman's argument for relativism simply ignores accounts of moral demands like this. I will return to this point at the end.

To sum up, Harman assumes that there is a connection between moral demands and sufficient reasons – moral demands are claims about the things that people have sufficient reasons to do or hope or wish for – and, he stipulates, the issue that divides relativists from absolutists is the domain of people who have such reasons. According to Harman's stipulations, absolutists hold that everyone has to have such reasons, and, as we are interpreting "everyone," this is the view that every possible rational agent has to have sufficient reason to do or hope or wish for the things that morality demands. Moral absolutism is therefore a version of moral rationalism, the view that basic moral demands are claims about the reasons that people have, where these claims are both necessary and a priori. Moral relativism, by contrast, is the claim that though some possible rational agents have sufficient reasons to do or hope or wish for the things that morality demands, there are some possible rational agents who do not have such reasons. The existence of moral demands does not require that everyone has sufficient reasons to do or hope or wish for the things that morality demands.

## 12.2 HARMAN'S ARGUMENT AGAINST MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND THE FLAT-FOOTED RESPONSE

As I pointed out at the beginning, Harman's hypothesis is that naturalism tells in favor of moral relativism. But what exactly is naturalism? Naturalism, he tells us, is the familiar methodological principle that, in doing moral philosophy, "we must concentrate on finding the place of value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science" (Harman 2000a: 79). The question we must ask is why he thinks that this familiar methodological principle supports the truth of relativism.

Let us begin with reasons to do things. Harman begins with the assumption that, if there are any absolutist moral reasons for action at all, then there is a sufficient reason for everyone not to harm or injure others. This assumption is at least somewhat plausible because fairly minimal, and it is also a claim about moral reasons that many moral rationalists have in fact endorsed. We will therefore go along with it for the time being. With this assumption in place, he then gives the following argument for the conclusion that, at least according to naturalism, not everyone has such a reason.

*First Premise:* if a person does not intend to do something and that is not because he or she has failed in some empirically discoverable way to reason to a decision to do that thing – inattention, lack of time, failure to consider or appreciate certain arguments, ignorance of certain available evidence, an error in reasoning, some sort of irrationality or unreasonableness, or weakness of will – then according to the naturalist the person cannot have a sufficient reason to do that thing.

*Second Premise:* there are people, such as certain professional criminals, who do not act in accordance with an alleged requirement not to harm or injure others, where this is not due to any of these failings. (Harman 2000a: 86–87)

Since it follows from these two premises that there are people, such as certain professional criminals, who do not have sufficient reason not to harm or injure others, the upshot is that, if the premises are true, then absolutism about reasons for action is false. A similar argument could also be constructed to show that absolutism about values is false, too. This simplifies matters, as it suggests that we can focus exclusively on the plausibility of the premises of the argument just given, for if those premises turn out to be false, then the premises of the analogous argument in the case of absolute values will presumably be false, too.

Consider *First Premise*. This premise spells out more fully both what it is to have sufficient reason for action and what a naturalist must say, given that this is what it is to have such a reason. When someone has sufficient reason for action, *First Premise* tells us, they are in a position to reason themselves to a corresponding intention to act, absent ignorance, irrationality, and the like. There are, in other words, no *unreduced* reasons for action – or more cautiously, if deciding and intending are themselves actions, then apart from reasons for mental actions like reasons for deciding and intending, there are no unreduced reasons for action (from now on I will forgo the caution) – as all reasons for action reduce to reasons for deciding or intending.

This premise is one that we should go along with as well, because it is common ground with many of Harman's opponents. Scanlon, for example, would certainly accept it. He thinks that

'reason for action' is not to be contrasted with 'reason for intending'. The connection to action, which is essential to intentions, determines the kinds of reasons that are appropriate for them, but it is the connection with judgment-sensitive attitudes that makes events actions, and hence the kind of things for which reasons can sensibly be asked for and offered at all. (Scanlon 1998: 21)

But since someone who has a sufficient reason for intending is in a position to reason themselves to having that intention, assuming they have a sensitivity to reasons, and since an insensitivity to reasons is itself plainly a kind of irrationality, the upshot is that Scanlon would happily go along with the idea that someone who has a sufficient reason for action is in a position to reason himself to an intention so to act, absent ignorance, irrationality, and the like.

*First Premise* also tells us that if someone who is in a position to reason themselves to an intention to act in a certain way fails to reason themselves to that intention, then this failure is empirically tractable. This is one place where naturalism comes into the picture. For what's important about the list of possible explanations that Harman provides – "inattention, lack of time, failure to consider or appreciate certain arguments, ignorance of certain available evidence, an error in reasoning, some sort of irrationality or unreasonableness, or weakness of will" – is that it indicates the sorts of explanations that might be proffered when someone fails to reason themselves to an intention, and that, in each case, the explanation appeals to some empirical fact about the agent, a fact that is amenable to further scientific understanding. A psychologist could in principle provide us with a more fine-grained account of what each of these explanations amounts to.

Whereas *First Premise* insists on the *naturalistic respectability* of both reasons for action and the explanations that we give of people's failure to intend to do what they have sufficient reason to do, *Second Premise* tells us that when someone like "the professional criminal" intends to harm and injure others, no such explanation is in the offing. Two points are worth noting about this premise. The first is that, if *Second Premise* is true, then absolutism is false on even the weakest of the interpretations we have considered. Not only is it false that every possible rational agent has sufficient reason not to harm and injure others, but there are also rational agents we know about – drug lords, human traffickers, and others we read about

in the newspapers on a daily basis – who lack such reasons. The second point is that, even if *Second Premise* is true, and hence even if absolutism is false on even the weakest of the interpretations we have so far considered, absolutists might retreat to a slightly different claim about the connection between moral demands and the reasons possessed by every possible rational agent.

The alternative form of absolutism I have in mind claims not that if there is a moral demand not to harm and injure others, then there is *sufficient* reason for every possible rational agent not to harm and injure others. It claims instead that if there is a moral demand not to harm and injure others, then there is a *pro tanto* reason for every possible rational agent not to harm and injure others. The difference is that whereas even the weakest form of absolutism we considered earlier holds that moral demands entail reasons to intend not to harm or injure others that cannot be outweighed by other reasons, the alternative form of absolutism allows for the possibility of their being outweighed, or their being equally weighty, or their being incommensurable. *Second Premise*, even if true, is consistent with the truth of this alternative form of absolutism. Even the professional criminal may have a *pro tanto* reason not to harm or injure others, it is just that his reason not to do so is either outweighed by, or equally weighty as, or incommensurable with, other reasons to harm or injure them.

I mention this alternative form of absolutism not just because it is a position in logical space that is overlooked in Harman's argument, but also because there are rationalists who accept a form of absolutism like this. Susan Wolf thinks that moral reasons come into conflict with, and so must be weighed against, reasons of "personal perfection," and she further thinks that, sometimes at least, it is the moral reasons that get outweighed in such cases (Wolf 1982). Reasons of personal perfection that might outweigh moral reasons include reasons to act in ways that are funny, or that display an agent's personal style or cool. Of course, Wolf might not think that there are many, or perhaps even any, professional criminals whose criminal activities are so humorous or stylish or cool that their reasons to engage in these actions outweigh their reasons not to harm or injure others, but the logical point remains. Though Wolf agrees that moral demands provide us with reasons, she denies that moral demands entail *sufficient* reasons.

What this alternative form of absolutism shows is that Harman's initial assumption was not as minimal as it could have been. Harman began with the assumption that if there are any absolutist moral reasons for action at

all, then there is a sufficient reason for everyone not to harm or injure others. This is a fairly minimal assumption, and many moral rationalists do accept it, but an even more minimal assumption that he might have made instead, one which is accepted by even more rationalists, is that if there are any absolutist moral reasons for action at all, then there is at least a *pro tanto* reason for everyone not to harm or injure others. Having identified this alternative form of absolutism, however, I will say no more about it. The reason, as we will see, is that if Harman's argument succeeds in showing that naturalism counts against the stronger form of absolutism he describes, then a slight variation on that same argument will plausibly show that it counts against the alternative form of absolutism just identified, too.

Let us now ask whether the premises of Harman's argument, clarified in the way we have just clarified them, are true. In *Second Premise* Harman claims that the successful criminal's intention to harm his victim cannot be explained by "inattention, lack of time, failure to consider or appreciate certain arguments, ignorance of certain available evidence, an error in reasoning, some sort of irrationality or unreasonableness, or weakness of will." It might be thought that Harman is here relying on the more or less common-sense observation that when we look around us, we see lots of rational people, some of whom have nice intentions and some of whom don't, and that the successful criminal is just a particularly striking example of the latter. But note that this observation – that the people we see around us, including the professional criminal, meet the minimal standards of rationality required for us to see them as agents – is far too weak to support *Second Premise*. What Harman needs to suppose, for *Second Premise* to be true, is that certain professional criminals aren't just minimally rational, but that they are neither ignorant of nor insensitive to anything relevant to such arguments as there might be for or against their having the intentions that they have. In other words, he needs to suppose that, at least in relevant respects, they are maximally rational. But whether or not we will agree with him about this turns not on our accepting the commonsense observation, and it doesn't turn on our commitment to naturalism, either. It turns rather on the specific assumptions that we make about what an argument for having a certain intention would look like.

For example, one assumption we might make is that an agent's intentions are principally governed by a norm of coherence: an agent's intentions are rationally required to cohere with his intrinsic desires and his beliefs about how those intrinsic desires can be satisfied. Let's call this

MEANS–ENDS. Of course, even if an agent's intentions are principally governed by MEANS–ENDS, we might also think that there are additional principles that govern an agent's intrinsic desires and means–ends beliefs as well. For example, we might think that his beliefs are required to be both evidentially well supported and true, and that his intrinsic desires are required to support preferences that are both transitive and complete. Call this expanded set of principles MEANS–ENDS+. Crucially, however, if MEANS–ENDS+ exhausts the principles that govern intentions – or, to be more precise, if the principles that govern intentions are like MEANS–ENDS+ in not including any principles that allow us to directly criticize the *contents* of an agent's intrinsic desires, and hence the contents of his intentions – then the upshot will be that such arguments as we can give to agents for having certain intentions rather than others will depend on which intrinsic desires those agents have to begin with.

Note that a commitment to MEANS–ENDS+ need not commit us to the implausible sounding view that an agent's intrinsic desires and beliefs – or facts about his intrinsic desires and beliefs, or facts about the intrinsic desires and beliefs he would have if his intrinsic desires supported preferences that were transitive and complete and his beliefs were epistemically justified and true (from hereon I will mostly ignore these complications) – *are* his reasons for intending to act in a certain way (the implausible-sounding view is discussed by Jonathan Dancy under the name “psychologism” [see Dancy 2000]). We might instead suppose that what makes non-desiderative facts, such as the fact that by hitting someone you will cause him harm and injury, a reason not to intend to hit him, is the fact that the person for whom that reason is a reason has certain intrinsic desires that would cohere best with his not intending to hit someone. An agent's intrinsic desires, together with the beliefs he would have if he had beliefs that were epistemically justified and true, might in this way be a *condition* of the non-desiderative facts that are reasons being reasons, not themselves reasons (see also Schroeder 2007).

But while a commitment to MEANS–ENDS+ need not commit us to the implausible-sounding view that an agent's intrinsic desires and beliefs *are* his reasons for intending to act in a certain way, note that reasons for intending, even if those reasons are non-desiderative facts, would still turn out to be very different from reasons for believing. This is because, as we have just seen, the considerations that are reasons for intending would turn out to be reasons only conditionally on the agent's having certain desires. Whether some consideration is a reason for believing, by contrast, depends on whether it supports the truth of the thing believed, something that holds or doesn't hold quite independently of what an agent

happens to desire. The considerations that are reasons for believing are thus not reasons only conditionally on the agent's having certain desires. We will return to this point below.

If something like MEANS–ENDS+ exhausts the principles that govern the formation of an agent's intentions then *Second Premise* turns out to be true. Certain professional criminals' intrinsic desires are so unusual that the non-desiderative fact that by hitting people they will cause them harm and injury is not a reason not to intend to hit them, because a crucial condition of that non-desiderative fact's being a reason is absent. Such professional criminals' possession of the intention to harm and injure others is thus not the result of their insensitivity to any argument. Assuming that MEANS–ENDS+ exhausts the principles that govern the formation of an agent's intentions would therefore lead us to conclude that only some people have sufficient reasons not to harm or injure others. (Indeed, it would lead us to conclude that only some people have even a *pro tanto* reason not to harm or injure others as well. This is why I said earlier that a variation on Harman's argument would work even against those absolutists who hold that moral reasons, even though they are possessed by all possible rational agents, are merely *pro tanto* reasons.) What's striking about this argument, however, is that naturalism plays no role at all in it. The argument is entirely driven by the specific assumptions we have made about the principles that govern intentions, the assumption that MEANS–ENDS+ exhausts these principles. If we make different assumptions, things look very different.

Suppose, for example, we assume that an agent's intentions aren't just governed by MEANS–ENDS+, but that in order to be fully rational they must also meet a requirement of universality. If we further think, as some Kantians do, that we can derive (say) Kant's Formula of Humanity from his Formula of Universal Law, perhaps together with some additional premises – let's call this whole package UNIVERSALIZATION+ (compare Korsgaard 1996) – then we will conclude that the professional criminal *does* have a reason not to harm or injure others. For in having that intention he will display an insensitivity to the arguments that show that the only intentions that are universalizable are intentions to treat people never merely as a means, but also always as an end. If these assumptions are correct, *Second Premise* is false. But supposing that these assumptions are correct shows nothing whatsoever about our commitment to naturalism. There is nothing anti-science in supposing that reasons are universalizable.

Or suppose we assume that there are certain considerations – that is, certain ways the world could be – that count in favor of everyone's having

certain intrinsic desires rather than others quite independently of what they desire. Perhaps the facts that harm and injury have the intrinsic natures that they do provide everyone with a reason to intrinsically desire that they not be harmed or injured, where these reasons are unconditional in just the same way that reasons for believing are unconditional. Let's call this view REASONS+ (Scanlon 1998). In that case, too, we will conclude that the professional criminal has a reason not to harm or injure others. For in having the intention to do so he will display an insensitivity to arguments that would, if he weren't so insensitive, move him from premises about the intrinsic natures of harm and injury to having intrinsic desires that people not be harmed or injured, intrinsic desires that best cohere with his having the intention not to harm or injure others. If this assumption is correct, then *Second Premise* is once again false. But supposing that reasons for desires and aversions are just like reasons for belief in being unconditional doesn't seem to be in any way contrary to the impulse to find the "place of value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science."

What all of this suggests is a rather flat-footed response to Harman's argument. *First Premise* insists on the naturalistic respectability of both the reasons for doing or hoping or wishing for things and the explanations that we give of people's failure to be sensitive to such reasons. *Second Premise* then claims, in effect, that absolutist reasons are not naturalistically respectable. But *Second Premise* is true only if we make certain assumptions about the principles of reason that govern an agent's intentions, and Harman hasn't said anything at all about how naturalism bears on which assumptions we should make. True enough, if MEANS-ENDS+ exhausts the principles that govern an agent's intentions, then *Second Premise* is true. But if intentions are governed as well by either UNIVERSALIZATION+ or REASONS+, then *Second Premise* is false. The flat-footed response to Harman is thus that, absent some reason for thinking that naturalism tells especially in favor of the principles that govern intentions being more like MEANS-ENDS+, and less like UNIVERSALIZATION+ and REASONS+, naturalism has no bearing at all on whether *Second Premise* is true, and hence no bearing at all on the disagreement between relativists and absolutists.

### 12.3 FIRST REPLY TO THE FLAT-FOOTED RESPONSE

Harman considers a version of this response.

The absolutist might agree that the criminal must be irrational, or at least unreasonable. Seeing that a proposed course of action will probably cause serious

injury to some outsider, the criminal does not treat this as a reason not to undertake that course of action. This must be irrational, or unreasonable, because such a consideration simply is such a reason and indeed is an obvious reason, a basic reason, not one that has to be derived in some complex way through arcane reasoning. But then it must be irrational, or at least unreasonable, for the criminal not to care sufficiently about others. The criminal's lack of concern is what's responsible for the criminal's not taking the likelihood of harm to an outsider to be a reason against the proposed course of action. This is one way an absolutist might argue.

The relativist's reply to such an argument is that, on any plausible characterization of reasonableness or unreasonableness (or rationality or irrationality) as notions that can be part of the scientific conception of the world, the absolutist's claim is just false. Someone can be completely rational without feeling respect and concern for outsiders. But, of course, this reply appeals to naturalism. The absolutist who rejects naturalism in favour of autonomous ethics relies on an unreduced normative characterization of rationality and irrationality (or reasonableness and unreasonableness). (Harman 2000a: 90)

Harman here argues that the relativist's conception of rationality or reasonableness is itself more naturalistically respectable than the absolutist's. This is because the absolutist, unlike the naturalist, relies "on an unreduced normative characterization of rationality ... or reasonableness." But is this really true?

Remember that, according to Harman, there are no unreduced sufficient reasons for action. All sufficient reasons for action reduce to sufficient reasons for intending. As Harman imagines the absolutist's view in this passage, however, the absolutist denies this, claiming instead that the fact that a course of action would probably cause serious injury to some outsider is a "basic reason" not to undertake that course of action, "not one that has to be derived in some complex way through arcane reasoning." I take it what he means by this is that, according to the absolutist, the criminal's reason not to harm and injure others isn't explained by his having reasons to intend not to harm and injure others, but that the reverse is the case. According to the absolutist he imagines, it is "irrational, or at least unreasonable, for the criminal not to care sufficiently about others" because his "lack of concern is what's responsible for [his] not taking the likelihood of harm to an outsider to be a reason against the proposed course of action." In other words, we appeal to unreduced reasons for action in explaining the rationality or reasonableness of an agent's intentions, not vice versa. So this is, in effect, to suppose that the absolutist rejects *First Premise*.

Harman carefully notes that this is "one way an absolutist might argue." This is true. But it is not the only way he might argue, and it is

not the best way for him to argue, either. In order to see that this is so, consider the two absolutist responses to Harman's argument I described earlier. Both the absolutists I described earlier agree with *First Premise*. They think that sufficient reasons for action reduce to sufficient reasons for intending. It is simply that they also hold, as Harman must too, that in explaining what a sufficient reason for intending is, we need to appeal to the rational principles that govern intentions, whatever those rational principles turn out to be, because it is these rational principles that fix what the reasons for intending are. The difference between the absolutists that I described and their relativist opponent is simply that they appeal to *different* rational principles. Whereas the relativist supposes that rational principles like MEANS-ENDS+ exhaust the principles in play, the absolutists think that a role is also played either by principles like UNIVERSALIZATION+ or REASONS+. In order to explain the irrationality or unreasonableness of the professional criminal's lack of concern for others, these absolutists therefore do not need to appeal to unreduced reasons for action. Instead they try to explain why the professional criminal has a sufficient reason not to harm or injure others by appealing to the fact that he has a sufficient reason to intend not to harm or injure them. Naturalism's insistence that there are no unreduced reasons for action thus cuts no ice against them.

#### 12.4 SECOND REPLY TO THE FLAT-FOOTED RESPONSE

Perhaps Harman has in mind a different objection. In that same passage he tells us that "on any plausible characterization of reasonableness or unreasonableness (or rationality or irrationality) as notions that can be part of the scientific conception of the world ... [s]omeone can be completely rational without feeling respect and concern for outsiders." As he sees things, the requirement that we come up with a characterization of rationality or reasonableness that squares with our scientific conception of the world thus tells against there being principles governing intending like UNIVERSALIZATION+ or REASONS+. But what is the connection supposed to be between coming up with a characterization of rationality or reasonableness and having a scientific conception of the world? In order to answer this question, we need to answer a prior question first. What are we doing when we come up with a *characterization* of rationality or reasonableness?

One answer, inspired by the thought that the norms of rationality or reasonableness are inter-defined with our concepts of belief and desire,

is that a characterization of rationality and reasonableness will follow from a spelling out of everything that we can know a priori about belief and desire. For example, those relativists who think that we can exhaustively characterize rationality or reasonableness in terms of something like MEANS-ENDS+ might suggest that this follows from the fact that all we can know a priori about belief and desire is that they are the states they are in virtue of their characteristic, but complementary, directions of fit: belief is a state that aims to represent things as being a certain way when and because they are that way; desire is a state that aims at its own satisfaction. These claims about the aims of belief and desire might equally well have been put in more explicitly normative terms: beliefs are states that are supposed to be true and well justified (beliefs are supposed to be knowledge); desires are states that are supposed to be satisfied. Or they might equally well have been put in counterfactual terms: in agents who are fully rational and reasonable, beliefs are states that are true and well justified and desires are states that are satisfied.

The relativist might then argue that, if we were to spell out these claims about the different and complementary directions of fit of belief and desire more fully, we would have no alternative but to conclude that principles something like MEANS-ENDS+ exhaust the principles of rationality and reasonableness governing the interactions of beliefs with beliefs and beliefs with desires. For though the idea that belief aims at the truth and desire aims at its own satisfaction provides us with ample reason to suppose that there are principles like MEANS-ENDS+ – this is because the satisfaction of intrinsic desires will be conditional on their combining with true beliefs about what can be done to satisfy them by giving rise to corresponding intentions (Smith 2004b) – it provides us with no reason at all to suppose that there are principles like UNIVERSALIZATION+ or REASONS+. In this way, the relativist might argue, the proper characterization of rationality or reasonableness in terms of MEANS-ENDS+ supports relativism about reasons for action.

Unfortunately, however, if this is what we are doing when we come up with a characterization of rationality or reasonableness, then even though it is clear why we might end up thinking that the proper characterization of these notions supports relativism about reasons for action, the requirement that we come up with a characterization that is part of, or squares with, our scientific conception of the world doesn't seem to play any role at all in the argument. Everything turns on what we can say a priori about belief and desire and what this entails. Moreover, though we have just seen how such a priori reflections might lead us to suppose that

relativism about reasons for action is correct, the argument that was given for this conclusion turned crucially on the claim that all we can say about belief and desire a priori is that belief aims at the truth and desire aims at its own satisfaction, a claim with which absolutists disagree. So not only does the argument from the proper characterization of rationality or reasonableness to relativism about reasons for action have nothing to do with naturalism, it is also highly controversial.

For example, some absolutists will disagree on the grounds that we can know a priori that desire is a state that aims at its own satisfaction *in a lawlike way*. When an agent has some intrinsic desire, and that intrinsic desire is satisfied, but the satisfaction of that intrinsic desire would be inconsistent with the satisfaction of other desires that are themselves suitably universal in their content, then that formal feature of the agent's intrinsic desire is grounds for rational criticism of the intentions with which it coheres (compare Korsgaard 1996). They will therefore think that, if we were to fully spell out the claims that belief aims at the truth and desire aims at its own satisfaction in a lawlike way, then we would be forced to conclude that principles like MEANS-ENDS+ do not exhaust the principles of rationality or reasonableness, because there are additional principles like UNIVERSALIZATION+.

Other absolutists will disagree on the grounds that we can know a priori that desire is like belief in being a "judgment-sensitive attitude," that is, a state for which reasons can be given, where the considerations that are reasons for desiring are just like the considerations that are reasons for believing in having their status as reasons unconditionally, not conditionally on the presence of some desire (compare Scanlon 1998). These absolutists will think that, if we were to fully spell out the claims that belief aims at the truth and that desire aims at its own satisfaction while bearing in mind that both states are judgment-sensitive attitudes, then we would be forced to conclude that principles like MEANS-ENDS+ do not exhaust the principles of rationality, because there are additional principles like REASONS+.

If either of these absolutists is right, then the proper characterization of rationality and reasonableness gives support to absolutism about reasons for action, not to relativism. What's much more important for present purposes, however, is not the fact that absolutists could in this way claim to find support from the proper characterization of rationality and reasonableness, but that naturalism is thereby shown to be completely irrelevant to the issue that divides them from their relativist opponents. What divides them is what we can say a priori about belief and desire. This is what relativists and absolutists really disagree about.

## 12.5 THIRD REPLY TO THE FLAT-FOOTED RESPONSE

A good question to ask at this point is whether the answer just given to the question of what we are doing when we provide a characterization of rationality or reasonableness is one that a naturalist could give at all. After all, according to the answer just given, knowledge of the specific normative claims about what is rational or reasonable follow a priori from a proper understanding of belief and desire. But isn't the idea that we can have such a priori knowledge itself a violation of the methodological principle that, in doing moral philosophy, "we must concentrate on finding the place of value and obligation in the world of facts as revealed by science?" Doesn't it require us to suppose that there are irreducible normative relations that are discoverable a priori, facts about the ways in which belief and desire *ought* to interact (compare Scanlon 2009)?

This is a fair question, but it is important to note that it is one to which the relativist, just as much as the absolutist, must have an answer. Anyone with naturalistic leanings will want to resist populating the world with unanalyzed normative relations. But I do not think that the account just given of what we are doing when we provide a characterization of rationality and reasonableness does require us to suppose that there are irreducibly normative relations. Instead I think that it requires us to suppose, plausibly, that belief and desire are best understood in *functionalist* terms. In order to illustrate how this helps answer the question, let's fix on the relativist's preferred normative characterization of belief and desire, the idea that belief is supposed to be true and desires are supposed to be satisfied. Robert Stalnaker spells out one way in which we might conceive of states with these aims in functionalist terms as follows.

Belief and desire ... are correlative dispositional states of a potentially rational agent. To desire that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to bring it about that P in a world in which one's beliefs, whatever they are, were true. To believe that P is to be disposed to act in ways that would tend to satisfy one's desires, whatever they are, in a world in which P (together with one's other beliefs) were true. (Stalnaker 1984: 15)

If some such functionalist account of belief and desire is along the right lines, then the differences between people with different beliefs and desires will amount to a difference in the functional roles that are played by the states that they are in when they are fully rational and reasonable. People may still have beliefs and desires, of course, even though they are not in states that are in fact playing these roles. It is just that in that case they will not count as being fully rational or reasonable.



The attraction of this functionalist way of understanding belief and desire, and the correlative ideas of what it is to be fully rational and reasonable, is that it allows us to naturalize the quite general normative claims that we made initially in characterizing these psychological states. For it suggests that the proper way to understand these normative claims is in much the same way as we understand similar normative claims in the case of other functional kinds, claims such as "Clocks are supposed to tell the time," or "Thieves aren't supposed to get caught." In each case what we have is a functional kind where things may be of that kind even though they don't function optimally, and where, as a result, functioning optimally provides a standard against which the actual function of something of that kind can be measured. A slow clock is supposed to tell the time because clocks are objects of a functional kind such that, when an object is a perfectly functioning member of that kind, it does tell the time. The normative characterization of a clock – the claim that a clock is an object that is supposed to tell the time – thus isn't an alternative to the functional characterization, but is rather just another way of stating the functional characterization. Similarly, when we say that beliefs are supposed to be true, this is just another way of saying that a belief is a state of a kind such that, when a state is a perfectly functioning member of that kind, it is true (contrast Zangwill 1998). The same is true of desire, *mutatis mutandis*.

This way of interpreting the normative characterizations of belief and desire is thus maximally friendly to the methodological principle, for it suggests that nothing but states governed by causal relations in complex and interrelated ways – perfectly functioning beliefs and desires are still just beliefs and desires, after all – is required for there to be beliefs and desires that stand in just the normative relations that they do stand in to each other. A fully rational and reasonable agent is just someone in whom belief and desire play their functional roles optimally. Irreducible normative relations are therefore no more a part of the story of what it is to be an optimally functioning believer and desirer than they are a part of the story of what it is to be an optimally functioning clock or thief.

The illustration just given has, of course, assumed that the relativist's preferred normative characterization of the natures of belief and desire is correct. But the illustration is useful because it suggests that we could provide a similar functionalist interpretation of each of the absolutist's preferred normative characterizations of the natures of belief and desire that we described earlier as well. This provides us with another way of getting at what the relativists and absolutists really disagree about, and

what the two absolutists we described earlier disagree about as well. They disagree with each other about which beliefs and desires an agent would have, and the way that these states would interact with each other, if those agents were fully rational and reasonable: that is, optimally functioning. The relativist thinks that someone who is fully rational and reasonable may have an intention to harm and injure others, much as the professional criminal does. The absolutist thinks that no such intention would be possessed by such an agent. So here we have yet another reason to think that naturalism is irrelevant to the debate between relativists and absolutists. For the disagreement just described is a disagreement *within* the naturalist camp, a disagreement about what an optimally functioning believer and desirer is like, not a disagreement between naturalists and those who reject naturalism.

#### 12.6 FOURTH REPLY TO THE FLAT-FOOTED RESPONSE

This suggests a fourth line of reply to the flat-footed response to Harman's argument that I have been running on behalf of the absolutists, and the last that I will consider here. Whether we are in fact in the sorts of functional states that are described by the relativist, or the sorts of functional states that are described by the absolutists, might be thought to be an empirical question, not a question whose answer is settled a priori. Harman might therefore suggest that the a priori questions on which we have focused are a side-show. The important questions, he might say, are all empirical.

There are two points to make about this reply. The first is that, though it is evidently a contingent fact that we are believers and desirers – we might have suffered irreversible brain damage and been incapable of either believing or desiring – it seems to me that our knowledge that we are believers and desirers, if indeed we are, may well be a priori knowledge for all that. Perhaps a careful working through of what it is to have any knowledge at all shows that we are the sorts of beings who are in psychological states with the functional profiles of belief and desire. The second is that it is hardly credible to suppose, as the imagined reply does, that the answers to the a priori questions on which we have been focusing are a side-show. For we don't want to know just any old thing about the professional criminal that explains why he is the cause of harm and injury to others, we want to know quite specific things, such as whether his harming and injuring others is itself the product of his intention to harm and injure them; whether he has that intention because of (say) ignorance or

insensitivity to arguments; and, if it is, whether that ignorance or insensitivity is itself culpable because he had the capacity to be otherwise. The questions to which we seek answers are therefore questions that can only be framed in the terms whose nature we have been trying to clarify. (For the record, this is why it seems to me that we can safely ignore analyses of moral demands like Railton's. Railton's analyses in effect change the subject.)

The upshot is that, even if it were ultimately an empirical question whether or not we are believers or desirers, the answer to this empirical question matters a great deal to us, and figuring out the answer to this empirical question would require both a priori reflection and empirical investigation. Indeed, even if the evidence were already in, and that evidence favored the relativist, rather than the absolutist – though, for the record, I haven't seen or heard such evidence, and nor does Harman provide any – we would still need to know what to make of that evidence. Would the evidence show that only some humans have sufficient reasons to do or hope or wish for what morality demands? This would be the conclusion if the relativist had the correct a priori story. Or would it show that no humans have sufficient reasons to do anything at all? This would be the conclusion if the absolutist had the correct a priori story. To repeat, these are questions that can only be answered a priori by answering the sorts of questions that the relativists and the absolutists described earlier are attempting to answer, questions about the natures of belief and desire, rationality and reasonableness. Naturalism is irrelevant to the issue that divides them because these are questions about which naturalists can and do disagree.

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