# Do We Need Moral Facts?

JONATHAN PAYTON

*In this article I answer Gilbert Harman's objection to the possibility of objectivity in the field of ethics, namely, that there is no such thing as a "moral fact." I analyze the argument using terminology from G. E. Moore's* Principia Ethica *and try to apply it to utilitarian moral theory. After demonstrating that utilitarianism does not, in fact, make any appeal to moral facts, I then consider the implications of Harman's theory for the field of ethics as a whole. I conclude that his argument is based on a misunderstanding of ethics and that values are not to be found in the world, but are to be found in us. I then give some closing remarks about one possibility for the construction of an objective system of ethics which finds its basis in the subject.*

In *The Nature of Morality*, Gilbert Harman provides an argument against the possibility of objectivity in the field of ethics. He bases his argument on the idea of moral facts, that rightness and wrongness exist out in the world for our observation. He thinks that without these kinds of moral facts, there is no hope for objectivity in ethics. The purpose of this essay is to pose two questions: *To which ethical theory is Harman's argument directed?* And, *do we actually need moral facts?* We will begin our analysis by investigating the status of moral facts in the doctrine of utilitarianism, using terminology provided by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*. This will give us the insight necessary to apply Harman's argument to ethics in general and to move on to

the second of our questions. We will see that the objection that Harman raises is the result of a misunderstanding of what ethics is. As a result, we will be able to conclude that we do not, in fact, require moral facts for objectivity in ethics.

## OUTLINE OF THE PROBLEM

The problem that Harman outlines in his essay is epistemological: It is a problem of observation. Attacking the notion of moral facts, Harman asks us to examine the relationship between our moral principles and the events in the world. Are there such things as moral facts? Are rightness and wrongness things which we can observe in the world? Harman concludes, quite rightly, that they are not. He compares two different kinds of situations in which observation and theory play important roles. The first situation involves a scientist trying to observe protons in a cloud chamber. If the scientist sees a vapour trail, this is seen as evidence in conformity with the predictions the theory makes; the observation tells us something about the world, and the validity of the scientist's theory (Harman 2006, 267). This is contrasted with a situation in which an individual turns a corner, sees a group of children about to set a cat on fire and concludes that he is seeing something *wrong*. The difference in this situation is that the observation-theory link is severed in a way it is not in the case of the scientist. Harman asks us, where is the wrongness in the situation with the cat? Is it in the fire? In the gasoline? Even the observation of the pain the cat is feeling would not count as a moral fact because there is nothing observed that tells you that inflicting pain is *wrong.*

*4*

Because we cannot observe the wrongness in the situation, or in any situation, Harman concludes that there are no such things as moral facts. Right and wrong are not things out there in the world, and as a result, our declarations such as, "Burning cats is wrong," can never tell us anything about the world. Observations cannot verify or falsify our moral theories; they can only tell us about the moral principles of the observer. As Harman puts it, "[t]he fact that you made a particular moral observation when you did does not seem to be evidence about moral facts, only evidence about you and your moral sensibility" (627). The question of the grounding of our moral theories always remains open.

What are the consequences of this argument for the field of ethics? This is obviously an important problem, but it is one which seems too large to handle within the confines of this essay. We will have to restrict our analysis and pay close attention to only one ethical theory. Is there a particular theory that reflects best what Harman means by an appeal to moral facts?

## UTILITARIANISM AND THE *PRINCIPIA ETHICA*

One theory that would seem to be impinged by Harman's thesis does come to mind: the doctrine of utilitarianism. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of utilitarian theory is that it is aggregative: It consists in a calculation of pleasure and pain, which are capable of being observed in the world. We will, in our analysis, want to keep Harman's distinction between theory and observation always in mind. This terminology, however, tends to become clunky when put into use, so we will substitute for it some terms used by G. E. Moore in his *Principia Ethica*. This is not

meant to imply that Moore's and Harman's theses are the same, or even that the terms would mean *exactly* the same thing in either context; Moore's terminology is simply easier to use, and accurately reflects the distinction which must be made if we are to make a useful analysis of our problem.

Moore makes a distinction between what he calls 'good' and 'the Good'. The term 'good', for Moore, is a simple, indescribable notion. He makes the comparison to the colour yellow. You would be hard-pressed to define 'yellow', and you would not be able to explain it to anyone who had never seen it before. In the same way, what is meant by 'good' cannot be explained to anyone who does not already know what it means (Moore 2006, 414). The concept of 'good' is a simple notion that we use to construct further, more complex notions which we *would* be able to define, but only in terms of simpler notions. We can see that Moore's description of 'good' matches up quite nicely with the idea of a moral fact: an indescribable quality which is observable in the world. 'The Good', by contrast, is a complex, definable notion. Specifically, it is the collection of things which produce the most 'good' in the world; that is, those things that we actually take to be valuable. For example, we might say that compassion is "good," so comforting someone in times of sorrow would become part of 'the Good'. How can we apply this to utilitarianism?

As has been said above, utilitarianism seems to be a prime target of Harman's argument. Jeremy Bentham sought to build an entire ethical system on the balancing of pleasure and pain — two things that can actually be observed in the world. He declares that humans are essentially "under the governance of two sovereign

masters, *pain* and *pleasure*.[1] It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do" (Bentham 2006, 309). That is, humans desire nothing for its own sake other than pleasure, and, hence, the balance of pleasure and pain are at the root of all of our moral sentiments. An act is to be measured by its consequences, that is, "according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question" (309). Everyone's happiness is weighed equally, and actions that result in greater pleasure over pain are said to be right actions. Thus, the proper aim of a moral system is the promotion of *general* utility.

Moore's distinction between 'good' and 'the Good' becomes important at this point in our analysis. Recall that 'good' is an indefinable notion, so we cannot make sense of the sentence "Pleasure is good" if the word 'good' is used in this way. Indeed, it would amount to nothing more than saying, "Pleasure is pleasure" (Moore 2006, 417). So, the question now becomes, "Are Bentham and the utilitarians making a claim for a kind of moral fact?" Are they trying to define 'good' — in which case utilitarianism falls under the scrutiny of Harman's thesis — or 'the Good' — which leads us to question whether utilitarianism does, in fact, make reference to moral facts?

THE STATUS OF MORAL FACTS IN UTILITARIAN THEORY

It is clear, upon reading Bentham or Mill, that they are attempting to define 'the Good', rather than 'good'. Mill writes, in *Utilitarianism*, that while certain things can be

---

1. Original italics.

proved to be good by virtue of promoting pleasure, it is impossible to prove that pleasure itself is good (Mill 2006, 319). Moore's terminology can help make the point clearer. If we cannot prove that something is good, it is because we cannot equate 'goodness' with any other ideas, such as 'pleasure' or 'knowledge'. Indeed, as Moore points out, when I say, "I am pleased," I am not equating the concept of myself with the concept of pleasure. In the same way, when Bentham and Mill say, "Pleasure is good," they do not mean that these two concepts are one and the same (which would mean that "Pleasure is good" is the same as "Pleasure is pleasure") (Moore 2006, 417). So what are they really saying?

At first it seems as though the utilitarians are arguing for a kind of moral fact. By saying that one cannot demonstrate that pleasure is good, Mill seems to be making the case that the goodness of pleasure is something which one simply has to observe for oneself; it cannot be demonstrated to anyone who does not already appreciate that pleasure is good in itself. We seem to have all the components necessary for Harman's argument to apply — the moral fact and the moral theory, or, as we have put it, 'good' and 'the Good'. However, we must consider Bentham's original argument for the principle of utility. Bentham does not try to prove that utilitarianism is true; he only argues that his readers are already utilitarians — that humans are naturally governed by the principles of pleasure and pain (Bentham 2006, 309, 310). Thus, the value of pleasure is not an observable fact, but an element of psychology: 'Goodness' is something that we, as agents, bring to a given situation. It is not that pleasure and pain are moral facts. Rather, according to Bentham and Mill, humans simply attach values to these phenomena, which

can then be used to construct a more complex ethical system. So, it is not even the case that utilitarianism begins with a moral fact out in the world and then proceeds to construct an ethical system. Rather, utilitarianism begins with psychology — with 'the Good' — and makes no reference to goodness in a metaphysical sense at all.

We can now see the value in using Moore's terms. They have allowed us to demonstrate the distinction that Harman wants to make, and we have shown that one of the two terms — 'good' — can actually be removed from utilitarian moral theory. Bentham and Mill do not claim that pleasure is good in some intrinsic, metaphysical sense; rather, they claim only that we, as humans, happen to value it.

So, with the theory to which Harman's argument seemed most obviously directed now proven to be exempt from his complaint about moral facts, what are we to make of its application to the field of ethics in general?

Harman seems to think that he has provided an argument against the possibility of objectivity in the field of ethics, but if this is the case, then he is wrong. We have seen that utilitarianism — arguably the only moral system to make anything which could be misconstrued as an appeal to moral facts — does not, in fact, fall under the scrutiny of Harman's argument. The utilitarians do not argue that pleasure is 'good' in the sense in which G. E. Moore uses the word. Rather, they simply argue for an ethical theory based on what we happen to value, on human psychology. The other two major ethical theories — deontology and virtue ethics — seem similarly immune, as goodness is grounded within a rational will or a human conception of the "good life." Harman's argument only applies to a very specific kind of ethical theory, and one

which does not seem at all prevalent from an (admittedly) cursory reading of the literature. So, why is the argument supposed to be significant? We saw earlier that Moore made the distinction between 'good' and 'the Good' because of what he saw as a confusion that has a hold on moral discourse. This distinction itself and Harman's distinction between moral facts and facts of psychology appear to be based on a similar confusion.

## PROPOSAL FOR A METHOD

It may be argued that there is no basis for ethics if we adopt a God's eye view of the world, but this argument is clearly faulty. The "revelation" that there are no such things as moral facts out there in the world is only damaging if we adopt a skewed vision of what ethics is in the first place. Rather than acting as a reflection of the world as it is, ethics is a statement of the world as we want it to be. What does this mean, and what significance does it have for our question?

Proponents of Harman's argument sometimes use the above-mentioned God's eye view argument. If we attempt to place ourselves above the realm of human interests, and take a view of the world in purely scientific terms, then all bases for morality seem to disappear. Rightness and wrongness cannot be observed, from this perspective, in any objects in the world. This development should not surprise us, however. After all, what are we really saying when we make an ethical claim? If we say that the boys ought not to light the cat on fire, this is clearly not a statement about the world *as it is*. Rather, we are invoking a sense of a different world, a world where the cat is safe. It is a statement about the way we wish the world to be; by

saying, "You ought not to light cats on fire," we are making an appeal: We are saying that a world in which cats are burned is worse than a world in which cats are safe. Similarly, when we offer praise for a moral act, we are making a statement that this world, as a result of the actions of our moral interlocutor, is better than an alternative world in which they did not act as they did. Rather than describing the world as it is, ethical statements suspend the world and invoke the sense of another one.

It should be obvious from the preceding analysis that we are not using the word 'world' to refer to the earth in any value-free scientific way. Rather, we are referring to the phenomenological life-world in which values are initially encountered. This is why values disappear when the world is viewed from "above" the human experience; values are an aspect of the purely human interaction with the world. This is also why observations do not play the same role in ethics as they would in science; ethics cannot take a scientific view of the world. Values are not "out there" in the world, but rather, they are an aspect of the human encounter with the world that occurs before any theoretical knowledge can be gained. Once we begin analyzing our experience, we are justified in breaking it up into smaller, more manageable parts. Science deals with the world as it is and as it would be without any human interaction. Ethics, on the other hand, is based on values which only exist in the human encounter with reality; they form a part of the life-world. This is why the realization that there are no moral facts is not an argument against the pursuit of moral knowledge: The fact that values are not to be found in the world simply means that they must be found in the subject.

Thus, values cannot be observed from the God's eye view because they are a purely human aspect of the world. We initially encounter a world in which human projects and values are already wrapped up. To bracket this aspect of the world, which science must do in order to provide us with knowledge of the world as an object, is to bracket the entire field in which ethics can take place. Harman's observation that moral statements can only tell us about an individual's psychology is, therefore, not a refutation, but rather a reiteration, of the purpose of ethics.

It may be argued that we are approaching a kind of moral relativism. What kind of objective basis could ethics have if it is dependent on us for its intelligibility? Our initial reaction is to once again make the point that this objection is based on a misunderstanding of morality. Moral statements are not purely descriptive statements about the way the world is; therefore, it is absurd to expect to find a basis for ethics after removing any reference to humans, or those things we happen to value. It is we who experience values in the world, and we who can project the vision of a world different from this one.

But are we not committing a fallacy if we say that something is valuable just because, as a matter of contingency, humans happen to value it? Surely, "It is valuable to me" does not equate to "It is valuable." This objection only works if we assume that all people are fundamentally different and that there are no things that we value in common. Certainly there are differences between people and cultures, but once we realize that values form a part of our pre-theoretical understanding, we are in a position to provide a phenomenological basis for ethics. It may be the case that disagreements about morality are the result of mistakes that are made during

the transition from pre-theoretical experience to theoretical knowledge. As a result, what we must do is re-assess values as we experience them, and search for consistencies between cultures and times. Once these values have been isolated, we can then move on to theoretical construction, which can only take place in the subject, that is, through reflection and logical analysis, rather than a scientific investigation of the world. Through careful analysis and even more careful categorization, we may be able to construct a system of ethics based on those things that humans value first and foremost. The place of theoretical investigation and logical adjudication in this process is secured, but it can only take place after phenomenological insight. This seems to be the most objective ethical system we can hope for. If, after all, basing ethics on those things that we as humans do, in fact, value is to fall into relativism, then it is a relativism which we can live with. However, I do not believe this is the case.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, through our analysis of utilitarianism, we have seen that the very concept of a moral fact seems to come from a fundamental misunderstanding of ethics. Ethics does not rely on observation of the world, but rather the invocation of another better world. As such, ethics is centered in the subject. This is, of course, exactly Harman's problem, but does it really eliminate the possibility of objectivity? I, for one, believe that this realization only leads to relativism if we make a certain assumption about humans — that we all, whether as individuals or in a given cultural context, experience the world in fundamentally different ways. If, however, we can find those values that we all experience

and share, then we are in a position to construct an objective system of ethics. This is obviously a very large task to set ourselves, but I see no reason why it should not be attempted, or why it could not be achieved.

**REFERENCES**

Bentham, Jeremy. 2006. An introduction to the principles of morals and legislation. In *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, 309–317. New York: Oxford University Press.

Cahn, Steven M., and Peter Markie, eds. 2006. *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Harman, Gilbert. 2006. The nature of morality (selections). In *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, 625–636. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mill, John Stuart. 2006. Utilitarianism. In *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, 317–352. New York: Oxford University Press.

Moore, G. E. 2006. Principia ethica (selections). In *Ethics: History, theory, and contemporary issues*, ed. Steven M. Cahn, 413–419. New York: Oxford University Press.