

Part IB, Paper 3, Question 4b

'Liberalism for the liberals. Cannibalism for the cannibals.'

Discuss.

The claim in question reflects, on the one hand, the position of metaethical moral relativism (MMR), which holds that the truth-conditions for a moral sentence are relative to a given moral framework. On the other it reflects the complaint frequently made against relativity that MMR entails firstly that appraiser-relative criticism of another framework (or the act is legitimates) cannot be sound, since the judgement that the act is wrong is made merely to the appraiser's framework; judged against the agent's, it is right. Secondly (MMR entails) that different cultures must therefore be tolerant of each other's moral practice. The question at hand, then, is whether MMR entails that criticism or attempted reform of another culture is impossible, and whether this entailment is in line with one's reasons for adopting MMR in the first place.

Wilhelm argues that criticism of other cultures can be valid only in circumstances where the appraiser's framework or the change in practice the appraiser proposes is a real option for the appraised – when the moral frameworks are in real confrontation. A framework is a real option for a given group when the framework already is their framework, or they could go over to it without a change in their social circumstances, engaging in self-deception, and if they could acknowledge rationally the change from one to the other in light of comparison between the two.

Thus, in the case of the liberals and cannibals, it might be said that the cannibals have a real option to convert to liberalism, since rational comparison might bring them to change views, but the liberals have no real option to convert because to do so would involve an act of self-deception. On the other hand, it might be argued that neither has the real option of conversion because to do so would involve a change in social circumstances beyond either group. Thus the implications for MMR and non-criticism is that morality is relative to a framework, but that some significant discussion is possible in cases where the frameworks in question are non-distant – one is a real option for the other, relevantly.

However, there are limits on the implications of Wilhelm's distinction between real and notional confrontation. MMR is broadly motivated in part by the claim that moral frameworks are noted in social and psychological factors, rather than in objective moral facts. To analyze Wilhelm's view, this relativist account of how moral frameworks arise must be analyzed. Truth-valuations of moral sentences is the product of reasoning given 'background' conditions, such as social, biological and psychological factors. Thus we can conceive of moral frameworks as composed of moral claims that can be analyzed as inferences from a set of axioms, which is defined by the background conditions of the adherent. So, moral discourse can either operate at the level of the reasoning – arguing that, for instance, cannibalism is inconsistent with that society's valuing of human life, or that the conclusions of Searle's "promising game" argument do not follow from his premises – which can be called "rational refinement", since it implies that, given idealized circumstances in which the axioms are similar and the reasoning correct, opinions as to the conclusions will converge. Or, discourse can operate at the level of the axioms, attempting to appeal to something other than the other party's own background conditions in order to effect an axiomatic change.

MMR does not entail that rational refinement is impossible or invalid, indeed such activity will form the greatest part of the relativists' normative discourse, since a great

deal of ethical disagreement arises simply from logical confusion or incorrect reasoning; or, issues can be resolved by forcing the appraised to realize that the view is inconsistent with others they hold. Non moral facts can be appealed to, such that arguments establishing moral principals change. With rational refinement alone, the bulk of ethical discourse remains intact.

The MMR theorist does deny however, that discussion at the axiomatic level is impossible. It is not that opponents will never change in circumstances such that their axioms change; it is that such change is invalid through rational means. If a debate occurs on the legitimacy of abortion between a non-theist and an extremist Christian, rational refinement may take place but if the differences can be reduced to a simple differing over axioms, MMR entails that attempts to criticize are unfounded since the relativist much accept that there is as much claim for one to be true as the other; there is no absolute to appeal to, to settle the matter.

This account of moral framework can now be applied to Wilhelm's relativism of distance. What does distance consist in? If each moral framework is the product of a reasoning process given background conditions, distance can be analyzed as a difference in background conditions. A real option is one where the change can be made rationally, and it therefore follows that it is one in which the difference is a matter of new information or a corrected reasoning process. Distant frameworks are therefore those for which the change cannot be made simply by rational refinement, while non-distant frameworks are those for which it can. This has the consequence that, contrary to earlier intuitions about cannibals and liberals, the relation of distance is symmetric; either there is a difference in social circumstances, or there is not.

Yet this has the consequence that it seems contrived to assert that all frameworks within classes of mutual non-distance are equally true. It has been conceded that under idealized circumstances, non-distant frameworks ought to converge. Thus, relative to the shared foundation of all the non-distant frameworks in a class, assuming that only one reasoning process and set of facts is correct, it is the case that there can only be one correct moral framework to be the product of a set of background conditions. So, within the classes of frameworks within which rational discussion is held by the relativist to be possible, there is no more than one correct framework. The project of the relativists, in its entirety, is rational refinement of the frameworks in the non-distance class of their own framework.

MMR is intended to give ethical discourse meaning in the absence of absolutes, and it self-consciously limits the discourse to rational refinement. It acknowledges that there can be no rational basis upon which to criticize at an axiomatic level where axioms are determined by circumstance. In conclusion, then, if the difference between liberals and cannibals is intractable, in the sense that, fully analyzed, both frameworks would end up at an axiomatic difference, MMR implies that both liberals and cannibals are acting rightly relative to their frameworks; the claim in question therefore holds true. If the difference isn't rational, however, and one side can convert the other by appealing to facts, and consistently within the other's framework, MMR does not imply that criticism is invalid.

2:1 - Develops a clear argument, considers objections, and makes reference to the specific issue outlined in the question. Does not reach First class level as it does not show familiarity with a range of material (only one philosopher is mentioned) and does not address the specific question in a sustained way throughout.