

Mathew H. Kramer, *Moral Realism as a Moral Doctrine*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, Pp. 387, ISBN 9781405194020

Understanding morality includes our perceptive knowledge of moral permissibility and moral unjustifiability on the one hand, and its correspondence to our actions in the real world on the other. Moral philosophy is characterized by moral universalists downgrading moral relativists (including those of subjectivists) and vice-versa. The never ending fit between the two compels us to reevaluate the notions of “variance” and “invariance” of moral principles with respect to moral adjudication. What are the claims that both the sides are unwilling to reconcile? What is it that they are not able to grasp in each other’s perspective? Are moral universalists merely obsessed with objectivity, and are relativists too much caught up with variance? These rival claims also bring us back to the initial position of the nature of morality and what it refers to.

Mathew Kramer’s book *Moral Realism* is a fine contribution on the nature of morality. He very strongly asserts that most of the principles that guide our moral behavior are objective and universal – somewhat characterized as observationally mind-independent and existentially mind-independent (26). This is how the moral realm is designated. While doing so, he elaborates three genus of ethical objectivity: Ontological (Mind-Independence, Determinate Correctness, Uniform applicability, Invariance); Epistemic (Transindividual Concurrence, Impartiality) and Semantic (truth-aptitude) (15). Much of the argument of Kramer centers around his own example to defend his thesis on moral realism: “The practice of torture perpetrated against babies for pleasure is wrong, as the practice of torturing babies for pleasure is wrong”. Kramer’s primary concern is the ‘invariant’ nature of moral principles that have universal validity irrespective of the context as long as one is not treading into the non-moral realm. Kramer’s argument is that relativists’ claims indicate a departure from the moral, and forces one into the non-moral realm, violating the application of reason as well as the “supervenience of the moral over the empirical.” This argument consistently runs throughout the book – invariant moral considerations prevail over all others invariably.

Kramer treats morality as a distinct realm and is concerned with what morality hinges on to. He refers to analytical and metaphysical truths, which make moral claims true in all possible worlds. But, what is not clear here is how do we arrive at the understanding that “torturing babies for pleasure is wrong”? One significant way that Kramer directly or indirectly argues for is *a priori* moral truths. Even if we admit that nothing more can guide us than a universal moral principle (taking into account the greater scope of morality), we are not enlightened on how we come to know it as a universal principle (especially *a priori*). Particular to morality, we tend to think reason is sufficient enough to grasp the moral, making existential mind-independence one of the necessary conditions for arriving at such moral axioms. Kramer directs us to a very important issue: determinacy and demonstrability explained along with intractability. We may have determinately correct answers yet indemonstrable. He asks two very pertinent questions: what could account for the intractability of moral conflicts? Why would people not converge in detecting the correct answers to the problems on which those conflicts are centered? (94) The argument that runs through the book is: if the basic principles of morality are properly complied with, intractability has no place in moral reasoning as we would be able to arrive at determinate answers even on perplexing questions (following the rule of non-contradiction). Kramer seems to assume that

perplexity does not imply irresolvability. However, intractability is not to be shunned away in totality.

Signifying moral realism, is Kramer denying the collision of basic moral values altogether? (not speaking in the line of Ronald Dworkin referred in the book: presence of a unique correct answer to every legal question.) Kramer claims that relativism and subjectivism need to take account of the infinite regress principle. Moral realists presume that relativists have either none or a minimal commitment to morality – for instance, they may not morally deplore Hitler's action (Kramer's analysis of Gilbert Harman). In a way Harman is talking what Kramer explained as the difference between indeterminacy and indemonstrability. There are many aspects that are difficult to put across all individuals for consensus, because of which moral frameworks are significant. This does not prove amorality as central and integral to relativism. All our analysis depends upon how we take morality to be, i.e., the base parameter, like for some, "life is beautiful," and for some others, life is nothing but "experiencing the pain." To analyze our choices, preferences and actions is one thing and understanding the complexity of life is another. One of the most significant concerns that emerge out of the book is the ontological status of moral relativism and moral subjectivism? What is missing in Kramer's argument is this: there is a difference in the way we understand two different instances like "torturing babies for pleasure is wrong" from "burning Tolstoy's book in public in Russia is wrong."

Kramer further makes interesting clarifications about categorical prescriptiveness, uniformity and neutrality. The principle that proscribes murders proves the fact that the principle partakes at the level of consequence. He must have had in mind moral proceduralism, where rules and laws are grounded in some definite moral standards. How do we explain these two in the example mentioned in the previous paragraph? His linking of categorical prescriptiveness and uniformity of moral duties seems to have an a priori attribution to the notion of a moral duty – meaning there is certainly a presumptive clear distinction between moral and non-moral, though not explicitly stated. Kramer takes a strong stand committing that whenever various 'oughts' compete, then the moral prevails over all others (thus negating all other considerations). Any morally competent person, for Kramer, does not face the dilemma of choosing between a moral duty and a non-moral duty. Though this kind of supervenience 'may' be considered, we cannot be happy with Kramer's thesis on prudential, aesthetic and supererogatory factors. Nevertheless, the challenge Kramer poses to a moral agent is the capacity to identify something moral by virtue of morality. Morality takes priority but a critical reflection is needed here in reconciling how one fulfills a life-project constitutive of desires, choices and preferences.

It would be interesting to see how Kramer's existential and observational mind-independence entail on social morality. Here, we need to admit that both moral universalism and moral relativism are insufficient in addressing conclusively questions related to common morality, be it abortion, euthanasia, corporeal punishment, public morality etc. This takes us to Kramer's concern for invariance *contra* variance. Like other moral realists, Kramer ignores the fact that substantial amount of moral principles are varyingly invariant in the sense that they 'evolve' over a period of time through thoughtful reflection. It does not deny a sudden abrupt change in our moral outlook – both individually and collectively. This is evident from the fact that humanity was not born with ready-made answers to perennial moral questions raised since ancient times. For in-

stance, woman's say in abortion was not considered a few decades back as is considered now. So is the way we treat corporeal punishment and many other moral questions.

Implications of basic moral principles are seen as problematic when we extend them to rather a larger scope. Supposing that "a world is morally possible if and only if every normative state of affairs within it is consistent with the existence of all the basic principles of morality (158)" is apt, moral realists need to identify the difference of 'spheres of human life' while applying reason. The assertion is not to make the point 'necessary'; that basic moral principles, of the kind Kramer refers to, cannot be extended across frameworks. Moral knowledge, whether perceptive or relating to the conduct of human affairs, individual or collective, ought to account for both invariant and contingent principles. It is a very complex task to list out where moral objectivity and moral relativism applies exactly. This is backed up by a subsidiary assertion that the mere fact that the domain of natural sciences and mathematics is featured with strong existential and observational mind-independence does not entail the same in the domain of morality. Any such imposition is reflective of presupposed rightness being placed in the former's domain and making it imperative upon other domains of human inquiry.

Kramer is right in so far he states that people might have mistaken convictions individually or collectively. These misapprehensions, at times, will certainly influence the invariant application of a moral principle. For instance, stating the example of cannibalism, Kramer asks us about the moral status of it across societies. As a moral principle, a supposition that cannibalism is morally impermissible is applicable across all moral frameworks. It cannot be morally impermissible in S and permissible in S_1 . Referring to the actual world itself, we can say that modes of moral inquiries differ at various levels of human existence and the kind of examples we take. Asking someone whether cannibalism is permissible or not has different moral force from that of asking someone whether her/his choice to pursue the career in the field of arts than in sciences has any ethical value.

Kramer's reference to objectivity *vis-a-vis* existential mind-independence and trans-individual concurrence in fields like cosmology and natural sciences, in terms of recognition-transcendence is interesting in comparison to moral understanding. For him, epistemic objectivity seems to be domain specific, and different from trans-individual concurrence. It is right that epistemic objectivity is unaffected by differences even under optimal conditions; however, assuming that divergences are due to corrupting factors is too predisposed an inference drawn against moral difference. Epistemic objectivity of law in most situations is robust is to be carefully analyzed. The separation between moral and legal domains is a dubious distinction as the latter is dependent on the former substantially. He may seem to be claiming that morality is mostly dependent on what people agree them to be that connects trans-individual concurrence and consensus. The latter two are different from recognition-transcendence in the sense that people may have consensus over a thing that is not part of it. Divergences in everyday life are not due to corrupting factors.

By denying any epistemic value to variance, Kramer's 'moral realism' attempts to make recourse to dependence on existentially and observationally mind-independent principles. To comment on the example taken by him: let us suppose that jurists exhibit epistemic objectivity by passing the judgment that 'racial segregation of children in school' is not morally permissible. On the contrary, what if the 'normal' norm of functioning of a school brings no better social prestige to the child of a colored race? Kram-

er's perspective is over conscious of treading into the zone of divergence. Like other moral realists, his idea too presupposes that divergent answers resemble misconceived 'wild assumptions' and 'unwarranted' knowledge. If there exists a right answer to every question despite its inaccessibility to human beings (even reason), non-cognitivism must be equally meaningful to cognitivism.

The issue implicit in all perspectives of moral realism is non-persistence of divergences - convergence is ought to be obtained albeit intractability is the initial condition. Here, the reference is made to Crispin Wright's idea of representational capacities of human beings within robustly objective domains. Any sort of intractability or disagreement is indicative of lack of objectivity of that domain or cognitive incapacity of some of the persons involved in reasoning. This is only one side of the argument. The other side is 'moral questions' aren't raised in such a way that yields the desired/anticipated outcome. The ability to judge morally is somehow linked to our understanding of moral properties - where, for majority of moral realists (unlike for Simon Blackburn), supervene empirical properties. Kramer takes an interesting stand stating that there are overwhelmingly strong reasons for the reality of moral properties. Let us take his own example, 'wrongness of genocide', how does one come to know the moral property of 'wrongness of genocide'? Is it not observationally mind-dependent? If it isn't a natural property, then is it the product of human reason or intuition? Supervenience of moral over empirical does not mean any lack of dependence on the latter, even though the reality of a moral property is itself a moral matter. However, the causal inefficacy thesis has substance in it; the difficulty of empirical verifiability of moral properties. Kramer's thesis gains more points in that it attempts to make understanding morality more than a descriptive enterprise (as is seen in Frank Jackson's theory). The challenge to moral properties is not confined to the question of their presence and knowability, but also to explain how certain moral principles acquire those properties of rightness or wrongness, real or unreal etc.

The demands of impartiality take us to another level. Demands of morality might be imperative on us theoretically, but practical morality may be something else to some extent. Partially it has to do with the knowability of moral precepts. The impartiality condition faces a paradox here: It is apt to think that one ought not to be impetuous, whimsical and partial. It is counterfeited by people's inability to rise above their partial conditional circumstances. Here, no defense is drawn for partial or complete agent-centered behavior - some have argued that agent-centrality and agent-neutrality can be overlapped (Thomas Nagel's "personalizing the impersonal"). We are only talking about the reasonableness of moral demands; that a moral agent should possess the ability to let her verdict be unaffected by the belief that he has a stake in there. Does it mean to say that, for instance, if Christian morality is corrupt, the moral agent will by virtue of existentially mind-independent knowledge be impartial enough to relinquish, by the virtue of self-critique, that morality altogether?. How does he identify the moral truth-conduciveness of certain moral traditions? How far we can go ahead with the logic that morality or the truth about moral principles are independent of our beliefs. For a capitalist, the belief that 'socialism is driven by false principles' is an impartial belief. Does a mathematician's way of seeing the world is more impartial than a sociologist? Does the former possess more moral value than the latter? The terrain of morality at a particular level is always characterized with dilemmas and contradictions. For instance, who has violated the principle of humanity more: Hitler against Nazis or Israelis against the

Palestinians or Communists against Liberals or West as colonial rulers? Moral realists should also be self-critical about why their exemplifications feature only particular than the rest.

Kramer argues for impartiality for two reasons; truth-conduciveness and epistemic reliability. It is further illustrated by the fact that moral judgments aim to fit the correct principles of morality. Once again our argument takes a reversal. Truth-conduciveness is very much integral to any form of moral reasoning, but how those truth assertions are placed in the domain is of utmost importance. For instance, a particular claim is of moral importance if and only if it is the case that P is x . It all depends upon what is x and how it is formulated. Racial inferiority is morally insignificant unless it is the case. All social and common morality too is understood likewise. It is the responsibility of a moral realist to come up with those principles of morality, lest, moral relativist can challenge the validity of these moral standards. Kramer does not go on to inquire about how these set of moral standards are arrived at – except for him they are outcome of rational enterprise involved in existential and observational mind-independence. It is fine to say that impartiality is preferred to save moral judgments from prejudices and ignorance. Moral realists claim that a fully informed moral agent cannot be morally ambiguous from the judgmental point of view. The assumption itself may be misleading – in the sense that how is it possible that a moral agent is fully informed about moral matters. S/he is fully informed in the sense that they abide by the assumed ‘correct principles of morality’ without further thought-reflection over why they are correct.

It is always a matter of intense debate as to how our beliefs and desires fit into the real world, and a more convincing account is required to purport the point of fitting the world in our desires and beliefs. The latter cannot be evaded altogether. Rationally compelling moral principles too stand fragile here. The question posed for moral realists is – on what basis moral principles are in conformity with the laws of logic? Or is it mere obsession with the terms like logical necessity and objectivity? Kramer’s point escapes this kind of criticism as he claims that moral necessity and logical necessity are different. However, it is interesting to see how Kramer claims that mostly our rejection of moral principles is violation of moral requirements i.e., moral obedience, shows us ‘unreasonable behavior’ than logical incoherence or irrationality. There is some problem in such an assumption. Anyone can violate moral principles without being irrational – without being entangled in logical contradictions but in most of the cases the immoral behavior is unreasonable. Kramer is right in so far as he departs from Hare’s notion that logical-moral nexus is stated very simplistically. Clarification is needed on irrationality of moral agents i.e., a better way to assert that a person is morally mistaken. Kramer only tends to differ with Hare on how moral universalizability is to be obtained; nevertheless, prompting that it is the desired condition.

An assumption that any kind of morally qualitative distinctions is immoral is itself in one significant way unreasonable on the part of moral realists. It is not a necessary condition, hoping that moral philosophy has gone well ahead, that if two persons are perfectly identical in natural properties, they are identical in moral qualities too. Moral consensus is not always an instance of progress of our capacities for ratiocination. But for moral realists we cannot conceive of a possible moral order that licenses different moral ascriptions for situations that are in all aspects identical in nature. There are instances when non-moral considerations prevail over the moral – does not mean failure of the latter. The distinction between moral and non-moral is always problem-

atic. The supervenience of ethical over the empirical is reasonable but assumption that relativism is tantamount to 'non-moral' *per se* is itself unreasonable. A contrary picture to this goes like this: moral consensus cannot be imagined in all morally relevant and identical conditions. It may otherwise mean that morally non-identical conditions if any would certainly lead to morally divergent judgments and would still remain moral.

On the whole, Kramer's book is completely refreshing in its detailed account of moral realism. It can be said that the book made marked progress in moral philosophy in two significant ways. First, Kramer's very lengthy discussions of most contentious issues provide progressive insights for researchers in moral philosophy. Second, he poses strong challenge to relativists and subjectivists on the one hand, and ethical naturalists on the other. Issues discussed by Kramer are most compelling in nature – the most pertinent question being the entailment of existential and observational mind-independence of basic moral principles. It remains an open question as how invariant is this assumption. The richness of debates in this book take us back to have a thoughtful reflection, on the one hand, on the nature of morality possessing epistemic value, and the complexity existent and complexity attributed to our understanding of ethical dimension of human behavior on the other. However, Kramer's defense of moral realism doesn't end the debate between objectivity and subjectivity, and between universality and relativity.

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