

# Is moral relativism a good explanation of the existence of widespread moral disagreement?

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# Is moral relativism a good explanation of the existence of widespread moral disagreement?

Moral disagreement happens when two agents disagree on the truth of a moral statement. Moral statements are claims that something is morally good or bad, right or wrong, obligatory or permissible. For example, that we should never lie is a moral statement. It states that lying is never permissible. Different people have different opinions on this matter. Many Kantians have argued that it is true, while others disagree and argue that lying is sometimes necessary as a means against evil. For ease of discussion, I shall call those agents who give truth values to moral statements attributors. For instance, Kantians are attributors of truth to the statement that we should never lie.

In response to the existence of moral disagreements, moral universalists and moral relativists offer different explanations. Moral universalism is the thesis that the truth of moral statements is independent of the attributors of truths. Orthodoxically, moral universalists would argue that moral disagreements happen because at least one of the attributors is wrong. However, the orthodoxical explanation of moral universalism fails to provide the potency for resolution because of their epistemological burden to find the true theory of morality. On the contrary, moral relativists claim that moral statements' truth depends on the attributors. This dependency invites the co-existence of different perspectives, which can free moral relativists from some epistemological burdens for universalists to provide resolution. Nevertheless, the explanation by perspectives incites epistemological burdens on how a justifiable common decision can be made under different perspectives.

Instead, this essay will argue for the explanation by approximate interpretation. On the one hand, unlike the explanation by mistakes provided by the universalists, this explanation does not give rise to an epistemological burden to find the true theory of morality. On the other hand, unlike the explanation by perspectives, this explanation provides an answer on how one can make justifiable resolutions based on the quality of approximation. However, I will argue that this explanation is open to both universalists, who claim that the truth value converges with the improvement of interpretations, and relativists, who claim that truth value does not converge. Under the scope of this essay, it is unclear which of universalism and relativism is true. This undecidability of universalism and relativism shows an orthogonality between the relativism-and-universalism debate and the problem of providing a potent explanation for widespread moral disagreements.

Because of this orthogonality, I will not conclude that moral relativism is a good explanation of the existence of widespread moral disagreement.

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### 1. Moral universalism

Moral universalists can explain the existence of some moral disagreements by resorting to the fact that moral attributors make mistakes. Although universalists claim that moral truths are independent of the attributors, the disagreeing parties could fail to know the universal truths. As a result, their moral beliefs could be diverse as they endorse false beliefs. In particular, this explanation seems convincing in cases which can be called factual moral disagreements. In factual disagreements, two agents correctly agree on general moral principles. However, because they hold different non-moral beliefs about a specific situation and reason from these beliefs differently, they may nonetheless disagree on detailed moral statements about the specific situation.

For example, consider two people holding the same moral principle that rolling out unreliable self-driving cars is morally wrong. While they agree on this principle, they may still disagree on the morality of rolling out a particular car model because they have different empirical beliefs about how reliable this car brand is. One person believes this car brand has a very low probability of accidents in normal scenarios. In contrast, the other believes this car brand has a significantly high probability of accidents. In this case, the disagreement between the two attributors does not result from fundamentally different moral principles. But rather it is a result of their different non-moral beliefs about how high the probability of accidents is. If they could find the truth about this factual question, they would be able to resolve their moral disagreement regarding the rolling out of this model of car.

But in many other moral disagreements, agents disagree on the basic principles applied in the situations. For example, in the case of lying, Kantians argue that lying is always impermissible because it is against the categorical imperative. According to the formula of universal law, that lying is permissible is not a universalizable principle. Because if lying was a universalized principle, everyone would expect that the people they talk to are lying, give no trust in what they say, and even disengage from the conversation. This absence of trustful communication will undermine the possibility of lying, as lying to another person involves the communication and trust of the person you lied to. However, utilitarianism has a different diagnosis of lying. Classical utilitarianism holds that behaviour is morally good if it maximizes the total happiness in the world. According to utilitarianism, lying in some cases is permissible if it brings more happiness in the world than not. In this disagreement, it is not difference in their empirical beliefs that lead to disagreements, but it is the difference in their fundamental moral principles that lead to disagreements. For the discussion in this essay, I shall call disagreements on fundamental moral principles ‘radical moral disagreements.’

Universalists will be tempted to explain the existence of this moral disagreement by supposing that at least one of the disagreeing parties makes a mistake. However, this response will be problematic for radical disagreements because universalists lack the means to adjudicate. They can neither use rationality because, as the case of lying shows, both Kantian ethics and utilitarianism seem sufficiently supported by rationality, nor are there sufficient empirical means to adjudicate between fundamental moral principles<sup>1</sup>, so it is much harder to know the true moral

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<sup>1</sup> One example against the viability of adjudicating moral principles empirically can be found in Harman’s response to Judith. See Harman’s example of Mary. (Harman & Thomson, 1996, pp. 185-186)

principles than the empirical facts. But to adequately explain the disagreement as the mistake of one particular party, universalists will need to know the only true theory of morality to see which party is wrong in the disagreement. The epistemological burden to find the true theory is heavy.

As a result, the explanation by mistake is not more effective than the explanation by apparent difference. To see why it is the case, let's suppose that two agents, A and B, have a radical disagreement concerning a fundamental moral principle, P. In this case, A attributes falsehood to P, while B attributes truth to P. This observation is the conceptually minimum explanation of why there is a moral disagreement. But this explanation is not satisfying because this explanation does not entail how A and B come to disagree over the principle P. Without knowing how A and B come to attribute different truth values to the same principle, one does not know how to resolve the disagreement between A and B. Hence, a *potent explanation* must explain how a resolution of the disagreement is possible. In factual disagreements, we know that A and B come to disagree because at least one makes a mistake in the empirical methodologies to attribute truth values to facts. So, to resolve the disagreement, we only need to carefully apply the empirical methodologies to find the correct truth values to the fact. However, in the case of radical disagreement, the explanation by mistake does not explain how A and B come to make mistakes on the truth values of the same fundamental principle because they lack the knowledge of the true theory of morality<sup>2</sup>. As a result, the explanation by mistake provides no way of resolving radical moral disagreements by correcting the mistakes. In this sense, the explanation by mistake is not better than pointing out the apparent difference between the disagreeing parties. If this is the case, saying one party makes a mistake is unhelpful. Then by the principle of parsimony, we should not complicate the explanation by assuming that one party makes a mistake in radical disagreements..

To take stock, we have discussed why explanation by mistakes is not a good option for universalists because radical moral disagreements are faultless. Here, I discussed universalists at such length because there is an important lesson for relativism. The lesson is the following: Relativists must provide an explanation of how a resolution can be made without a heavy

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<sup>2</sup> Moreover, asserting a true theory of morality without empirical support only shifts the burden of resolving the disagreement circularly. without empirical means to find the true moral theory, the assertion of the true theory and the interpretation of who is wrong in the disagreement circularly support each other. This circularity shows that universalists cannot assert the existence of a true theory of morality prior to the resolution of radical disagreements.

epistemological burden. Otherwise, they will not succeed in providing a potent explanation that goes beyond pointing out the apparent differences among the disagreeing parties.

## 2. Moral relativism

Moral relativism is often posed as a better choice in explaining the existence of radical moral disagreements. Relativists claim that people come to have different fundamental moral principles because of their cultural conventions or personal preferences. As relativists claim that the truths of the statements depend on the attributors, they argue that each of the disagreeing parties is telling the truth from their perspective and their judgements are to be preserved. Hence, radical moral disagreement can exist even if no one makes mistakes.

But as we discussed earlier, universalists' root problem is their inability to provide an explanation that can lead to moral resolution. To put relativism and universalism in fair trials, the next natural question we want to ask is this: Without heavy epistemological burden, can relativists explain how disagreements occur and how resolution can be made? It is not obvious. Suppose relativists are to resolve the disagreement regarding the statement that lying is not always wrong. There are at least two ways they can achieve it. First, they can use the relative truth values, such that a statement does not only have a scalar truth value but a vector of relative truth value. In this explanation, the statement lying is not always wrong is true-for-Kantian and false-for-utilitarianists. The two truth values coexist side-by-side in the truth value vector. However, I believe this vector theory of truth is counterintuitive. In particular, it counters the deflationary use of true statements, which suggests that the truth value is a scalar.<sup>3</sup> The second way is to use conceptual framework. In this explanation, each attributor is said to have its own conceptual framework to understand statements. Kantians understand the statement that lying is always wrong as 'lying is always wrong under the Kantian conceptual framework'. Utilitarianists understand the statement as 'lying is always wrong under the Utilitarianism conceptual

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<sup>3</sup> truth is said to be deflationary because the assertion It is true that X adds nothing new to the assertion X. I do not want to suggest that [the deflationary theory of truth](#) is true, but only to make a case that deflationary use is intuitive.

framework. In this case, Kantians and utilitarianists attribute truth values to two parallel statements. Hence, relativists claim that we need to do nothing to resolve the disagreement in the appearance.

To take stock, we can call this explanation by perspectives. In this explanation, each disagreeing party holds a perspective shaped by personal and cultural factors. Their perspectives determine the truth of the fundamental moral principles. To resolve the disagreement, we should simply see them as talking past each other and do nothing. Hence, according to the explanation by perspectives, relativists can explain the resolution of radical moral disagreements in dissolution.

However, on many occasions, dissolution of the disagreement is impossible by allowing conflicting attributions to exist. For example, suppose a doctor performs euthanasia on a patient suffering from extreme pain and asking for relief. For those who believe it is wrong to kill a person under any circumstances because killing violates the dignity of life, they would argue that we should punish the doctor for the crime she performs. While others who believe relieving a person from extreme pain can bring more happiness in the world, hence it should be permissible, will argue that the doctor does nothing wrong and we should not punish him. For relativists who believe both perspectives can coexist, it would be impossible to explain how to reach a common decision on whether or not the doctor should be punished. Logically speaking, only one of the conflicting actions can be carried out on this occasion. But to reach such a common decision, the disagreeing parties must come under one perspective.

In response, relativists must see the perspectives of the attributors as something changeable, and they must explain how their perspectives should change to yield a common decision for resolution. This requirement gives relativists a significant epistemological burden. If they cannot explain how a common decision can be made, then this explanation is not potent. One explanation is given by Wong (Wong, 2006). Wong argues that we must care about other parties, so our perspectives will converge in practice under the universal requirement to care. However, Wong does not give direction on what a common perspective would look like. Without a direction, any possibilities of common perspectives and methods of reaching them can be acceptable for relativists.

But not all possibilities reached by communication are just. For example, slavery may be justifiable from the perspective of an enslaver, as enslavers argue that they can best protect the welfare of their slaves because slaves know very little, and they should follow the orders of the

enslavers. But from the perspective of the slaves, they will not see this as justifiable. They would argue that their liberty is severely limited, and it is wrong. Relativists may argue that both of them are right from their perspectives. However in this case, after communications, both the slaves and the enslavers agree to keep slavery. In the process of convincing the slaves, the enslavers might release them into the wilderness without giving them what they need to sustain their lives. The now freemen are unable to live under this condition, so they return to the enslaver for basic goods and compromise.

Here, I do not mean to justify slavery. Slavery is wrong. There are structures of organizations that are much more justifiable than slavery-owner relations. Comparing to a slave-owner relations which favours the owner unlimitedly, employee-employer relations are built on contracts that detail the balanced and limited duties. In a contract, the employers' and employees' duties are accounted for, and the employees will have the liberty to determine their lives outside of their work. Furthermore, the slave owner is also wrong to coerce the slaves into buying his perspective by not giving the now-freeman basic conditions for living. When releasing the slave, the enslaver should compensate the now-free man for his work. In addition, the enslaver should give the now-freeman an opportunity to do what he normally does as a job under the employer-employee contract. If the slave owner gives all these conditions while releasing the slaves, then there are no reasons for the now-freeman to compromise. In general, the case of the slaves and enslavers shows that some methods of settling disagreements can be coercive and wrong, and settling disagreements in these can yield severe injustice in the final common decision.

To avoid injustice in resolution, relativists must find methods to reach a common decision justifiably. But it is unclear how relativists can find a direction in making common decisions because, according to relativists, all disagreeing parties make decisions based on a true statement from their perspective, which means there is no quality difference among the judgements from different perspectives. In response, relativists may argue that there are quality differences among perspectives, if not among their judgements. But it is also unclear on what basis relativists can compare the quality of cultures and personal preferences. The task for relativists to adjudicate perspectives does not seem easier than universalists' quest to find the true theory. Therefore, in so far as the explanation by perspectives goes, relativists have significant burdens in explaining how resolutions with common decision can be made. Because of this epistemological burden, relativists' typical explanation is not potent.



### 3. Explanation by approximate interpretations

At this point, I have given enough motivation to explore an explanation that starts neither from mistakes nor perspectives. For clarity, I will first present the explanation by approximate interpretations in this section. Then, I will argue why this explanation is potent. At last, I will argue how both universalists and relativists can offer an explanation from approximate interpretation.

#### 3.1. How do distinct kinds of moral disagreements arise?

As we suggest in the above sections, we should make two distinctions of disagreements for different matched explanations of their existence. First, there is distinction between factual and radical disagreements. Factual disagreements exist because someone is wrong about the empirical facts, and the disagreements can be resolved through empirical means. Radical moral disagreements exist because disagreeing parties attribute different truth values to a set of fundamental principles. Next, the theoretical/decisional disagreement distinction can further bifurcate radical moral disagreements. Theoretical disagreements are disagreements over statements without specific decision problems. For example, the disagreement between Kantian and utilitarianism over the general permissibility of lying is theoretical. As the relativists suggest, theoretical disagreements can be dissolved. In comparison, a decisional disagreement are disagreement in a specific situation. For example, a disagreement over the permissibility of the British prime minister to falsely deny his participation in parties in the time of a nationwide lockdown for pandemic control<sup>4</sup> is decisional. The prime minister is either permitted to deny or not deny. The resolution of this disagreement implies a decision<sup>5</sup>. Thus in the decisional disagreement, a resolution with a common decision must be made. Both previously mentioned explanations are insufficient in explaining how it is possible. The explanation by approximate interpretation is proposed to explain the existence of decisional radical moral disagreements.

The explanation is based on the mechanism to evaluate decisional statements like 'the prime minister is permissible to participate mass gatherings during the pandemic as official meetings'.

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<sup>4</sup> see <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/mar/20/boris-johnson-guilty-misleading-parliamentary-civil-war-commons>. The point is to make a concrete situation statement.

<sup>5</sup> Whether to hold the primminister accountable.

Normally, it is difficult to evaluate such statements because of the inadequacy and complexity of the information about a particular situation. To continue evaluation, one must simplify and focus on some available features to analyze the situation and compare the case with paradigmatic cases that the agent can readily understand. For example, to judge the statement about the prime minister's participation in mass gatherings, it is imaginable that someone only sees that the prime minister being the prime minister is an important feature, and the see that it is important to protect the privilege and persona of the prime minister. Many others only see his gatherings as unnecessary mass gathering for fun; because the prime minister denies his participation in these gatherings, they will see this as a paradigmatic case of lying not punished; for them, the interpretation of 'the prime minister is permissible to participate mass gatherings during the pandemic as official meetings' is the statement that 'the prime minister can lie for his benefits' which is false. If this interpretation is accurate, one will attribute falsehood to the uninterpreted statement that 'the prime minister is permissible to participate mass gatherings during the pandemic as official meetings'.

The above example demonstrates the process of attributing truth value to a statement. This process can be further broken down into two independent processes. First is the process of interpreting a statement in a moral framework of concepts and fundamental principles. Using the moral framework's fundamental principles, the agent can infer the truth values for the interpretation statement. For example, in the above example, interpreting the statement (a) 'the prime minister is permissible to participate mass gatherings during the pandemic as official meetings' as 'the prime minister can lie for his own benefits' and inferring that (b) 'the prime minister can lie for his own benefits' is false, are two steps in the process of interpretation. Second, the truth values are now only attributed to the interpreted statement within the moral framework of the attributor. The attributor needs to approximate the truth value of the decisional moral statement by the truth value of the decisional moral statement. In the above example, this is to attribute falsity to the statement (a) by using the truth value of its interpretation (b) as an approximation. In combination, we can call two processes together as approximate interpretations.

To sum up, for a moral decision statement S, agent X attributes the truth value of S by approximating S's truth value with the truth value of its interpretation S(F) under a moral framework F of concepts and fundamental moral statements. Hence, radical decisional moral disagreements can happen when the disagreeing parties use different moral frameworks to approximately interpret the truth value of a decisional statement.

### 3.2. How can a disagreement be resolved with a common decision?

As approximate interpretation can only provide truth values for the decision statement approximately, an approximation can be better or worse depending on the moral framework used in the interpretation. In general, four aspects of interpretation can determine the quality of the approximation: paradigmatic aptness, feature coverage/precision, framework coherence and inference complexity. A good interpretation uses features apt in the situations, with sufficient coverage and precision to cover the features noticed by the disagreeing parties. Moreover, a good interpretation should use a framework with coherent moral principles, and the inference in the framework should be as straightforward as possible. I will explain these features one by one.

First, a good interpretation should have paradigmatic aptness. In the prototypical theory of concept application<sup>6</sup>, each concept has some paradigms and classifies an instance comparing the instance with the paradigms. The closer the instance is to the paradigm, the better the concept's application. For example, the paradigm for working is based on the exchange of services and goods with payments with roughly equal values. The further the exchange is away from the equality of values, the less apt it is to describe the relationship as a work. In addition, in the paradigm case of working, the workers are allowed to make decisions outside of work. In an owner-slave relationship, the ability to make decisions for how they live is not present, making it less apt to be described as working. Because of the severe inaptness of the concept of working in this interpretation, the quality of the approximation provided by the enslaver about their decision is very low.

Second, a good interpretation should capture as many features as possible to provide the fullest depiction of the situation for judgement. This depiction should include descriptions of the dynamics of events and the independent opinions of the participants. For example, in the case of euthanasia, it is important to describe the financial and biological consequences of euthanasia and how the client and others think of euthanasia as much as possible. Furthermore, the precision of the description also matters. To better judge a case of euthanasia, one should describe the technology and process to conduct euthanasia; it is important to know if the process has little pain, gives the client dignity and warmth, and is financially affordable. At the same time, it is

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<sup>6</sup> See prototype theory <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/concepts/#ProThe>

important to know the thoughts of the client, their family members, and the general public respectively. Suppose now the description becomes precise, we know that the process is painless, as smooth as going to sleep, accompanied by his family and friends, reversible at any moment before he becomes unconscious, and approved by their friends and the general public. Moreover, at the end of the process, the client can be freed from his struggle with chronic physical pain and persistent boredom of life. Then with descriptions as precise as such, the quality of the approximation will be high with this interpretation.

The next two points concern the quality of the application of moral principles. A good collection of moral principles should, at minimum, be coherent. It should not be possible to infer contradictory results if one selects two subsets of moral principles in the application. In addition, a good application of moral principles should be as simple as possible such that it is possible to infer. For example, in the case of the prime minister's participation in mass gatherings, consequentialists may ask us to evaluate all possible consequences of the the prime minister's admission of having a party as a defence. Although this can increase the coverage and precision of description of the case, it complicates the inference process unnecessarily. When it becomes too complicated, the approximation may appear unconvincing. Therefore, a good interpretation should balance the inference complexity and feature coverage.

Hence, to morally resolve the moral disagreement, the disagreeing parties should agree with the judgement passed by the approximate interpretations with the highest quality. If the qualities of approximate interpretation are similar, the disagreeing parties should strike to provide a common interpretation with better aptness, coverage, precision, coherence and simplicity than any existing interpretations. In this way, a resolution with a common decision based on a good approximation can be found.

### **3.3. Why is this explanation open to both universalism and relativism?**

Some may falsely see that the explanation by approximate interpretation entails relativism. From their perspectives, in the explanation by approximate interpretation, attributors use different moral frameworks to interpret a moral statement, and the initial moral frameworks of the attributors depend on their perspective. This creates a situation where agents make different attributions because of the difference in their perspectives. However, unlike in the explanation by perspective, this does not create a situation under which one statement has different truth values

relative to the perspectives of the attributors. According to the explanation by approximate interpretation, the disagreeing parties evaluate the same statement approximately with different qualities. There is no guarantee on whether their approximation represents the truth, so the explanation does not entail relativism in virtue of the difference in the approximate values given by the disagreeing parties.

In comparison, some may also falsely see the entailment of universalism in the explanation by approximate interpretation. As disagreeing parties are making approximations on the same statement, it may be natural to assume that there is only one truth value for this statement. According to universalists, the result of increasing the approximation quality will be the convergence to the truth. However, this is not guaranteed as well. Different interpretations may continue to improve in quality by increasing the aptness, coverage, precision, coherence and simplicity in different directions. Hence their judgement may diverge in the end. If the attributions diverge, then the truth of the moral statements is partly determined by the attributors' choice to increase the quality of interpretations. In this case, relativism will be true.

As far as this essay goes, it is unclear if convergence will happen in the progress of adopting better interpretations. But this essay does not have the burden of proof. The issue of whether relativism is entailed by the explanation by approximate interpretation seems undecidable. However, as we have shown, the potency of the explanation does not rest on whether the result of the resolution converges. The explanation by approximate interpretation is potent because the resolution of disagreement can be found by comparing the quality of the interpretations of the disagreeing parties. Therefore, a decision on whether relativism is true is not necessary to explain the existence of moral disagreements. There is an orthogonality between the relativism-and-universalism debate and the problem of providing a potent explanation for widespread moral disagreements

## 4. Conclusion

To explain the widespreadness of moral disagreements, this essay has argued that the difficulty is to explain the existence of radical decisional moral disagreements, for which traditional

explanations associated with universalism and relativism fail to be potent. In response, this essay has argued that relativism can provide a good explanation for radical decisional moral disagreements based on approximate interpretation. However, this essay has also argued that the explanation by approximate interpretation is not potent by virtue of relativism; a version based on universalism could provide equal potency. This equality in potency suggests that explaining moral disagreement is orthogonal to the relativism/universalism debate. Because of this orthogonality, this essay will not conclude that relativism is a good explanation on its own.

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