

## Aspects of Folk Morality\*

### *Objectivism and Relativism*

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The past several years have witnessed a burgeoning of research in the field of folk metaethics, or the way that ordinary, philosophically untutored folk view the status of morality. Interest in this research has been fueled by two distinct yet overlapping quarters. On the one hand, psychologists have been interested in how folk react to moral disagreement, and the ways that morality may enlist distinctive psychological processes or motivate distinctive behavior. For example, some work has shown that a tendency to thinking of morality in absolute<sup>1</sup> terms arises early in development (Wainryb *et al.* 2004). Other studies have found that priming people to think of morality in objectivist terms increases their prosocial behavior (Rai and Holyoak 2013; Young and Durwin 2013), while still others have found a correlation between embracing relativism about morality and being tolerant of others (Wright, Cullum, and Schwab 2008). Psychologists have also looked at how folk metaethical views might be related to other psychological constructs, such as belief in moral progress or belief in a just world (Uttich, Tsai, and Lombrozo 2014). On the other hand, philosophers have also (and increasingly) been interested in this research program, though for some distinct reasons. A chief motivator for this latter group of researchers has been the prominent role that folk metaethical claims play in philosophical theories. In particular, most metaethicists maintain that part their goal is to make sense of ordinary moral practice which itself is committed to a conception of morality as absolute (and not relative). This datum serves to constrain and shape philosophical metaethics, since those working in this field feel compelled to make sense of it.

In what follows, I will discuss why philosophers take on this commitment in the first place. Next, I will outline the relevant experimental research exploring whether, and to what extent, ordinary folk think of morality in absolute terms. As we shall see, folk metaethical commitments

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\*My thanks to Wesley Buckwalter, Justin Sytsma, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments on a previous draft.

are in fact woolier than most philosophers have assumed. Finally, I will turn toward a more general discussion of what implications this work may have for philosophical ethics.

### 14.1 Metaethics and Folk Morality

Metaethicists attempt to characterize the nature and status of morality by stepping away from particular moral issues and judgments and then looking, systematically and abstractly, at the underlying assumptions, commitments, and foundations of ordinary moral practice. Although metaethics is a large and diverse field, a key question within this discipline is whether moral judgments make reference to objective moral properties that are independent of human thought and sentiment, or whether morality can only be valid relative to the standards of a moral community or moral framework. There are many things to consider when trying to answer this question. Philosophers reflect on ordinary platitudes or truisms concerning morality, on conceptual analyses of moral concepts, as well as the structure of ordinary language and the nature of moral phenomenology. The purpose or goal of this research is to arrive at some unified theory about the status of morality. Put another way, philosophers are trying to systematically characterize and unify the phenomenon that needs explaining.

Michael Gill has described the paradigmatic method of metaethics as involving a two-stage process (Gill 2009). The first stage in this process includes “gathering examples of moral ideas and terms in everyday language and thought... canvassing commonsense moral judgments, linguistic intuitions, and platitudes” (217). Here, philosophers almost inevitably arrive at the platitude that everyday moral discourse is committed to moral absolutism, that ordinary folk take morality to trade in mind-independent moral facts, and that if two individuals disagree about a moral issue at least one of them must be incorrect. Having thus characterized the phenomenon that needs explaining, philosophers then move on to the second stage in the process, which consists in trying to argue for a particular, systematic theory of the evidence gathered in the first stage, usually with a conceptual characterization of morality as having a certain shape or structure. For some philosophers, this second step in the analysis will vindicate ordinary moral practice. That is, some philosophers argue that morality truly is objective and absolute in nature, just as ordinary folk maintain. Other philosophers argue to the contrary, and claim that ordinary moral practice is mistaken, because the true nature of morality is not objective and absolute.

For present purposes, the important thing to note is that, regardless of what comes out of this two-stage process (whether the resulting theory is a form of realism, relativism, expressivism, etc.), philosophers generally agree at the first stage that ordinary moral practice is committed to objectivism. For example, Frank Jackson writes that,

it is part of current folk morality that convergence will or would occur. We have some kind of commitment to the idea that moral disagreements can be resolved by sufficient critical reflection—which is why we bother to engage in moral debate. To that extent, some sort of objectivism is part of current folk morality (Jackson 2000, 137).

Stephen Darwall claims that “ethical thought and feeling have ‘objective purport.’ From the inside, they apparently aspire to truth or correctness and presuppose that there is something of which they can be true or false” (Darwall 1998, 25). Michael Smith also discusses “the objectivity of moral judgement” and claims that ordinary users of moral language

seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts; that moral facts are wholly determined by circumstances and that, by engaging

in moral conversation and argument, we can discover what these objective moral facts determined by the circumstances are (Smith 1994, 6).

He enshrines the importance of this datum by claiming that “the philosopher’s task is to make sense of a practice having these features” (5). Blackburn talks about “the realistic-seeming nature of our talk of evaluations—the way we think we can be wrong about them, that there is a truth to be found, and so on” (Blackburn 1984, 180). Richard Joyce sums up the philosophical landscape very nicely when he says that

If morality had never been concerned with objectivity in the first place, why this seemingly compulsory ritual that every metaethicist embarks upon of emphasizing all elements of his or her theory that lean in the direction of objective authority and downplaying all elements that lean away? (Joyce 2011, 529)

Joyce’s comment is particularly telling. Philosophers do indeed contort and bend their philosophical theories to make sense of folk moral objectivism (FMO). And, indeed, if this is a fact to be explained (or explained away), then philosophers are doing as they must. In a moment we’ll turn to some of the experimental evidence that may be relevant to assessing this philosophical claim. In the meantime, though, it may be helpful to pause and consider, if only briefly, why it is that philosophers believe in folk objectivism.

## 14.2 The Case for Folk Objectivism

That philosophers (whether realist, relativist, expressivist, or otherwise) embrace FMO is clear. Yet why do they do so? There are likely a plurality of sources supporting objectivist-seeming talk among the folk. Some have argued, for example, that a tendency to regard morality as objective and binding is a result of evolutionary forces, an adaptation that fosters cooperative behavior (e.g., Joyce 2006; Ruse 2010). Here, though, I will focus on the following three other sources.

The first, and least acknowledged by philosophers themselves, stems from the close connection in Anglo-American culture (and, indeed, throughout much of the rest of the world) between ethics and religion, and thus with divine command (see, e.g., Flanagan, Sarkissian and Wong 2007). Most individuals in Anglo-American cultures have believed (and continue to believe) in a personal, all-powerful, all-knowing, and wholly good God who is the source of the moral law and who rewards and punishes individuals according to its fixed, absolute standard. Accordingly, moral knowledge consists in knowledge of what God creates or endorses as morally good or bad, morally right or wrong. What’s more, God does not vacillate or change the rules. Morality grounded in a theistic conceptual framework could thus explain the objectivist shape of folk moral discourse in those cultures which serve as the observation points of moral philosophers. At times, religious reasons are proffered in everyday moral discourse. At times not. However, philosophers would do well to acknowledge this fact and not perpetuate what Peter Railton has called “the common but regrettable philosophical practice of ignoring religious points of view when discussing the foundations of ethics” (Railton 2007, 37).

Second, and independent of any commitment to a theological grounding of morality, there are a number of features of ordinary moral discourse (some of which are noted in the quotations earlier) that are, on the face of it, reflective of a commitment to objectivity (cf. Finlay 2008). For example, when we make claims about what is right or wrong, permissible or impermissible, we do not make such claims using language that qualifies or relativizes them. Rather, we use baldly absolutist language. We don’t say, for example, that “murder is wrong only insofar as one values

human life and personal protection.” Instead, we say that “murder is wrong” *simpliciter*. Second, people do not seem to treat moral disagreements as they treat disagreements of taste. Disagreement over whether a particular painting is beautiful or a particular drink palatable is not an occasion for sustained, reasoned argument, or for entrenched demands for justification. By contrast, we offer reasons for our moral judgments and treat moral disagreements as real disputes concerning matters of fact, matters that we can stand to convince others of by offering persuasive reasons or evidence. Indeed, there seems to be an expectation that others will yield to moral reasons, or that through argument we get closer to the truth.

Finally, our judgments are often accompanied by relevant reactive attitudes, giving moral judgments a felt force that may be missing from other evaluative domains. While there are ways of explaining such a felt force that are amenable to various types of metaethical theories, it's plausible that, from within the practice of folk morality (and not as explained by any metaethical theory), the compelling force that accompanies prototypical moral judgments might be taken to reflect a commitment to moral objectivity.

### 14.3 The Case for Folk Relativism

The earlier considerations make it easy to see why FMO enjoys a place of prominence in contemporary metaethics. However, some philosophers acknowledge that in everyday moral practice, and alongside moments of moral absolutism, are moments of questioning and suspension of judgment. For example, faced with a puzzling case of moral disagreement regarding an especially vexing moral issue, individuals can be made to feel quite differently. Consider, for example, how David Wong characterizes what he calls “moral ambivalence” (Wong 2006). Wong describes moral ambivalence as a reaction we can have when we see that otherwise reasonable, knowledgeable, and competent individuals—individuals who seem command our respect—arrive at very different moral judgments than our own. This sort of situation serves to shake our confidence that our own judgment is obviously superior or uniquely right.<sup>2</sup> This can happen either when we fail to persuade them of our point of view, or when in the course of trying to persuade them we gain insight into an issue that previously eluded us, and come to appreciate others' perspectives and the reasons behind their judgments. In such moments, we can come to realize that moral disagreement need not take place between communities of individuals who are radically different or incomprehensible to one another. On the contrary, coming to understand different ways of life can render them familiar to us, even if they remain different in important and substantial ways. As Wong writes,

Understanding other moral codes and the ways of life in which they are embedded is not to see them as alien and incomprehensible but in some respects familiar and in other respects constituting a challenge to our own codes and ways of life. Since we ourselves are complex and ambivalent moral beings, we are able to see that at least some other codes and ways of life may just as reasonably be adopted by decent and informed human beings as our own. (Wong, 20)

Similarly, David Velleman (2013) has written about cultural practices that might seem in some ways ethically suspect, but which we might not obviously condemn as objectively wrong or false. In these moments, we similarly drop any commitment to absolutism about morality. For example, Velleman discusses *vranyo*, a Russian cultural practice “which is not exactly bullshitting, not exactly fibbing, not exactly joshing, not exactly telling tales.” It is a practice altogether different from any of these, and one for which we have no precise analogue. Velleman notes, for example, that

the purveyor of *vranjo* does not quite expect to be believed. He does count on not being unmasked — on receiving a straight-faced hearing — but he also prefers aesthetic appreciation to naive credence. It is even unclear whether he thinks that he is telling untruths. (36)

When confronted with this practice, we might, for example, say that it is unethical or morally wrong to confabulate and make up lies, to draw a person along by uttering statements that are patently untrue, that we have devised on the spur of the moment. But such a reaction is not obvious. Velleman speculates that

he strongest negative attitude we are likely to have is to be glad that we don't live among the practitioners, while granting that if we did, we probably wouldn't regret it. Alternatively, we might feel somewhat envious of the Russians, whose social life is spiced with creative bluffing. (43)

Wong and Velleman thus stress features of ordinary, everyday moral practices that pull individuals away from any commitment to absolutism.

## 14.4 Empirical Work

Thus far I have sketched how philosophers have emphasized different and diverging aspects of ordinary moral practice. Most claim that ordinary practice is best understood as committed to objectivism, whereas others emphasize a substantial commitment to relativism. How do we assess these claims? Are people committed to absolutism, as some philosophers claim? Or, instead, is ordinary moral practice just as accurately described as embracing relativism? Researchers have begun to explore systematically the commitments of ordinary folk. In undertaking this task, they have taken cues from metaethicists themselves, who have suggested one way to understand the core issue. Consider the following passage from Smith.

it is a platitude that our moral judgements at least purport to be objective.... Thus if A says "It is right to  $\phi$  in circumstances C" and B says "It is not right to  $\phi$  in circumstances C" then we take it that A and B disagree; that at most one of their judgements is true. (Smith 1994, 86)

The scenario that Smith describes here is one that has been adopted by nearly all the empirical studies of folk metaethics. The idea is simple: if a person responds to a case of moral disagreement between two individuals by judging, intuitively, that at most one of them can be correct, they seem to be reflecting a tacit commitment to objectivism about morality.

In an early experimental foray into this issue, Shaun Nichols (2004) presented participants with a short story about two individuals—John and Fred – who hold different moral views. John claims that "It's okay to hit people just because you feel like it," whereas Fred claims that "No, it is not okay to hit people just because you feel like it." Participants were then asked to weigh in on this case of disagreement by choosing which among the following options best represented their own views:

- 1 It is okay to hit or shove people just because you feel like it, so John is right and Fred is wrong.
- 2 It is not okay to hit or shove people just because you feel like it, so Fred is right and John is wrong.
- 3 There is no fact of the matter about unqualified claims like "It's okay to hit or shove people just because you feel like it." Different cultures believe different things, and it is not absolutely true or false that it's okay to hit people just because you feel like it.

In this particular study, approximately 57% of participants chose either the first or second option, seemingly rejecting the idea that one and the same action (such as hitting others because one feels like it) can be both morally permissible and, at the same time, morally impermissible relative to different moral frameworks. Instead, those choosing either the first or second option are suggesting that there is a fact of the matter as to whether hitting or shoving is morally good or bad, such that anyone who disagrees or holds different opinions must be mistaken. A substantial minority (43%), though, opted for the third option, responding to the disagreement by claiming that cultural differences render morality relative in nature.

Nichols's experiments represent an early attempt at exploring FMO experimentally. Arguably, though, a later study by Geoffrey Goodwin and John Darley (2008) was instrumental in spearheading the recent wave of experimental activity. We should discuss this study in some detail, as it inspired many of the studies that followed. In this study, they presented participants with a large number of statements chosen randomly from four different domains:

- factual domain (e.g., "the earth is not at the center of the known universe")
- moral domain (e.g., "consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race is morally wrong")
- conventional domain ("talking loudly and constantly to the person next to you during a lecture is a permissible action")
- aesthetic domain (e.g., "classical music is better than rock music")

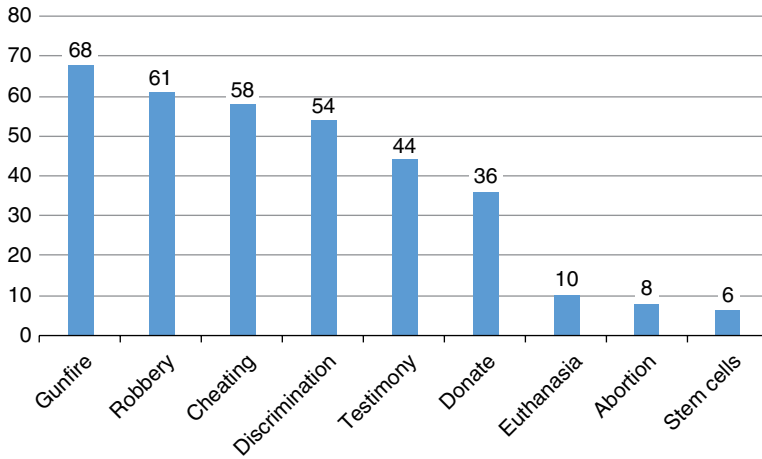
Participants were first asked to what extent they agreed with these statements. Next, they were told that none of the statements had, in fact, elicited full agreement; whatever judgment they happened to hold, there was some fellow participant holding the opposite view. Once again, participants were asked how they would interpret such disagreements. This time, the options were:

- 1 The other person is surely mistaken.
- 2 It is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken.
- 3 It could be that you are mistaken, and the other person is correct.
- 4 Other.

Looking just at the moral statements, 70% of participants believed that in the case of disagreement, the other individual had to be incorrect in her moral judgments (e.g., option 1). As Goodwin and Darley note, this seems to suggest that people are objectivist about moral matters. Indeed, looking across all the four domains, participants' tendency to give objectivist answers were only stronger within the factual domain (an unsurprising result), and were weaker in both the conventional and aesthetic domains.

Some might claim that these two results, in themselves, might count against FMO. If FMO were true, then we wouldn't find such a sizable minority of participants answering as non-objectivists. However, on a charitable reading of FMO, the claim is not that every single person is an objectivist about morality. Surely there will be outliers. And if this is the case then we are left arguing about what is a large enough of a minority in order to bring pressure on the claim. The results of these studies cannot show that the claim is dubious, even if the minorities are sizable. This is especially true since the populations in these studies were undergraduate students who, as we shall see later, might be in a peculiar stage in their moral development that skews toward relativism (more on this later).

More importantly, perhaps, Goodwin and Darley focus on the *average* levels of objectivism in the moral domain, and *on average*, it seems as though the folk show a tendency toward objectivism for moral claims. However, the average is misleading, for there was remarkable variation



**Figure 14.1** Overall percentages of “true” or “false” judgments for moral items.

in levels of objectivism when we look across the moral items. For example, in one study, they had subjects rate various moral statements such as “Consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race is morally wrong” as being either (a) true statement, (b) false statement, or (c) opinion or attitude. See Figure 14.1.

Some of the items were indeed seen as being highly objective, with a majority of participants believing the statement to be “true” (e.g., opening gunfire in a crowd, conscious racial discrimination, cheating on an exam, and robbery), garnering a majority of true or false responses (overwhelmingly true, as expected).<sup>3</sup> Yet, some of the most highly charged moral issues (e.g., abortion, stem cell research, and assisted suicide) garnered the lowest ratings of objectivism, with the overwhelming majority of participants labeling these as attitudes or opinions (as opposed to true or false statements). In other words, when presented with a selection of moral transgressions, they gave objective groundings to only some of them, while giving clearly relative groundings to other issues. As Goodwin and Darley note, “meta-ethical judgments about the truth of ethical claims appear to be highly sensitive to the content of the claims in question (i.e., robbery vs. abortion)” (1346).

Why is this so? A couple of things might be said to explain the disparity here. First, some have suggested that objectivity judgments here parallel participants’ sense of moral consensus on the item being judged. Indeed, subsequent studies have shown just such a correlation. For example, Goodwin and Darley (2010) found that perceived consensus concerning a moral issue correlated with levels of objectivism for that moral issue. In one study, they had participants answer to what extent they agreed that certain moral actions were either good (e.g., saving a drowning person) or bad (e.g., assaulting someone for disparaging our favorite sports team); to what extent they thought there could be true judgments in the relevant case; and what percentage of fellow Americans they thought would find the actions good or bad. Finally, they were told that at least some other participants disagreed with their judgments concerning these actions, and whether they thought these other participants were therefore wrong. They found that participants’ own estimates of perceived consensus among fellow Americans predicted their objectivity ratings. In a separate study, they found that presenting participants with bogus data about consensus on moral items from classmates had an effect on their judgments concerning objectivity for those items, such that higher levels of (bogus) consensus increased their beliefs concerning the objectivity of

those items. In related research, James Beebe (2014) found a similar effect. Thus, perceived consensus seems to at least partly explain why folk find some moral claims to be objective. Yet, since consensus can move or change this does not seem to reflect the sort of objectivism philosophers have in mind concerning FMO.

A second way to explain the variation among the moral items would point to a potential problem in the way the moral items were chosen. Goodwin and Darley (as the experimenters) came up with all the items and sorted them into the four domains. And their choices seem reasonable. However, we shouldn't be surprised if some participants didn't agree with their categorization. If this is the case, then (an objectivist might say) we can expect that some participants did not show their true objectivist colors because they were not presented with what they believed to be paradigmatic moral items. The difference can be summed up as one between taking a third-person approach (where the experimenter deems what counts as a moral item) and a first-person approach (where the participant deems what counts as a moral item).<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Wright, Piper Grandjean, and Cullen McWhite (2013) allowed participants to first classify the various moral statements into the four domains (factual, moral, conventional, and taste) themselves, and only then asked them to respond to a disagreement scenario in order to assess their commitment to objectivism. Did participants display greater objectivism for those items they themselves deemed to be moral? Using the same items by Goodwin and Darley, they found no difference between mean levels of objectivism for the moral and conventional items. There was also no difference in levels objectivism for particular items whether they were classified as moral, conventional, or taste. Wright *et al.* found this pattern when adding qualitative analysis as well, and conclude that folk are neither objectivists nor relativists about morality, but rather pluralists.

Thus far, the studies surveyed tend to provide some support to FMO, but the evidence remains equivocal. Some have argued that ordinary moral discourse most often occurs in a particular context—namely between individuals of a shared moral community. The community itself need not be particularly homogeneous nor salient to the individuals engaging in moral discourse. Nevertheless, this shared context may help to explain why it is that folk seem to embrace objectivism, though in an inconsistent manner. Put succinctly—moral judgments may seem objective to participants in ordinary moral discourse because they normally think in terms of a single moral framework. However, when thinking across moral frameworks and considering alternative perspectives, their commitments to objectivism may wane.

Philosophers have noted this feature of ordinary moral discourse—namely that much gets left unsaid owing to shared context. For example, Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian, and David Wong (2007) argue that “in practice, moral imperatives and judgments are often exchanged in particular contexts which include tacit background assumptions and qualifications. Indeed, they can be stated categorically only if we assume such a contextual framework” (47). Shared context is thus thought to explain the categorical nature of ordinary moral discourse. It is often both unnecessary and potentially strange to state that we are sharing a particular moral framework when we are discussing moral issues. We state moral judgments categorically and absolutely not because we think they refer to objective, mind-independent moral facts, but because our shared context allows us to do so. “Of course,” Flanagan *et al.* write, “we could include all the possible exceptions and qualifications within the imperatives themselves, but that would assume a small or manageable finite set of such qualifications and exceptions, as well as a way to efficiently deploy them. Both of these claims are contentious; the former would be impossibly cumbersome, the latter cognitively onerous” (47). Peter Railton has provided a useful everyday example to illustrate this general point.

For example, suppose that you have just come back from an afternoon hike and I greet you:

(A) Welcome back! Help yourself to whatever's in the fridge.



Despite the unqualified permission (A) appears to extend, it is clear to both of us in this context that I have not authorized you to clean out my refrigerator, to load your car and save you from doing your weekly shopping, or to warm up tonight's lentil soup to soak your feet. The invitation conveyed by (A) has contextually understood conditions and qualifications that go without saying. We can, of course, make many of these conditions and qualifications explicit, and rewrite (A) as a conditional, hedged permission: If you are hungry and would like to eat, then you should feel free to serve yourself a reasonable amount of food from the fridge. (Railton 2007, 39)

Similarly, Stephen Finlay writes that "It would be strange, for example, for the captain of a rugby team (the All Blacks, say) in a mid-game huddle to prefix his statements about which play ought to be run with expressions like 'If you want us to score a try,' or 'In order to win this game.' The obvious need not be stated" (Finlay 2008, 353). These philosophers draw a parallel with the normal context of moral discourse. "In the moral case this is even more true: moral ends or standards are typically shared by members of a society, assumed to be shared, and easily identifiable" (*ibid.*). Thus, when we say something along the lines of "X is forbidden" or "X is morally wrong," we issue statements that seem, on the face of it, to be categorical, absolute, and without condition. However, tacitly, there are in fact such conditions and qualifiers that are left unsaid. One such qualifier may be that we share a moral framework, or that our moral frameworks overlap sufficiently so as to make such categorical judgments possible.

Let us return to the empirical data. A common feature of the studies discussed earlier is that they use a disagreement task to probe people's metaethical commitments. This task presents subjects with two individuals who have differing moral judgments about a particular case, and then asks whether these two individuals can both be correct, or whether instead at least one of them has to be wrong. The individuals are depicted (whether implicitly or explicitly) as members of the same moral community—indeed, as members of the same moral community as the subjects in the experiment. And, as noted, a majority of subjects seem to think that in a case of disagreement such as the one portrayed, at least one of the disagreeing individuals must be wrong—that two individuals of the same moral community can't have differing judgments about a moral case without one of them being mistaken.

What if, instead of working within a single moral framework, participants were instead presented with disagreement tasks where the two appraisers of the moral case stem from different cultural backgrounds? This hypothesis was pursued by Hagop Sarkissian and colleagues (2012). Like the studies earlier, they deployed a disagreement task to gauge folk metaethical commitments. However, they varied the identities of the disagreeing appraisers. In "same culture" condition, the two appraisers were described as having the same cultural background (fellow classmates at a university). In the "other culture," one of the appraisers was instead described as a member of an isolated community of individuals preserving their traditional way of life in the Amazonian rainforest. Finally, in the "extraterrestrial condition," one of the appraisers was described as a member of an extraterrestrial species who have radically different psychologies than those of humans. They found that participants in the first (same culture) condition were characteristically objectivist about cases concerning canonical moral transgressions (such as murder and assault). They denied that two appraisers from the same culture could both be right in a case of moral disagreement. However, participants were increasingly relativist in the second (other culture) and third (extraterrestrial) conditions. That is, as the identities of the appraisers became increasingly divergent, folk seemed to recognize that both of the disagreeing individuals could be correct relative to their own frameworks, and that there was no absolutely correct fact of the matter regarding the case. If folk were indeed objectivists then it would not matter that the disagreeing individuals held different values or ends. An act is wrong for an objectivist irrespective of what people think about it. The fact that Sarkissian *et al.* found a

significant drop in objectivism across these conditions suggests that people may tacitly believe that moral statements have unspoken qualifiers and conditions—namely something's being a moral fact is only relative to a particular moral framework.

This idea of taking perspectives has cropped up in a number of studies in this area, and a pattern seems to emerge (though much work needs to be done). For example, Edward Cokely and Adam Feltz (2008) hypothesized that personality traits might play a moderating role in folk intuitions about the status of morality. In particular, some individuals score high in the trait of being open to experience, which includes being receptive to the unfamiliar and less likely to abide by accepted conventions and authorities. Cokely and Feltz hypothesized that when such individuals are confronted by individuals who disagree with them, or who reject socially accepted norms, they will be less likely to deem them wrong or mistaken. They might be open to the possibility, instead, that their own socially accepted norms might need to yield or admit of flexibility. Using the same materials developed by Nichols (2004), they first tested for a tendency to embrace objectivism by using a disagreement task. They then provided subjects with a standard Big Five personality inventory (Gosling, Rentfrow and Swann Jr 2003). They found that a majority of individuals in their sample (FSU students) rejected objectivism in the disagreement task. They also found that those who scored high in openness to experience were significantly more likely to respond to the disagreement task by rejecting objectivism. (Those scoring low in openness to experience were just as likely to give objectivist and non-objectivist answers.) Openness to experience seems correlated with metaethical relativism.

Relatedly, Goodwin and Darley (2010), in follow-up studies, found a correlation between displaying a facility with disjunctive reasoning and being a metaethical relativist. Consider the following problem: There are five blocks in a stack, where the second one from the top is green and the fourth is not green. Is a green block definitely on top of a non-green block? Many people feel, intuitively, as though there is insufficient information to decide. But there are just two possibilities for that third block: if the third block is green it would sit over a non-green block (the fourth block), and if it is not green it would be right under a green block (the second block) so the answer is "yes." Arriving at the correct answer requires unpacking the various alternatives for the third block, then working through the problem. And those who answered the question correctly showed significantly lower tendencies toward objectivism than those who did not. In other words, being able to unpack alternative possibilities predicts that one does not embrace objectivism about morality.

A finding not directly speaking to the issue of perspective-taking also fits this pattern. James Beebe and David Sackris (2010) investigated whether or not folk metaethical views are stable across one's lifetime. Using similar disagreement tasks as found in other studies reported here, they found that participants' tendencies toward objectivism varied across age groups. A pattern emerged whereby participants aged 12–16 years of age and participants 30 years of age or older were both significantly more objectivist than participants aged 17–29 years old. (This corroborates widespread anecdotal evidence that undergraduate students in philosophy courses tend to avow moral relativism.) Why this pattern? Why is it that relativism is most prominent in this age group? As Beebe and Sackris note, the period immediately after high school is one of flux, when most individuals move away from home and live independently. This often coincides with enrolling in college, broadening one's experience, and skeptically probing one's most deeply held beliefs. During this period, individuals are most likely to be open to new perspectives and to envision a plurality of options for how their lives might progress. Thus, relativism correlates with a time of openness to experience, or considering alternative possibilities, and of seriously entertaining different points of view. It is also possible that this is the result of generational differences in their subject pool. Future research will help clarify the issue.

Finally, more recent evidence suggests that perspectives and frameworks are important when it comes not only to the appraisers of a moral action but also to the perpetrators of the actions themselves. Suppose someone is depicted as committing a moral transgression—say, stealing from their employer to pay for an expensive holiday. Does it matter whether the person stealing from her employer appraises her own action as morally wrong or morally permissible? If folk were truly objectivists, then such appraisals shouldn't matter, for the wrongness is the property of the action and does not hinge upon how people think about it. Yet, in some recent work, Katinka Quintelier, Delphine De Smet, and Daniel Fessler (2014) have probed the extent to which the actor's appraisal of her own actions is also relevant. If the actor deems her action as morally wrong, then this tends to increase objectivist responses, whereas if she deems her action as morally permissible, subjects tend to soften their objectivist responses.

Overall, then, folk judgments about the status of morality seem sensitive to numerous factors, including features of the cases (e.g., how they are framed, the types of moral violations involved) as well as features of the participants themselves (e.g., their age, and personality).

## 14.5 Conclusion

Folk moral commitments are complex and include the influence of numerous variables. At times, they seem to respond as objectivists, at times as relativists. Much of the research thus far has been framed as concerning “whether the folk are X,” where X stands for objectivist or relativist. However, given the variability noted earlier, perhaps this question is no longer a useful one to pursue. As work on folk metaethics continues, it seems that rather than asking something as general as whether people are objectivists or relativists, we should be asking different questions. For example, we might ask: under what conditions do folk show a tendency toward objectivism? Which type of folk show this tendency, and for which issues?

And just as the empirical research is revealing a messier situation than one would have anticipated having read the philosophical literature, the implications of these findings for philosophical metaethics are similarly complex. It is hard to see how any claim that folk just are moral objectivists *full stop* can escape this empirical scrutiny unblemished. While philosophers have good reason to think that objectivism is a *part* of folk morality, it is certainly not all of it. How and to what extent this shifts issues in contemporary debates remains an open question. Yet, two possibilities stand out as likely. First, it seems that philosophers maintaining the truth of moral objectivism as the best theoretical account of the status of morality cannot bolster their arguments by claiming that their view best coheres with the folk view, for the folk view itself is not plainly or baldly objectivist. Second, philosophical error theorists face a significant retrenchment of the scope of their theory. If folk aren't committed to objectivism in any strong sense then it's not at all clear that they are in error about anything. At best, error theory would be recast so as to apply to that sub-segment of the population that may, in fact, be committed to objectivism.

## Notes

- 1 The literature in this area tends to use the terms “objectivism” and “relativism” in ways that can be misleading. Specifically, it may be misleading to characterize objectivism as the denial of relativism, since relativists maintain that there are objective moral facts relative to the moral frameworks of particular communities. “Absolutism” arguably better captures the contrast between relativism and objectivism, as it conveys the idea that there can only be one absolute set of moral facts (as opposed to several, each relative to some community). Having noted this issue, I will be using “objectivism” and “absolutism” interchangeably in what follows.

- 2 Presumably, we react very differently if the persons involved seem otherwise unreasonable, ignorant, or incompetent. In such cases, the mere fact of disagreement would likely have little sway over our own moral convictions; disagreement might even further entrench our convictions.
- 3 Note that, even for those who chose to say the statements were “true” or “false,” these answers are consistent with a relativist reading, as the questions do not disambiguate something’s being “true absolutely” as opposed to “true relative to some perspective.” See Beebe and Sackris (2010) for further critical discussion.
- 4 There are strengths and weaknesses to both approaches, though the third-person is dominant. See Meindl and Graham (2014) for helpful discussion.

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