Matilal's Metaethics

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Bimal Krishna Matilal was born in India in 1935, a dozen years before India gained its independence. By the time he passed away in 1991, he had a named chair at Oxford University. For those who work in Indian philosophy he is a figure that looms large, but for those working in other areas of philosophy he's largely unknown. That's unfortunate because he was a brilliant and thoughtful philosopher who produced interesting work on a wide range of subjects.

Matilal initially made his name working in logic, first on Indian logic then later on Western logic. That by itself was not so revolutionary; what was revolutionary was his approach to the subject. Rather than treating Indian logic as a kind of historical curio, he treated it as relevant to contemporary philosophical work on universal questions. He inspired generations of scholars to approach texts of classical Indian thought as containing living ideas.[1]

So why should metaethicists care about Matilal? Classical Indian philosophy has very little explicit normative ethical theorizing, let alone obviously metaethical theorizing. Flip through any overview of classical Indian philosophy and you'll find a lot of epistemology, logic, and metaphysics but little, if any, metaethics. This is not to say that there isn't any metaethics, but finding it takes some looking. And this kind of looking is difficult and time consuming. This is why Matilal is a good figure to start with for metaethicists interested in Indian philosophy. He engages directly with the traditional founders of analytic metaethics: people like Bernard Williams, Gilbert Harman, and R.M. Hare. He studied at Harvard under Quine, and so he knows how to write like a 20th-century analytic philosopher.

At the same time, Matilal draws on classical Indian philosophy. He picks out the texts and ideas that are relevant to metaethical questions. In this respect

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[1] See Ganeri (2017) and Chakravarti (2017) for more on Matilal's life and philosophical approach.

he's similar to another philosopher of his generation: Philippa Foot. Foot's work in metaethics develops ideas from Aristotle, Aquinas, and Nietzsche in interesting ways that make one reconsider those historical figures.[2] In the same way, Matilal's work develops ideas from Nāgārjuna, the *Mahābhārata*, and Jainism into a novel and interesting metaethical view. This makes Matilal an ideal figure for metaethicists curious about Indian philosophy. He has linguistic and cultural expertise but writes in English and engages with foundational figures in Western metaethics.

Just as Foot's work responded to then-popular trends in expressivism, Matilal's deals with the once-dominant cultural relativism. Since the clash of cultures and the hazards of relativism were a lived reality for him, he has many sensible things to say about them. But implicit in these responses is an interesting metaethical view. Our aim here is to explain this view and its roots in classical Indian philosophy.

1. Matilal Contra Relativism

Matilal argues against cultural relativism, which he characterizes essentially as the view that there are no cross-cultural moral standards. He bases his objections on two principles. The first he calls the Impossibility of the Individuation of Cultures (or IIC). Real cultures, Matilal thinks, are not "dead watertight compartments"; rather, they flow into each other. The second principle is a relatively familiar one. It says that, if relativism were true, we would have to call the intuitively worst moral offenses morally right, as long as the offenders behaved according to the norms of their own culture. The best we can do is to call them wrong "from our point of view". Matilal calls this the Repugnant Consequence (or RC).

Matilal distinguishes two species of cultural relativism, which he calls *soft relativism* and *hard relativism*. Both claim that there are no cross-cultural moral standards. He sometimes puts this in terms of mutual incommensurability: there is no fact about whether one culture's standards are superior to another's. So both forms of relativism share an anti-realist metaphysics of value. They are differentiated by their epistemic claims. According to soft relativism, the moral standards set in a culture different from one's own are nevertheless still intelligible or comprehensible. According to hard relativism,

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[2] See especially Foot (2001).

moral standards in different cultures are mutually incomprehensible. The hard relativist thinks that the moral standards of a culture different from our own are forever foreign objects, untranslatable into our own concepts or paradigms. On such a view, this mutual unintelligibility underwrites the mutual incommensurability. We cannot rank one culture's moral standards against another's because we cannot even get the two to be talking in the same terms.

Matilal's two main targets are the sophisticated versions of relativism endorsed by Bernard Williams and Gilbert Harman.[3] Before really addressing these, though, he first dispenses with a form of relativism that Williams calls *vulgar relativism*. Vulgar relativism claims that (1) we ought to tolerate other cultures' moral perspectives, since (2) terms like 'right' just mean 'right for a given society' – in other words, 'right for them'. Matilal here simply defers to Williams's own refutation of vulgar relativism, one that contemporary readers will likely recognize. In saying (1), we implicitly endorse a universal, non-relative moral claim, namely that we should tolerate the views of other cultures. But (2) bars us from endorsing any non-relative moral claims. So the view looks incoherent.

The version of relativism that Williams defends is more restricted. For Williams, there are two ways in which cultures confront or come into contact with each other.[4] There are *real confrontations* and *notional confrontations*. A real confrontation occurs when one culture's moral system is a *real option* for members of another culture. And a moral system counts as a real option for someone when they could adopt that system and "not engage in extensive self-deception",[5] "retain their hold on reality", and perhaps even make retrospective sense of their conversion.[6] What Williams means here is not at all clear, but that need not distract us, as this is not the point that Matilal takes issue with. What is important is that, if one culture's system is not a real option for members of another culture, then those two cultures can confront one another

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[3] Matilal's critiques of Williams and Harman are primarily drawn from Matilal's 1986 essay "Ethical Relativism and the Confrontation of Cultures". Citations to Matilal's work are drawn from two essay collections edited by Jonardon Ganeri and published in 2002: *Ethics and Epics* and *Mind, Language, and World*. To maintain a sense of historical context, we have used the dates of the original publications for each essay, but page numbers will refer to these 2002 collections.

[4] Williams does not mean 'confrontation' in any combative sense.

[5] Williams (1985, 160).

[6] Williams (1974, 223).

only notionally. As examples, Williams offers the moral systems of bygone eras: Bronze Age chiefs and medieval samurai, as well as traditional societies whose systems and ways of life are incompatible with current, irreversible technological advancements. Whatever exactly counts as a real option, those moral systems are simply inaccessible to us.[7] Finally, it's only in the context of notional confrontations that we face relativism. When two cultures can really confront each other rather than merely notionally confront each other, we aren't pushed to relativistic conclusions. Williams writes that

> it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal – good, bad, right, wrong, and so on – can be applied to [the other moral system]; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made.[8]

He calls his view the relativism of distance.[9]

Matilal counts this view as a form of relativism because two moral systems that can only notionally confront each other are incommensurable, that is, we cannot think that one is better than the other. Furthermore, he counts it as a form of soft relativism, since Williams nowhere claims that systems that allow for only notional confrontation must also be mutually unintelligible. Matilal presents two worries for this view. First, he argues that it's unclear why we should think that any moral system is not a real option for any culture. We can't literally go back and *be* Bronze Age chiefs. But surely that isn't all that Williams means. He seems to be saying something stronger, such as that some cultures are so conceptually or socially distant that only notional confrontation is possible. But why think that we couldn't, for example, disavow our modern technologies and opt for life in a traditional society? The only barriers to this are practical (if there actually aren't any such communities left) or epistemic (if we don't know enough about its moral system). Aside from these philosophically uninteresting senses in which bygone cultures are inaccessible, there's no further sense in which they are. Moreover, any living culture is a real option for any other living culture. No actual culture is a windowless monad perfectly sealed off from the rest of the world. This is Matilal's IIC principle, the Impossibility of the Individuation of Cultures.

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[7] For his defense of relativism, see Williams (1974) and Williams (1985).
[8] Williams (1985, 161).
[9] For more on Williams's relativism of distance, see Fricker (2010).

His second objection provisionally grants that some cultures can only confront each other notionally but denies that this entails their mutual incommensurability. First, it is question-begging to suppose that such cultures couldn't apply non-relative standards to each other. Moreover, this supposition conflicts with the linguistic data: we do in fact apply appraising language when talking about bygone moral systems. We say that slavery was wrong, for example, and that our current system is better. And if we deny this, we must face RC, the Repugnant Consequence.

Matilal then turns to Harman's relativism, according to which our judgments (and statements) about how people ought to act or which actions are wrong are relativized to groups that have formed agreements or have come to understandings with each other.[10] Harman offers a few examples, involving Martians, a band of cannibals, a mob-like group called 'Murder, Incorporated', and Hitler. Harman thinks that, whatever we might say of members of these groups – that they behave unjustly, that it is a bad thing for them to go around killing others, even that they are evil – we fall short of saying that they *ought not* kill others or that it is *wrong* for them to do so. Such statements strike Harman as sounding very odd because such agents are "beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations".[11] They are simply beyond the pale – creatures that we, in some deep way, just cannot make sense of.

There are three objections Matilal offers here. First, he thinks that Harman, like Williams, unfairly represents the linguistic situation. We hear people call Hitler's and the mob's actions wrong all the time. More importantly, though, Matilal argues that Harman runs afoul of both IIC and RC. Harman's choice of Martians is telling. As others have more recently argued,[12] it's hard to know what to make of these bizarre cases. It's not clear how reliable our linguistic or metaethical intuitions concerning them are. This is because real cultures are not hermetically sealed things, and imagining cultures this way will not, Matilal thinks, be philosophically revealing. In order to get Harman's relativist intuitions we have to imagine cases of Martians, that is, literal aliens, or else "monsters (Hitler), mentally deranged or impaired persons (Murder, Inc), or subhumans".[13] In short, these cases implicitly try to circumvent IIC. But real

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[10] Harman (1975, 5).
[11] Harman (1975, 8).
[12] See Dowell (2016).
[13] Matilal (1986/2002, 224).

cultures do flow into each other, and no culture is so sealed off that we have *no* moral purchase on it. Last, Harman effectively attempts to avoid RC by allowing that we can call a figure like Hitler *evil* – it's just that we can't call his actions wrong or say that he did things that he ought not to have done. But in giving up these latter claims, Harman still says something quite repugnant.

2. Emptiness and Culture

Matilal's insights about culture draw on an important concept from classical Indian philosophy, the Buddhist notion of emptiness (in Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*). Matilal draws on this idea in claiming that it is impossible for any culture to be completely isolated and self-reliant.

Emptiness is most closely associated with the Madhyamaka school of Buddhism and its founder Nāgārjuna (~150–250 CE), who makes frequent appearances in Matilal's writings.[14] Nāgārjuna famously claimed that everything is empty. But what does that mean? Being empty does not mean simply not existing; emptiness is not to be understood as nothingness. To be empty is to be empty *of something*. The mug on my desk is empty of coffee but not of air. In the context of Buddhist philosophy, what all things are empty *of* is a static and independent nature (in Sanskrit, *svabhāva*).

One way that a thing can be empty is temporal. Think of the spoke on a bicycle wheel. Though it may seem to be a singular object, it is really a collection of particles organized in a certain way. So to say that it has no static essence isn't just to say that it is, for example, slowly corroding or turning to rust. There is no spoke to corrode, a spoke just is the relational interplay between the particles that make it up. What appears to us as the spoke rusting is just the particles that make it up changing their relations. There's no thing that went from shiny to rusty.

But there is also another, non-temporal way in which the spoke is empty. Even at any instant, it exists only relationally. To be a spoke is to have a kind of relational identity, one that is dependent on other things. What it means to be a spoke is to play a certain role in a wheel and in a bicycle. And what it means to be a bicycle is to play a certain role for humans, to ride around and travel places. So a spoke, to be what it is, depends on its relations to other

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[14] See, for example, Matilal (1973/2002) and Matilal (1975).

things, on its place in a larger content. This, according to Madhyamaka philosophy, is true of everything: spokes, the particles making it up, bicycles, people, toads, helium, even emptiness itself. Everything depends on everything else to be what it is.

This is not to say that Matilal fully endorses this Buddhist view. You can, however, see the influence of this idea of emptiness in his discussion of culture. Just as a spoke is a constantly changing collection which depends on other things to be what it is, so too do cultures. So we find Matilal taking Bernard Williams to task for assuming that cultures interact like billiard balls, as independent things that occasionally crash into each other.[15] As someone with a multicultural background, Matilal saw clearly that though the atomistic, billiard ball way of seeing things might be useful, it isn't how reality works:

> But in practice, in today's world, cultures and sub-cultures do flow into each other, interacting both visibly and invisibly, eventually effecting value-rejection and value-modification at every stage. This shows the vitality of cultures, which are like living organisms, in which internal and external changes are incontrovertible facts.

<div align="right">(1991a/2002, 253)</div>

To be clear, Matilal does not explicitly claim that cultures are empty, but the lesson is similar. His choice of metaphor is telling; he pictures cultures as liquids flowing into each other. Cultures, like liquids, are dynamic, changing entities with vague borders. Thinking of 'Indian' or 'Italian' culture as something singular, static, and independent, as something with a non-relational essence is a mistake. Not only do they change over time, but they are deeply relational, intertwined and dependent upon other cultures in ways that are subtle and difficult to see.

Views about cultures that ignore these facts are doomed to fail because they treat a complex living thing as if it were a fossil. Matilal uses this insight to highlight how philosophers wishing to see cultures as static and independent must lean heavily on semi-fictionalized examples of past cultures and science

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[15] Matilal writes, "For the Williamsian kind of notional confrontation, we have to imagine two self-contained and totally isolated cultures with guaranteed immunity from external influence and hence with guaranteed immunity from evaluation and criticism from outside. Such cultures are mostly theoretical constructs, which sustain a defensible type of relativism" (1991a/2002, 253).

fiction.[16] These artificial examples of cultures with independent essences are then generalized, giving the illusion that *all* cultures work this way. One need not accept Nāgārjuna's more radical metaphysical stance to see this, though it can help illuminate Matilal's lesson: real-life cultures just don't work that way.[17]

3. Matilal on Singularism and Realism

Given his denial of relativism, it may be unsurprising that Matilal endorses a version of moral realism, according to which there are universal moral facts. Matilal does not, however, consider other views that have become commonplace in contemporary metaethics, views like speaker subjectivism, error theory, or expressivism. Instead, he contrasts cultural relativism with what he calls *singularism*, the view that there is only one set of moral standards for everyone, and introduces his rival view, *pluralism*, in terms of this contrast.

He characterizes singularism (sometimes calling it *monism*) as the view that

> there is only one set of moral standards to which everybody should conform, and it is possible to discover this singular standard of universal morality through rational means.

(1986/2002, 218)

Like soft and hard relativism, singularism consists of both a metaphysical and epistemic thesis. Metaphysically, it posits a set of standards that apply to everyone, making it a view sometimes called *absolutism* in contemporary parlance. Epistemically, it claims that this set of standards is rationally accessible to us all. In essence, if we each thought about morality long enough and clearly enough, we would discover the universal moral truth of the matter. He has in his sights arch rationalists, and in this he follows fellow pluralist Isaiah Berlin, who characterizes singularism in the following way:

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[16] See Matilal (1986/2002, 224).

[17] Matilal's invocation of Nāgārjuna's Madhyamaka when concluding his discussion of moral realism and relativism is telling: "it is a new open-ended way of dealing reality without the usual dogmas of empiricism. The Mādhyamikas do not give up the world" (1986/2002, 239). That is to say, we can reject static essences, even in the moral domain, without thereby giving up on realism.

first, that all men have one true purpose, and one only, that of rational self-direction; second, that the ends of all rational beings must of necessity fit into a single universal, harmonious pattern . . .; third, that all conflict, and consequently all tragedy, is due solely to the clash of reason with the irrational.[18]

Rejecting singularism makes Matilal sound like a relativist. Though we won't cover all of the details here, it's worth noting that he argues that not all divergence is the result of irrationality. Sometimes it is the result of completely reasonable, understandable diversity of moral opinion. In fact, Matilal is keenly concerned to take seriously the fact of moral diversity. It's this seriousness that leads him to pluralism.

Pluralism holds that there are multiple, potentially incompatible, moral standards. Still, it's possible that some are better, i.e., to be prioritized, over others. In other words, Matilal accepts a certain amount of diversity of moral standards but denies that this commits him to relativism. He takes diversity to be compatible with an underlying moral realism.

This metaphysical picture may sound a bit like W.D. Ross's view.[19] For Ross, there is a listable plurality of goods, and these different goods are not reducible to one another. We can even think of Matilal's standards as continuous with Ross's goods (justice, non-maleficence, etc.). However, Ross thinks that there is always, in each situation, a particular right thing to do. Matilal disagrees. First, Matilal leaves it open that these different standards or goods are simply incompatible. That is, there might be cases where we cannot comply with all of the standards or realize all of the varying goods. Second, Matilal leaves it open that these different standards or goods cannot be prioritized – that they are incommensurable. So he thinks that we might be unable to fully realize all of the plural goods, and that we might furthermore be unable to even weigh the different goods against each other. By contrast, while Ross thinks it doesn't make sense to prioritize the goods in the abstract, he thinks that they can be properly ordered in any particular situation. In these ways, Matilal's form of pluralism is more thoroughgoing than Ross's.

Matilal doesn't claim that moral standards definitely are incompatible. Instead, he leaves these possibilities open. This brings us to Matilal's epistemic

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[18] This is Matilal (1991a/2002, 244) quoting Berlin (1969, 154).
[19] Ross (1930). For a more recent version of metaethical pluralism, see DeLapp (2013, 80ff).

thesis, which unfortunately is not always clear. He generally sounds quite skeptical about compatibility and commensurability, denying that there is any way to determinately rank moral standards. But even though we might never be certain about our rankings, they are (justifiably) important to us.[20] That said, he does offer an account of how we come to know the different particular moral standards, as well as how we can come to know the universal moral standards. Given all this, it's still not clear how exactly we should understand his pluralist account. Fleshing it out will be the job of the rest of the chapter.

4. Dharma Morality

Matilal's pluralism appears in an incipient form the Indian notion of dharma. The term *dharma* is one of the most important in Indian philosophy; it is also one of the most complex, having many, many meanings. Built on a root meaning to hold up or to support, it sometimes means teachings or instructions; this sense is typically capitalized in English, as when people write about the Buddhist Dharma. It is also commonly used in a metaphysical way, referring to something like instantaneous experience events.

The term also has an important normative sense, referring to social, ritual, legal, and moral obligations.[21] There are many distinctions made within this sense, but here we will focus on one that distinguishes two different levels of obligation. One level is contingent and specific; these are called *viśeṣa dharmas*, literally particular or individual dharmas. These include one's obligations to a particular ruler, one's wife, or duties specific to one's role in society.[22] One feature of this class of dharma is that the associated obligations do

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[20] Matilal (1986/2002, 218).

[21] The domains are not always clearly separated and are disambiguated contextually. This is also true of the English word 'wrong'. A protester, for example, might do something legally wrong but not morally wrong. It can also be used in the domain of etiquette ("It was so wrong of him to wear that to the wedding!") or aesthetics ("Pineapple on pizza is just wrong!"). Like 'wrong' the term 'dharma' is also used in different normative domains. See Davis (2017) for background on the legal sense of dharma. See Krishan (1989, 52–5) and Perrett (2016, 24ff.) for an overview of the moral and religious senses.

[22] These are called *rājadharma*, *strīdharma*, and *svadharma* (sometimes also called *varṇāśramadharma*) respectively. See Sharma and Bharati (2000, 106ff.) for an overview of these distinctions.

not apply to everyone. Citizens of the United Kingdom may have special obligations to the Queen that citizens of other countries do not. The person next to you on the bus has obligations to their partner and children that you do not. Similarly people in certain roles, police officers, soldiers, judges, and firefighters, can have special duties that people not in those roles lack. In this sense, the obligations are contingent and arise on in the context of particular relationships, roles, or situations.

These contingent and particularized *viśeṣa dharmas* are contrasted with universal duties, known as *sādhāraṇa dharma*. Literally meaning general or common dharma, these are obligations that apply to all people everywhere. As you might imagine, what exactly is included in this category is a substantive ethical question. It commonly includes things like telling the truth, not stealing, and not hurting others.[23] These apply to everyone regardless of their job, social role, or relationships. As we'll see, Matilal has this in mind when he talks about the 'basic moral fabric' – general obligations that are not relativized to any particular person or place.[24]

It's not that *sādhāraṇa dharma* is real and *viśeṣa dharma* is not, nor do *viśeṣa dharmas* always reduce to *sādhāraṇa dharmas*. Many Indian philosophers assume that there are multiple distinct types of value.[25] Naturally, there are disagreements about whether different values can conflict and, if they can, which ones override others. The classic example of this comes from a critical scene in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a part of the much longer epic called the *Mahābhārata*. In it Arjuna, the best archer in the world, finds himself looking out over a battlefield just before the fighting is about to start. Because of a complicated web of promises, he must fight against his relatives and teachers. Arjuna experiences intense inner conflict. As a warrior and as royalty it is his duty to fight. On the other hand, he also feels the more general duty to avoid bloodshed.[26]

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[23] These are known as *satya*, *asteya*, and *ahiṃsā* respectively.

[24] Matilal (1991a/2002, 255ff.).

[25] For an overview see the discussion in Perrett (2016, 29ff.) of what he calls 'Value Pluralism' in Indian philosophy. Though his focus is on the *puruṣārthas*, the four main goals in life (morality, wealth, pleasure, and spiritual liberation) the point about a plurality of values is the same.

[26] Spoiler alert: Arjuna's charioteer is the god Kṛṣṇa, who convinces him that he should fight after all.

Matilal often wrote about this famous scene, particularly in the context of moral dilemmas.[27] So we find him writing:

> The situation is this: As a human being, as a loving member of the royal family, he feels that the killing of a grandfather and other relatives is bad; but as a *kṣatriya* [member of the warrior caste] he is told that it is his sacred duty to fight and kill – a classic case of moral conflict, which tends to inspire moral skepticism.

(1989b/2002, 14)

A full understanding of the scene would require contextualizing it in the much longer epic. What is important for our purposes is that Matilal reads this scene as demonstrating a case of a genuine moral dilemma. The conflict is not merely apparent and the values in question cannot be satisfactorily reconciled. He finds that accepting the possibility of such a case does not threaten moral realism. It highlights that values and duties must be flexible and dynamic but nevertheless real. To see why, it is helpful to look to his discussion of metaethics itself.

5. Matilal's Pluralism

Matilal's discussion of the *Mahābhārata* reveals a deep sympathy to the relativist's recognition of moral diversity. So while he doesn't think that diversity proves relativism, Matilal thinks the relativist gets some important things right.

Recall that on Matilal's pluralist picture, there are multiple potentially incompatible moral standards, a fact we see revealed in Arjuna's dilemma. How this could be compatible with realism, however, is not obvious. To elucidate his view, he draws on the notions of *sādhāraṇa dharma* and *viśeṣa dharma*, which he compares to Stuart Hampshire's "two faces of morality".[28] For Hampshire, morality admits of a rational side and a less-than-fully rational side. The former side is broadly continuous with singularist views, such as the

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[27] See, for example, Matilal (1983/2002, 6ff., 1986/2002, 227, 1989a/2002 and 1989b/2002, 138ff.). Matilal also edited an entire volume on the subject entitled *Moral Dilemmas in the Mahābhārata*, (1989c) that begins with his own essay "Moral Dilemmas: Insights from Indian Epics". This is not the only way the text has been read; see Dalmiya (2014) for a care-based alternative.

[28] Hampshire (1983, 2–3).

familiar Kantian view on which morality is both rational and absolute. The latter side involves those aspects of morality that are contingent: historically, geographically, and perhaps in other social ways. This side of morality is typically not fully articulated and may not be fully articulable, whereas the rational side is at least articulable. Matilal does not think Hampshire's categories map onto his own, but he wants to draw out a common thread they share.

Hampshire's view shares with dharma morality the thought that there are different, possibly conflicting, but nevertheless bona fide moral standards. They also share the idea that some moral standards are contingent, but that contingency doesn't undermine a standard's normative force or status.

Sometimes Matilal refers to these as two "layers" or "aspects" of morality (1986/2002, 232), though most frequently as its two "sides" (1986/2002, 232). He calls one "particularizing" side, and the other the "universalizing" side, which he sometimes refers to as the *basic moral fabric*. In an attempt to clarify the more contingent and particular side of morality, he writes:

> Our supposition is that there may indeed be some sort of incommensurability, or 'undercommensurability,' and hence a sort of relativism among cultural norms as far as the 'particularizing,' the historically conditioned, and therefore in some sense contingent, side of morality, is concerned (cf. *viśeṣa dharma*).

> (1986/2002, 232)

So this side of morality presents a genuine source of moral value in spite of contingency. This side of morality is also where Matilal tries to accommodate the truth he sees in relativism. There is some fundamental moral diversity, which may give rise to truly incommensurable moral standards. However, that's not all there is to Matilal's metaethical picture. There is also a universalizing side to morality. This side doesn't depend on our actual culture or on historical contingencies. Of course, we may give different accounts of what is universal in morality – common options appeal to our fundamental needs as human creatures, facts about happiness and suffering, what is required for human flourishing, or our shared rational capacities. While Matilal expresses some sympathies with these options, he does not commit to any particular account.

Before providing a more detailed analysis of Matilal's two-sided view, it's worth briefly considering his moral epistemology. Because he thinks that there

are two sides to morality, he needs to offer an account of how we know each side, as well as the extent to which we can meaningfully and truthfully say that some moral standards are better than others (something that itself, it would seem, belongs to the universalizing side).

We come to know the particularizing side in a straightforward and often anthropological way. We simply see diversity of moral standards. Admittedly, it's sometimes difficult to tell when a culture's standards count as *moral*, but that's a matter for the sensitive anthropologist, he thinks.[29] He is less clear about how we come to know the universal side. He sometimes suggests that we do (or can) know these empirically, although he also mentions the possibility of using *a priori* methods. Take, for example, the following passage:

> If any human society is discovered by anthropologists where one or more of the above concerns is *proven* to be absent, then this notion of the universal moral fabric should be modified. I concede this possibility. Proceeding in a different vein, one may develop the notion of general morality by taking the happiness of all creatures, and the alleviation of their pain or suffering, as basic, and then recommend action-guides which must be obeyed by all.

<div align="right">(1991a/2002, 259)</div>

In the first half he seems to be recommending empirical methods; in the second, *a priori* ones. The worry is that it may be incoherent for Matilal to simultaneously endorse empirical and *a priori* approaches to moral knowledge. However, one way to read his seeming indecision or incoherence about moral epistemology is just as a presentation of the different epistemological accounts that could accompany these different substantive views about moral standards. After all, Matilal isn't committed to any substantive account of what the universal moral standards are. He claims only that acknowledging a plurality of moral standards need not lead to relativism; i.e., that such an acknowledgment is *compatible* with realism and the existence of some universal standards.

This is, then, the first attempt at a more filled-in picture of Matilal's positive view. Still, there are some lingering questions. How exactly do these two sides of morality fit together? How is it possible that one side can be more or less relativist and the other side more or less absolutist? Doesn't this view just

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[29] His views seem consistent with, for example, the thought that the inherent motivational force of moral judgments could help us determine when we are encountering a moral standard.

seem like Matilal trying to have his cake and eat it too? In order to better understand Matilal's pluralism, it's important to look at another Indian philosophical tradition, the one that most conspicuously inspires his moral and metaethical views.

6. Jainism and *Anekānta-vāda*

In giving this dual-level realist account, Matilal draws on ideas from a tradition in Indian philosophy called Jainism. A renunciant religious movement appearing around the same time as Buddhism (~500 BCE), Jainism is a living tradition most well-known for its nonviolence.[30] Though it has not been studied as much as Buddhism in the West, Jainism also has a rich philosophical tradition. Of particular interest is the concept of non-onesidedness or *anekānta*. In his book on Jaina philosophy, Matilal focused on *anekānta*, claiming that it is equally as important as the Buddhist concept of emptiness.[31]

Anekānta-vāda literally means the doctrine of not being one-sided. It is a conceptual tool to make sense of conflicting viewpoints while still accepting realism. The best way to see what it means is through a classic image. Imagine several people, all blind from birth, are presented with an elephant. They each reach out and touch different parts of it and so, when asked what an elephant is like, they each give very different answers. The one who touches the leg says it's like a big tree, the one who touches the trunk says it's like a snake, the one who touches the tusk says it's like a spear, the one who touches the tail says it's like a broom, and so on. Hearing all of these different answers they begin to fight with each other, each denying the claims of all the others.[32]

The person who says the elephant is like a spear does not say something false, after all the elephant does have a tusk and it is sharp like a spear. But that is only part of the story; if he says that the elephant is *only* like a spear his claim is one-sided (or *ekānta*). This person mistakes part of the story for the

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[30] Nonviolence here meaning *ahiṃsā*. For an overview of Jain philosophy, see Long (2009) and Fohr (2015).

[31] Matilal (1981, 1). Matilal's comments seem to have gone unheeded; while there has been much interest in Buddhist emptiness among contemporary analytic philosophers, few works focus on *anekānta*.

[32] This is our own paraphrase of the story; there are many, many versions. The earliest written version is found in a Buddhist text called the *Tīttha Sūtta* (*Udāna* 6.4), though the story is likely older and not exclusive to either the Buddhists or the Jainas.

whole story, a partial truth for the whole truth. *Anekānta-vāda* is a collection of tools that allow one to acknowledge partial truths without mistaking them for the whole truth.

So some one-sided views do really get at one aspect of reality. But reality, on this picture, is complex and multifaceted, so getting at the whole truth requires various conceptual tools to synthesize these various one-sided views. These tools involve logic, philosophy of language, and epistemology.[33] In the philosophy of language there is theorizing about implicit indexical modifiers: each of the claims about the elephant is true if it includes an implicit "from my point-of-view".[34] In epistemology there is formal development of the different points of view that claims are indexed to.[35] Finally, there is a work on the logical relations between these claims and standpoints.[36]

Historical and technical issues aside, a few features of the Jaina view are worth emphasizing. First, the strategy of defusing disagreement by indexing claims to points of view resembles strategies used by moral relativists. In the same way that apparently conflicting claims about the elephant are resolved by indexing them to the points of view of the different people, cultural relativists resolve apparently conflicting value claims by indexing them to different cultures.

Unlike relativist views, however, the Jaina picture is at heart a realist one. There is, after all, an objective, mind-independent fact of the matter about how the elephant is. The relativizing makes their respective claims true but only in a limited way. One reason not to interpret *Anekānta-vāda* as a kind of relativism is that it would be self-undermining (Is *Anekānta-vāda* itself only true from a certain point of view? Is its negation also true from some points of view?). There is an objective truth, but it is complex and hard (if not some-

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[33] See Ganeri (2001, 128–50) for a philosophical explanation of these developments and Balcerowicz (2008) for a more historical treatment.

[34] This idea, called *syādvāda*, is a way of diffusing surface-level disagreements by adding an implicit modifier (*syāt*) to claims that indexes them to certain points of view. See Gokhale (1991) and Matilal (1991b).

[35] Traditionally the types of standpoints are divided into seven classes. See Cort (2000, 325–6) and Ganeri (2001, 134 ff.) for accessible overviews.

[36] See Ganeri (2002), Priest (2008), and Gorisse (2017) for more detailed discussions of Jaina logic.

times impossible) to assert; as Matilal puts it, "The total truth, the Jainas emphasize, may be derived from the integration of all different viewpoints."[37] After all, integrating the claims of the different blind people can produce a pretty accurate picture of the elephant.

Matilal's approach to logic embodies this Jaina inspiration. His approach was revolutionary in part because it did not treat Indian and Western logics as making claims entirely relativized to their own systems. Instead he treated them as offering different perspectives on the same reality. Drawing on Jaina thought he has a similar approach in metaethics, one that acknowledges plurality at one level but also allows for a deeper mind-independent reality. Of course, the Jaina doctrine was typically used in the context of different metaphysical views, not for value disagreements between cultures. Nevertheless, Matilal's view suggests that a similar framework can be used in the ethical domain to produce a view that is both realist and sensitive to cultural differences.

7. A Jaina Pluralism

Thinking through the elephant analogy in the moral case will give us a better picture of Matilal's pluralism. Like blind men, members of different cultures grope around for the basic moral fabric, the universal moral standards. The fabric is quite large, though, and each of us can only access a part of that fabric. The part that members of our culture can touch feels very different from the part that members of distant cultures can touch. Though there is a basic moral fabric, it's possible that some of us fail to touch the fabric at all – in the same way that some blind man may actually be touching a broom rather than the elephant. Perhaps we can talk to each other and form theories, either of expanded regions of the fabric or even of the whole thing. And nothing either precludes or guarantees the possibility that some of us might eventually get it right.

Given this inspiration, the best way to think about Matilal's metaethical view is that, at one level, there really are universal moral standards. We try, to

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[37] Matilal (1977/2002), 58; see also the discussion in Ganeri (2001, 147–9). Cort (2000) and Long (2009, 119) also point out that *Anekānta-vāda* was historically used to assert Jaina superiority over other schools, so it's unlikely that it was intended as just another point of view among many.

varying degrees of success, to capture those universal standards in our culture's moral outlooks, and the confrontation of cultures (analogous to a meeting of two of the blind men) may improve and expand those outlooks. We also try, to varying degrees of success, to describe the basic moral fabric through theories involving things like happiness and suffering, basic human needs, or our rational capacities. While Matilal seems to think it's possible that some such view in fact provides a full picture of the basic moral fabric, it would be very hard – or maybe even impossible – to be certain whether any view gets it right.

That said, Matilal also appears open to the possibility of genuine incommensurability and genuine moral conflict. Perhaps the best way to square this with his pluralist realism is to say that genuine moral conflicts only (but inevitably) exist given our actual, limited epistemological situation. Matilal may leave room for incommensurability because he thinks it could be impossible for us to grasp the entire moral fabric at once. Think of the elephant analogy, but modify it so that no single person can touch the whole thing, and so each one extrapolates a best explanation, but one which is fed by their own limited perspective. On that view, incommensurability and conflict could be inevitable, but wouldn't undermine the core realist thought.

Ultimately, Matilal's view seems to be that morality exists at both the universal level and the particular level. Our best substantive account of what exists at the universal level will probably be quite meager. Maybe all we can get is a luckily correct but impossible-to-verify picture of what goes on there. More optimistically, we might be able to get a justified but only rough picture of the basic moral fabric – like a hazy outline of the elephant. But like Kant's view of the noumenal realm, Matilal's view allows us to be aware of the existence of a universal moral standard, even if we don't know what it's like.[38]

Though Matilal himself doesn't say this, we can see the distinction between *sādhāraṇa dharma* and *viśeṣa dharma* in a similar light: individual *viśeṣa dharmas* are particular takes on the universal *sādhāraṇa dharma*, which we can only piece together in a limited way. So Arjuna's specific duties as a war-

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[38] Matilal frequently talks of 'levels' or 'sides' of morality. This evokes the Jaina claim that reality is multifaceted, with different sides having *seemingly* contradictory properties. The analog in value here is incommensurability; though Matilal doesn't assert that the values are incommensurable, he leaves it open that they are.

rior are indeed part of the universal fabric of morality, just seen from a particular point of view. His particular obligations, though not universal, are real but not the whole story.[39]

Matilal's pluralism, in the end, takes the form of metaethical realism, but with a somewhat novel moral epistemology, and combines it with normative or first-order pluralism. His view is not thoroughly pluralist at the metaethical level. A thoroughly pluralistic metaethics would hold that, for example, realism and cultural relativism were somehow *both* ultimately correct. Matilal accepts realism but wants to reject singularism. For Matilal, the existence of multiple, possibly incompatible, and incommensurable moral standards is intimately intertwined with his metaethical view. Though relativism is a mistake arising from our limited knowledge, it has a core truth that a sophisticated pluralist realism can capture.

8. Lessons

We haven't presumed to say all there is about Matilal's pluralist metaethics. We have hoped, however, to suggest that there is an interesting and underexplored account here, one that is inspired by classical Indian thought as well as 20th-century debates in metaethics.

He suggests, first, that realism is not the same as moral singularism or absolutism. An identification of realism with singularism still seems to motivate many people to adopt relativism. Realism seems to be in some way insufficiently compatible with the facts of moral diversity. Matilal offers a view that explicitly takes this into account, unlike some contemporary views that merely gesture at the fact that realism is not committed to singularism.

Second, Matilal offers us a different and more sensitive account of what we as theorists are responsible for. He claims that singularism encourages moral jingoism, that singularists are more likely to be nationalistic and xenophobic. Similarly, he thinks that relativism promotes moral insouciance, that relativists are more likely to be indifferent to real moral wrongs. He sometimes goes even further, arguing that relativism at its worst encourages liberal colonialism and oppression. He argues that what motivates the relativism of liberal colonialists is the thought that their own culture is radically and fundamentally different from foreign cultures.

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[39] Thanks to Jonardon Ganeri for drawing our attention to this connection.

A now common concern for cultural criticism is that this liberal perspective gives with one hand what it takes with the other: it offers tolerance but at the price of radical Othering. Matilal sees precisely this problem in Harman's cases. Unfamiliar cultures are seen as analogous to Martians: an otherworldly group whose values are utterly unrecognizable. Buoyed by this view, we may start to form "a love of exotic rituals" and even "resist the liberal forces in the native's own tradition and let superstitions, conservatism and fundamentalism take over" (1991a/2002, 260). Of course, he doesn't contend that singularism entails jingoism, nor that relativism entails insouciance or Othering.

But Matilal is aware that, as humans, theorists do not always believe precisely in proportion to what is entailed. We slip too easily into nearby views and too easily fall into patterns of unlicensed attitude and feeling. As theorists, we can take his suggestion to heart, not only in thinking about the connections between these different views but in thinking about how we treat cultures themselves in metaethical discourse. In the contemporary world, cultures simply are not isolated things. And even if we were to encounter a heretofore unknown culture, that encounter would itself be a confrontation of two cultures. Cultures change each other – even colonizers are changed by the colonized. With these thoughts in mind, we can see why Matilal thinks that many examples used to support cultural relativism are at best imperfectly imagined and at worst betray a false and offensive Othering.

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