

## WHAT IS MORAL RELATIVISM?

Of the various views that have been called 'moral relativism,' there are three plausible versions, which I will label 'normative moral relativism,' 'moral judgment relativism,' and 'meta-ethical relativism.' The first of these views is a thesis about moral agents; the second, a thesis about the form of meaning of moral judgments; the third, a thesis about the truth conditions or justification of moral judgments. *Normative moral relativism* is the view roughly that different people, as agents, can be subject to different ultimate moral demands. *Moral judgment relativism* holds that moral judgments make implicit reference to the speaker or some other person or to some group or to one or another set of moral standards, etc. *Meta-ethical relativism* says that conflicting moral judgments about a particular case can both be right.

### 1. NORMATIVE MORAL RELATIVISM

According to our rough statement of normative moral relativism, different people, as agents, can be subject to different ultimate moral demands. Only ultimate differences are supposed to be relevant, since even the nonrelativist will agree that different agents are subject to some different moral demands because of differences in situation. Jack is morally obligated to pay George ten dollars, Mary is not. That is not yet normative moral relativism. Maybe Jack has borrowed ten dollars from George and Mary has not. In that case Mary and Jack might still be subject to the same ultimate moral demands, including for example that one should pay one's debts.

Differences in situation can include differences in custom. In England (in 1977) Jack ought to drive on the left side of the road. In France, Mary ought to drive on the right. This is again not yet normative moral relativism, since Jack and Mary may still be subject to the same overriding principle — e.g. one ought to drive on the side of the road designated by law and custom. Similarly, other differences between what Jack and Mary ought to do may reflect differences in custom concerning politeness and etiquette, family responsibility, property, and so forth, rather than any difference in ultimate principle.

What is an *ultimate* moral demand? A given demand  $D$  is an ultimate moral demand on an agent  $A$  if and only if there is no further moral demand  $D'$  on  $A$  which, given  $A$ 's situation, accounts for  $A$ 's being subject to  $D$ .

Actually, quite apart from the issue of relativism, it seems to be a possible view that there are no ultimate moral demands on a person in this sense – that whenever  $D$  applies to  $A$  there is always a more fundamental  $D'$  which explains, given  $A$ 's situation, why  $D$  applies. But according to our initial formulation of normative moral relativism, someone who denies that there are ultimate moral principles could not be a normative moral relativist. That seems wrong. We need a better formulation.

Could we take normative moral relativism to be the view that there are no moral demands to which everyone is subject? No, because a nonrelativist might believe that there are people subject to no moral demands at all, for example infants and idiots. Could we take moral relativism to say that there are no moral demands that apply to everyone who is subject to at least some moral demands? That would be a very strong form of normative moral relativism. We also want to allow for a weaker version that is compatible with the existence of some universal moral demands.

This weaker version must claim there can be two people subject to different moral demands and not subject to some more basic demand that accounts for this, given differences in their situation. More formally, it says that there can be two people  $A$  and  $B$  and a moral demand  $D$  such that

- (1)  $A$  is subject to  $D$
- (2)  $B$  is not subject to  $D$
- (3)  $B$  is subject to some moral demands
- (4) There is no demand  $D'$  to which  $A$  and  $B$  are both subject which accounts for (1) and (2) given the differences in situation between  $A$  and  $B$ .

This formulation allows for some moral universality and is compatible with the claim that there are no ultimate moral demands. This is basically the same view that Frankena calls 'normative relativism.'<sup>1</sup> He formulates the view as follows: "what is right or good for one individual or society is not right or good for another, even if the situations involved are similar." This is inexact, however, since any two situations are similar in some respects and different in others. We need to say that the situations are similar in the sense that there are no morally significant differences in the two situations. If we suppose that a difference is morally significant only if it is counted significant by some

moral principle or demand, we are led to something like the formulations I have offered for 'normative moral relativism.'

Brandt uses the term 'normative relativism' differently, for any view which 'asserts that something is wrong or blameworthy if some person – or group – thinks it is wrong or blameworthy.' He gives two examples of such a view.

(a) "If someone thinks it is right (or wrong) to do *A*, then it *is* right (wrong) for him to do *A*." (b) "If the moral principles recognised in the society of which *X* is a member imply that it is wrong to do *A* in circumstances *C*, then it *is* wrong for *X* to do *A* in *C*."<sup>2</sup>

But this does not seem to be a very plausible view. Nor is it even clearly a version of relativism, since it appears to be advocating a moral principle that might be taken to have universal applications. In any event, it is certainly a different view from what I am calling normative moral relativism, which says that two people can be subject to different moral demands and not subject to some more basic demand that accounts for this, given their situation.

This ends my preliminary discussion of normative moral relativism, which makes a claim about moral agents. I turn now to a relativistic thesis about the meaning or form of moral judgments.

## 2. MORAL JUDGMENT RELATIVISM

According to moral judgment relativism, moral judgments contain an implicit reference to the speaker or some other person or some group or certain moral standards, etc. One version holds that moral judgments are always implicitly egocentric in the sense that they are always equivalent to judgments containing egocentric terms essentially. Egocentric terms in English include *I*, *me*, *this*, and *now*. So one example of this sort of moral judgment relativism would be Brandt's suggestion in *Hopi Ethics*: "It would be wrong to do *X*" means the same as "If I were normal, impartial, and fully informed, I should feel obligated not to perform *X*."<sup>3</sup> (Brandt later abandons this suggestion in *Ethical Theory*.)

Notice that this form of moral judgment relativism says that egocentric terms are *essential* to the equivalent paraphrase. Anyone can agree that 'Stealing is wrong' is equivalent to 'My stealing is wrong and so is everyone else's.' But that does not guarantee the truth of this form of moral judgment relativism. Notice also that this form of moral judgment relativism holds that *all* moral judgments are egocentric in this sense. It is obvious that some are, for example 'I should not steal' is, but, again, that is not enough to establish the truth of this form of moral judgment relativism.

Another version of moral judgment relativism takes moral judgments to be implicitly relative to one or another morality in something like the way in which a judgment that someone is tall is implicitly relative to one or another comparison class. To say that George is tall is to say that George is tall in relation to some implicitly indicated reference class. George can be tall in relation to one such class and not tall in relation to another. For example, George might be tall for a man but not tall for a basketball player. Note that it makes no sense to ask whether George is tall, period, apart from one comparison class or another.

Similarly, this form of moral judgment relativism holds that moral judgments make sense only in relation to one or another set of moral demands. Something can be right in relation to one morality and not right in relation to another. 'As a Christian, you ought to turn the other cheek: I, however, propose to strike back.' The judgment that *X* is wrong is always incomplete — just as the judgment that *P* is tall is incomplete. Just as we must always understand the latter judgment as the judgment that *P* is tall for a person, or for a basketball player, etc., so too we must understand the former judgment as saying that *X* is wrong *for* a Christian, *for* a Moslem, *for* someone who accepts such and such demands, etc.

Stevenson uses the term 'relativism' to indicate something like this second form of moral judgment relativism.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Firth counts an analysis as 'relativistic' if it is a version of the first form of moral judgment relativism in its essential use of egocentric terms.<sup>5</sup> Notice that an analysis that is relativistic in Firth's sense will not necessarily count as a form of relativism in Stevenson's sense. Nevertheless, both views see a hidden implicit relativity in the logical form or meaning of moral judgments, so both count as forms of moral judgment relativism in my sense. I turn now to a third form of relativism which sees a different sort of relativity in moral judgments — a relativity in the correctness of moral judgments.

### 3. META-ETHICAL RELATIVISM

According to meta-ethical relativism, there can be conflicting moral judgments about a particular case that are both fully correct. The idea is that two people with different moralities might reach conflicting moral judgments concerning a particular case — for example; one saying the agent was morally right, the other saying the agent was wrong — where both opinions are correct.

The two judgments must really conflict and therefore must be judgments about the same particular case. It is not enough to contrast a judgment about one act in society with a judgment about the 'same act' in another society.

Furthermore, it is not enough for meta-ethical relativism that there should be such conflicting judgments. Both judgments must be correct. In particular, neither judgment can rest on mistakes about the facts of the case, a failure fully to appreciate these facts, incorrect reasoning, or anything else that might distort someone's judgment.

Finally both judgments must be fully correct. Borderline cases are not enough – cases in which one might be equally justified in saying one thing or the opposite. According to meta-ethical relativism the one judgment is fully correct for the one speaker, the conflicting judgment is fully correct for the other speaker and not *vice versa*. It would not be correct for either speaker to make the other judgment.

Both Brandt and Frankena use the term 'meta-ethical relativism' in roughly this sense. According to Brandt, the meta-ethical relativist "denies that there is always one correct moral evaluation" of a given issue.<sup>6</sup> In his book *Ethical Theory*, he calls the same view 'ethical relativism,' which he there defines as the thesis that "there are conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid."<sup>7</sup> However, Brandt would allow certain merely apparently conflicting opinions to count as conflicting, if moral judgment relativism should be true. So certain moral judgment relativists will count as meta-ethical relativists as Brandt uses this term but not as we are using it.<sup>8</sup>

As Frankena explains meta-ethical relativism, "It holds that, in the case of basic ethical judgments, there is no objectively valid, rational way of justifying one against the other; consequently two conflicting basic judgments may be equally valid."<sup>9</sup> Presumably he refers to 'basic ethical judgments' to allow for the possibility that less basic judgments might be justified on the basis of more basic judgments, the question then being how the most basic judgments are to be justified. But this part of his definition is best omitted, since we want to allow both relativists and nonrelativists to be able to deny that there are basic ethical judgments in this sense. This leaves us with the claim that two conflicting ethical judgments may be equally valid, which is essentially the way in which we have defined meta-ethical relativism.<sup>10</sup>

Brandt uses the term 'methodological relativism' to refer to what he takes to be a particular version of what we are calling meta-ethical relativism, a version which holds that 'there is no unique rational method in ethics' for assessing moral judgments.<sup>11</sup> Stevenson uses the term 'methodological relativism' slightly differently for the claim that statements about the reasons

and justification of moral judgments are themselves implicitly relational, in something like the way in which moral judgments are held to be implicitly relational according to moral judgment relativism.<sup>12</sup> Brandt's but not Stevenson's definition counts as a 'methodological relativist' the sceptic who denies that moral judgments are ever correct or justified in any sense. Such a sceptic clearly does not count as a meta-ethical relativist in our sense, since a meta-ethical relativist holds that conflicting moral judgment can both be correct whereas such a sceptic denies that any moral judgment is ever correct.

#### 4. THE THREE VERSIONS OF MORAL RELATIVISM BRIEFLY COMPARED

We have distinguished three versions of moral relativism: (1) normative moral relativism, which holds that two people can be subject to different moral demands and not subject to some more basic demand that accounts for this given their different situations; (2) moral judgment relativism, which says that moral judgments implicitly refer to one or another person, group, or set of moral demands; and (3) meta-ethical relativism, which holds that conflicting moral judgments about a particular case can both be right. It is clearly possible to accept one of these versions without accepting the others.

For example, an emotivist might accept meta-ethical relativism on the ground that people can differ in their moral attitudes without having relevantly different beliefs, without having reasoned incorrectly or failed to appreciate certain things, without being prejudiced or biased, etc. But, as Stevenson points out, the emotivist need not (and probably will not) accept moral judgment relativism.<sup>13</sup> And the emotivist can also deny normative moral relativism, since he can (and no doubt will) suppose that the principles he accepts apply to everyone.

Moreover, an existentialist might accept normative moral relativism on the grounds that each person is subject only to the principles that person accepts. This does not imply moral judgment relativism or meta-ethical relativism, since the existentialist can suppose that conflicting moral judgments about a particular agent cannot both be correct. Given the moral principles that agent accepts, at most one of the judgments will be right.

Finally, a relativistic ideal observer theorist with the sort of view Brandt puts forward in *Hopi Ethics* can accept moral judgment relativism without accepting meta-ethical relativism, since he can suppose that two really (as opposed to merely apparently) conflicting moral judgments cannot both be right. And such a theorist can reject normative moral relativism too, e.g. on

the grounds that if he were an ideal observer he would apply the same basic principles to everyone.

So, it is possible to accept any one of these versions of moral relativism without being committed to the others. It is also possible, consistently, to accept more than one of these versions. Indeed, I am inclined to accept all three.

But someone might say that none of these is *really* a possible view – for each is subject to serious objections which we must now consider.

##### 5. AN OBJECTION TO NORMATIVE MORAL RELATIVISM

According to normative moral relativism there can be two people *A* and *B* and a moral demand *D* such that

- (1) *A* is subject to *D*
- (2) *B* is not subject to *D*
- (3) *B* is subject to some moral demands
- (4) There is no moral demand *D'* to which *A* and *B* are both subject which accounts for (1) and (2) given the difference in situation between *A* and *B*.

The obvious objection to this is that, if (1), (2), and (3) are true, there must be some reason why *A* but not *B* is subject to *D*, for surely this cannot be an arbitrary fact. *Something* must be true of *A* but not true of *B* which accounts for why *A* but not *B* is subject to *D*. It follows that there must be some sort of general principle which implies that people with certain characteristics *F* are subject to *D* and others are not. So there must be a general principle *P* more basic than that expressing the demand *D* which accounts for (1) and (2) given the difference in situation between *A* and *B*, i.e. given that *A* is *F* and *B* is not. But then it can seem that (4) must be false. For won't *P* express just the moral demand *D'* whose existence (4) denies?

Consider, for example, the existentialist who advocates normative moral relativism on the grounds that each person is subject only to moral principles that person accepts. Then *A* is subject to *D* but *B* is not because *A* accepts a principle expressing the demand *D* and *B* does not. But then it can seem that the existentialist is committed to supposing that there is after all a moral demand *D'* that applies both to *A* and to *B* and explains why *A* but not *B* is subject to *D*, namely the demand of non-hypocrisy, the demand that one should act in accordance with those principles one accepts. And it can seem that the same point will apply to any attempt to defend normative moral

relativism, leading to the conclusion that this is not after all a coherent form of moral relativism.

I suspect indeed that reflections along these lines lead Brandt to use the term 'normative relativism' not for what we are calling normative moral relativism but for the view that something is wrong or blameworthy if some person — or group — thinks it is wrong or blameworthy. For it can seem that the existentialist is more plausibly taken to be advocating normative relativism in Brandt's sense than normative moral relativism in our sense, even though normative relativism in Brandt's sense is quite implausible on its face; for it can seem that normative moral relativism in our sense is quite incoherent.

I believe that this is wrong and that normative moral relativism is not only coherent but even true. But before saying why, let me go on to objections to the two other forms of moral relativism.

#### 6. AN OBJECTION TO MORAL JUDGMENT RELATIVISM

Moral judgment relativism holds that moral judgments make implicit reference to the speaker, some other person or persons, or some set of moral demands. It follows from this that apparently conflicting moral judgments do not actually conflict if made by different speakers or made in relation to different people or moralities. But, as Stevenson has persuasively argued,<sup>14</sup> this seems to imply that certain genuine moral disagreements are mere pseudo-issues.

Recall Brandt's suggestions in *Hopi Ethics* that "It would be wrong to do *X*" means "If I were normal, impartial, and fully informed, I should feel obligated not to perform *X*." Now suppose that *A* and *B* are discussing whether abortion is wrong. *A* maintains that abortion is wrong; *B* maintains that it is not wrong. *A* and *B* imagine that they are disagreeing; they mean to be disagreeing with each other. But, Brandt's analysis implies that they are not really disagreeing. *A* is saying that if she, *A*, were normal, impartial, and fully informed, she would feel obligated not to have an abortion in certain circumstances; *B* is saying that if she, *B*, were normal, impartial, and fully informed, she would not feel obligated not to have an abortion in those circumstances. And both of these claims could be true. It is possible that under these conditions *A* would feel obligated not to have an abortion and *B* would not feel obligated. But this is implausible. For it seems that if *A* and *B* are using words normally they do genuinely disagree. In Stevenson's view, they may not disagree in belief but they certainly disagree in their attitude toward abortion. He takes this to be evidence for his view that moral judgments express favorable or unfavorable attitudes rather than beliefs.

## 7. AN OBJECTION TO META-ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Metal-ethical relativism holds that actually conflicting moral judgments about a particular case can both be right and not just in 'borderline' cases. The obvious objection here is that it is not clear what this could mean. It would seem that to say that a judgment is right is for oneself to endorse that judgment – to agree with it. The meta-ethical relativist therefore seems to be committing himself to agreeing with each of two judgments which, also according to him, genuinely conflict. This seems to involve an inconsistency. What can the meta-ethical relativist have in mind? We are supposing that the people making the judgments genuinely and not merely apparently disagree. So it seems that the meta-ethical relativist, in agreeing with both, must be disagreeing with himself!

In saying that both judgments are right, the meta-ethical relativist might mean either that both are true or that both are justified, given the facts and all other relevant considerations. In either case the objection seems to apply. Reverting to our earlier example, let us suppose again that *A* maintains that abortion is wrong and that *B* maintains that abortion is not wrong and let us agree that this is a genuine disagreement – that these judgments really and not just apparently conflict. Then what could it mean to say that both judgments are true. Presumably, it is true that abortion is wrong only if abortion is wrong, and it is true that abortion is not wrong only if abortion is not wrong. If the meta-ethical relativist says both judgments are true, he seems to commit himself to the contradictory conclusion that abortion is both wrong and not wrong.

On the other hand, suppose that the meta-ethical relativist says that, given all the facts and all other relevant considerations, the judgment that abortion is wrong is *justified* and so is the judgment that abortion is not wrong. What could he mean by this? He might mean that this is a borderline case – like deciding whether a certain person is bald – perhaps given all the facts, etc. the judgment that he is bald is justified and so is the judgment that he is not bald. But to say that there are borderline moral issues of this sort is not to say anything interesting – of course there are. We are supposing that the meta-ethical relativist is saying something more than that – that in a case like this both judgments might be justified although this is not a borderline case. But what can that mean?

Stevenson's suggestion might seem to help here. Perhaps the meta-ethical relativist is a methodological relativist in Stevenson's sense, holding that the term 'justified' is a relative term here, having application only to one or another person. Neither judgment is justified *period*; rather the one judgment

is justified for *A* but not *B* and the other judgment is justified for *B* but not *A*. However, as Stevenson observes,<sup>15</sup> this sort of methodological relativism is faced with the same sort of objections raised against moral judgment relativism. For *A* and *B* will disagree not only about whether abortion is wrong but also about whether the judgment that abortion is wrong is justified, *A* maintaining that it is, *B* denying this. The second disagreement, like the first, seems to be a real disagreement and not the pseudo issue it is taken to be by this sort of normative relativism.

There are, then, serious objections to each of the versions of moral relativism we have distinguished. Against normative moral relativism, it can be said that if *A* is subject to a moral demand that *B* is not, there must be some reason for this, a reason that invokes a demand on both *A* and *B*, contrary to what is claimed in normative moral relativism. The objection to moral judgment relativism is that it wrongly treats certain real disagreements as verbal pseudo-issues. Finally, it can be objected that the meta-ethical relativist either must contradict himself by agreeing with each of two conflicting judgments or, in supposing that 'justified' is a relative term, must fall subject to the objection raised against moral judgment relativism; namely that it misrepresents certain real disagreements as merely apparent disagreements.

But all these objections can be met. I will now describe a highly plausible view which, in one way or another, involves all three versions of moral relativism and shows how the objections to each version can be met.

#### 8. AN ARGUMENT FOR NORMATIVE MORAL RELATIVISM

Normative moral relativism might be derived from two assumptions. The first is this.

ASSUMPTION 1. A moral demand *D* applies to a person only if that person either accepts *D* (i.e. intends to act in accordance with *D*) or fails to accept *D* only because of ignorance of relevant (nonmoral) facts, a failure to reason something through, or some sort of (nonmoral) mental defect like irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.

This assumption might be defended by an appeal to the sorts of considerations sometimes offered in support of 'internalist' accounts of moral obligation.<sup>16</sup> It might be said, for example, that the assumption captures what distinguishes moral demands from demands of other sorts, such as legal demands. Moral demands have to be acceptable to those to whom they apply in the way that legal demands do not.

The point might be made in terms of the notion of a reason to do something, since, if a moral demand applies to someone, that person has a compelling reason to act in accordance with that demand. This is not true of legal demands. A legal demand applies to anyone in a given area who satisfies certain conditions, whether or not he or she has a compelling reason to act in accordance with that demand. Now, reasons depend on reasoning. To say that a person has a conclusive reason to do something is to say that there is warranted practical reasoning that he could do, if he knew all the relevant facts, were smart enough, rational enough, etc., reasoning that would culminate in a decision to do the act in question.

Frankena observes that the 'externalist' can escape this sort of argument by claiming that it rests on an ambiguity in the term 'reason,' which might mean either 'justifying reason,' i.e. reason to think one ought to do something, or 'motivating reason.' The externalist can say that the analysis of 'conclusive reason to do something' in terms of practical reasoning culminating in a decision to do it is, perhaps, an analysis of 'motivating reason to do something.' But this, the externalist can say, is irrelevant to the point that, if a moral demand applies to someone, that person has a compelling reason to act in accordance with that demand. For here the relevant type of reason is a justifying reason: If a moral demand applies to someone, that person has a compelling reason to think he or she ought to do that thing.<sup>17</sup>

The internalist will reply that this is an ad hoc maneuver, since no evidence has been offered for the alleged ambiguity. (Frankena gives examples which show that reasons for doing something might be either moral or nonmoral, e.g. self-interested.<sup>18</sup> But that seems irrelevant to the claim of ambiguity.) Furthermore, the notion of a 'justifying reason,' as a reason to think one ought, leads to difficulties for externalism, since to think one ought to do something is to think one has reasons to do it, and these reasons must not in turn be taken to be justifying reasons, for then thinking one ought to do something would be explained as thinking one has reason to think one ought to do that thing.

This point is obscured if talk involving 'ought' is not clearly distinguished from talk of obligation. It can happen that, according to the law, one is supposed to do a certain thing, although there is not the slightest reason actually to do it — perhaps there is no penalty for not doing it and one has no moral reasons to observe this particular law. Here we might speak of legal obligation but we would not say, e.g., that legally one *ought* to do the act in question (even though there is a legal 'justification' only for doing that) — for the word 'ought' is used to speak of reasons in a way that 'obligation' is not.

Of course, if according to morality, one is supposed to do a certain thing then one ought to do it — one does have a reason in that case.

So, even if there is no way of proving the relativist's first assumption, a strong case can be made for it and it is at the very least a possible view to take.

The second assumption can be made stronger or weaker, depending on how strong a form of normative moral relativism is to be defended. The strongest assumption is this.

ASSUMPTION 2S. For any moral demand *D*, there is someone subject to some moral demands who does not accept *D* as a legitimate demand on him or herself, where this nonacceptance is not the result of any relevant (nonmoral) ignorance on that person's part or any failure to reason something through or any sort of (nonmoral) mental defect such as irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.

Assumptions 1 and 2S logically imply that there are no universal moral demands which apply to everyone who is subject to some moral demands. We are interested here in a weaker normative moral relativism which can be based on a weaker second assumption.

ASSUMPTION 2W. There are two people *A* and *B* and a moral demand *D* such that

- (1) *A* is subject to *D*
- (2) *B* does not accept *D* as a legitimate moral demand on him or herself, where this nonacceptance is not the result of any relevant (nonmoral) ignorance on *B*'s part or any failure to reason something through or any sort of (nonmoral) mental defect such as irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.
- (3) *B* is subject to some moral demands
- (4) Neither *A* nor *B* accepts a demand *D'* which would account for *A* but not *B* being subject to *D* given the difference in situation between *A* and *B*, and in neither case is this failure to accept such a *D'* the result of any relevant (nonmoral) ignorance or any failure to reason something through or any sort of (nonmoral) mental defect such as irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or mental illness.

Assumptions 1 and 2W together logically imply normative moral relativism as we have defined it.

What can be said on behalf of assumption 2*W*? Let us consider a couple of possible examples. Consider first the issue of cruelty to animals as it appears to typical middle class American citizens and as it appears to the Hopi Indians. It seems plausible to suppose that a moral demand applies to the typical middle class American citizen forbidding the infliction of needless suffering on animals. On the other hand, from Brandt's description of Hopi morality, it seems that a typical Hopi Indian does not accept such a strong demand as a legitimate moral demand, where this nonacceptance is not the result of ignorance, irrationality, stupidity, etc.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, neither the typical middle class American citizen nor the typical Hopi Indian accepts any more basic demand that would account for why this should apply to middle class American citizens but not Hopi Indians given differences in their situations. And it would seem that in neither case is this failure to accept such a basic principle the result of ignorance, irrationality, stupidity, etc. So this seems to be an example establishing the truth of assumption 2*W*.

I am myself inclined to think there are many examples of this sort even within American Society. Consider the moral demand which seems to apply to most people that one should not kill other people. I am inclined to suppose that there are professional criminals who do not accept this demand who have no qualms about killing other people if there is something to be gained from doing so — where this is not because they are unaware of certain facts or have reasoned incorrectly or have failed to follow out certain reasoning, nor is it because of any stupidity, irrationality, confusion or mental illness on their part. And this is not because there is some more basic moral demand which accounts, given differences in situation, for why most people but not these criminals are subject to the prohibition against the killing of other people.

After thinking over these and similar examples, some people (like me) will suppose that assumption 2*W* is obviously true. Others will not. Some philosophers have argued — unconvincingly — that a rejection of moral demands of this sort must involve ignorance, irrationality, or some other (nonmoral) mental defect.<sup>20</sup> Others might hope that psychology would resolve the issue. “Unfortunately,” as Brandt remarks about a related issue, “psychological theories do not provide a uniform answer to our question.”<sup>21</sup> Gestalt theory and Piagetian theory point in one way, Hullean learning theory and psycho-analytic theory point in the other way.<sup>22</sup> In any event, I believe it is safe to say that neither philosophy nor psychology has produced a strong case against assumption 2*W*.

Assumption 1 says, roughly, that a moral demand applies to someone only if it is rational for that person to accept that demand. Assumption 2*W* says,

roughly, that it can be rational for different people to accept different moral demands 'all the way down.' Together these assumptions logically imply, roughly, that different people can be subject to different moral demands 'all the way down.'

How can it be rational for different people to accept different moral demands 'all the way down'? This might be because what it is rational to accept depends on how one's mind works and that different people's minds work in different ways. A less radical suggestion is that what demands it is rational to accept depends on what demands one already accepts and that different people accept sufficiently different demands to begin with that it is rational for them to accept different demands. This is not to say that if one accepts a demand it is automatically rational for one to do so. Nor is it to say that the only thing relevant to the question whether it is rational to accept a given demand is what demands one accepts. Presumably one's desires, other intentions, and beliefs are important too. To accept a moral demand, in the relevant sense, is to intend to adhere to it. Whether it is rational to do this is a question of practical reasoning which in my opinion is to be resolved (roughly) by minimally modifying antecedent intentions, beliefs, desires, etc. in the interest of a certain sort of coherence.<sup>23</sup> But the details are not important here.

We must now see how our earlier objection to normative moral relativism can be met. The objection was that, if *A* is subject to *D* and *B* is not, then something must be true of *A* but not *B* which accounts for this; so there must be some sort of general principle which implies that people who are *F* are subject to *D* and those who are not *F* are not subject to *D*. This general principle will repress a moral demand *D'* which accounts for why *A* but not *B* is subject to *D*. But normative moral relativism denies that there is always such a demand *D'*.

The answer to this objection is that the principle in question does not always express a moral demand. *A* but not *B* is subject to *D* because it is rational for *A* to accept *D* but not rational for *B* to do so, and this is sometimes not the result of some more basic moral principle applying to both *A* and *B* but rather due simply to the fact that *A* and *B* actually accept sufficiently different moral demands in the first place.

Perhaps even in the key case for the relativist there is a demand which applies both to *A* and *B* which, given the differences in their situations accounts for why *A* but not *B* is subject to *D*, but this demand is not a *moral* demand – it is simply the demand that one should be rational.

## 9. RELATIVISM AND UNIVERSALIZABILITY

Frankena raises a somewhat different objection to normative moral relativism: "Such a normative principle seems to violate the requirements of consistency and universalization . . ." <sup>24</sup> Elsewhere he refers to the relevant principle as "The Principle of Universalizability: if one judges that *X* is right or good, then one is committed to judging that anything exactly like *X*, or like *X* in relevant respects, is right or good. Otherwise he has no business using these words." <sup>25</sup> Here Frankena seems to be suggesting that the use of moral terminology normally presupposes a Principle of Universalizability which is incompatible with normative moral relativism. This implies that normative moral relativism involves a misuse of language.

But that is too strong a conclusion. Perhaps many people do use moral terminology in a way that presupposes a Principle of Universalizability that is incompatible with normative moral relativism. Perhaps such a principle is even partly constitutive of what these people mean by these terms. Nevertheless, other people — relativists, for example — do not use moral terminology in this way. It must be argued, not just assumed, that there is something wrong with this second usage.

Indeed, suppose that, although one initially uses moral terminology in the first way, one becomes convinced of assumptions 1 and 2*W* which logically imply normative moral relativism. Then one has become convinced of the falsity of a presupposition of one's use of moral terminology. What should one do? There are two options here. One might simply abandon moral terminology altogether, in the way that one abandons certain racist or sexist terminology after becoming aware of the false presuppositions of its usage. Or one might modify one's usage so that it no longer involves the presuppositions one takes to be false, in the way that Einstein modified the scientific usage of terms like 'simultaneous,' 'acceleration,' and 'mass,' after arguing that prior usage had involved a false presupposition. This second course, of modifying one's usage of moral terminology so as to eliminate the unwanted presupposition, seems clearly the preferable alternative.

How should one's usage be modified? Presumably along the lines suggested by moral judgment relativism. Judgments expressing moral demands can be treated as involving an implicit reference to a person or to a group of people who are presumed to accept certain demands or simply to certain demands themselves. But it is important to avoid or evade the objection raised against moral judgment relativism, namely that it represents certain real disagreements as mere pseudo-issues. If two people — even two relativists — disagree

about whether it is morally wrong to cause pain and injury to animals, they really do disagree and are not just talking past each other – the one saying that causing pain and injury to animals is wrong in relation to our morality, the other saying it is not wrong in relation to Hopi morality.

Within a relativistic theory, the objection can be partially met as follows. When a relativist makes a simple moral judgment, expressing a moral demand, saying that a certain sort of act is morally wrong, for example, making no explicit reference to one or another morality, the speaker makes this judgment in relation to a morality he or she accepts, presupposing that this morality is also accepted by anyone to whom the judgment is addressed and by any agents referred to in the judgment (in the sense that what is at issue is whether it is wrong *of them* to do a certain thing). A relativist can make moral judgments in relation to moralities he or she (or the audience) does not accept, but it is a misuse of moral language – even when it has been relativized – to do this without making it clear that one is doing so. It is, furthermore, always a misuse of language to make a moral judgment about an agent in relation to a morality not accepted by the agent.

If two relativists disagree, one saying simply that it is morally wrong to cause pain and injury to animals, the other saying simply that this is not wrong, they do *mean to be* disagreeing with each other. They presuppose that they are making these judgments in relation to the same relevant moral demands. Of course, they may be mistaken about that, in which case they really are talking past each other despite their intentions. If they come to see that they are speaking in relation to relevantly different moralities, they will have to stop saying what they are saying or indeed be guilty of misuse of language.

A relativist can intelligibly disagree with an absolutist over whether something is wrong if the relativist makes his judgment in relation to a morality the absolutist accepts, in the same way that a relativity theory physicist can disagree with a Newtonian over what the mass of a certain object is, if the relativity theorist makes his judgment in relation to an appropriate inertial framework.

A relativistic judgment made in relation to a given morality concerning the moral demands applicable to a particular agent presupposes that the agent in question accepts that morality. So relativists with different moralities will, if they have their wits about them, tend not to make this sort of judgment about the same agents. And, at least as a first approximation, it will turn out that even superficially conflicting judgments cannot both be true of the same agent even if the judgments are made in relation to different

moralties, since the judgments will involve conflicting presuppositions about the morality the agent accepts.

That is only a 'first approximation' because a particular agent will typically accept more than one morality — and those moralities can make conflicting demands concerning a particular case. In that case superficially conflicting moral judgments about that agent (e.g. Antigone) made in relation to different moralities can both be true if the agent accepts both moralities relative to which each of the judgments is made.

In any event, the relativist's usage does not permit unrestricted universalization. As a relativist, I cannot accept the principle that, if it would be wrong for me to do something, it would be wrong for anyone else in a similar situation to do that thing, since that is not true for those who do not accept the relevant aspects of my morality. But the following principle is acceptable: if it is wrong for someone else to do something, it would be wrong for me to do that in a similar situation; in other words, if it is okay for me to do something, it can't be wrong for anyone else in my situation.

#### 10. ASSESSING META-ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Our second and third versions of moral relativism are theses about moral judgments. But whose judgments, the relativist's or the nonrelativist's? Well, moral judgment relativism is a thesis about the relativist's usage; it is not meant to apply to the nonrelativist's usage.

What about meta-ethical relativism? This is the claim that really conflicting moral judgments can both be right. Now superficially conflicting relativistic moral judgments can both be right if made in relation to different moralities, but these judgments do not really conflict. And it does not seem to make sense to suppose that really conflicting relativistic moral judgments can both be right. So meta-ethical relativism does not seem correct as a thesis about relativistic moral judgments.

Is it correct as a thesis about nonrelativistic moral judgments? One might suppose that normative moral relativism implies that no nonrelativistic moral judgments can be right, since all such judgments presuppose an unrestricted principle of universalizability. But that would be like denying that any Newtonian judgments concerning the mass of a particular object could be right, on the grounds that these judgments presuppose that mass is invariant from one inertial framework to another. In practice we would say that a Newtonian judgment of mass is right if the corresponding relativistic judgment is correct made in relation to an inertial framework that is not

accelerated with respect to the person making the Newtonian judgment. Similarly we should count a nonrelativistic moral judgment right if the corresponding relativistic moral judgment is right made in relation to the morality accepted by the person making the nonrelativistic moral judgment. The relativist can intelligibly suppose that really conflicting nonrelativistic moral judgments are both right in this sense.

I conclude, then, that there is a reasonable form of moral relativism which involves normative moral relativism, moral judgment relativism as a thesis about relativistic but not nonrelativistic moral judgments, and meta-ethical relativism as a thesis about nonrelativistic but not relativistic moral judgments.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> William Frankena, *Ethics*, Second edition (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Richard B. Brandt, 'Ethical Relativism', in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. III (New York: Macmillan and Free Press, 1967), p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> Actually he suggests this as an analysis of the Hopi term *Ka-anta* which he takes to be roughly equivalent to the English term *wrong*. R.B. Brandt, *Hopi Ethics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), p. 109.

<sup>4</sup> Charles L. Stevenson, 'Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value', in Stevenson, *Facts and Values* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963), pp. 71–93.

<sup>5</sup> Roderick Firth, 'Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* XII (1952), 317–345.

<sup>6</sup> 'Ethical Relativism', p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1959), p. 272.

<sup>8</sup> 'Ethical Relativism', p. 75; *Ethical Theory*, pp. 278–279.

<sup>9</sup> *Ethics*, p. 109.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. 'On Saying the Ethical Thing', in K.E. Goodpaster (ed.), *Perspectives on Morality: Essays by William Frankena* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), p. 123, where Frankena calls this position simply 'relativism': "if two people hold conflicting normative judgments, . . . both judgments may be rational or justified."

<sup>11</sup> *Ethical Theory*, p. 275. Cf. 'Ethical Relativism', p. 76.

<sup>12</sup> 'Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value', p. 86.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 81. See also 'The Nature of Ethical Disagreements' in *Facts and Values*, pp. 1–9.

<sup>15</sup> Stevenson, 'Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value', p. 86.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Frankena's useful discussion of such considerations in 'Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy', in *Perspectives on Morality*, pp. 49–73.

<sup>17</sup> 'Obligation and Motivation in Recent Moral Philosophy', p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> Brandt, *Hopi Ethics*, pp. 213–215, 245–246. According to Brandt, the Hopi do recognise a weaker principle of concern for animals. More recently he has argued that basic psychological principles ensure that "our benevolence is and must be engaged by the suffering of animals – unless we wrongly believe they suffer little or not at all." 'The Psychology of Benevolence and Its Implications for Philosophy', *The Journal of Philosophy* 73 (1976), 450.

<sup>20</sup> I am thinking here of Plato, Kant, and more recently Thomas Nagel, *The Possibility of Altruism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>21</sup> *Ethical Theory*, p. 282.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, Chapter Six, 'The Development of Ethical Values in the Individual', pp. 114–150. Also Martin L. Hoffman, 'Moral Development', in *Carmichael's Manual of Psychology*, ed. by Paul H. Mussen, 3rd ed. (New York: Wiley, 1970), vol. 2, pp. 264–332.

<sup>23</sup> See Gilbert Harman, 'Practical Reasoning', *Review of Metaphysics*, pp. 431–463.

<sup>24</sup> *Ethics*, p. 109.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25. Brandt usefully discusses what might be said in favor of such a principle, which he calls "the requirement of generality," in *Ethical Theory*, pp. 19–24.