

That Seems Wrong: Pedagogically Defusing Moral Relativism and Moral Skepticism

Penultimate draft; please cite official article

ABSTRACT

Students sometimes profess moral relativism or skepticism with retorts like ‘how can we know?’ or ‘it’s all relative!’ Here I defend a pedagogical method to defuse moral relativism and moral skepticism using *phenomenal conservatism*: if it seems to S that *p*, S has defeasible justification to believe that *p*; e.g., moral seemings, like perceptual ones, are defeasibly justified. The purpose of defusing moral skepticism and relativism is to prevent these metaethical views from acting as stumbling blocks to insightful ethical inquiry in the classroom. This approach puts the burden of proof on the relativist or skeptic (to justify their view, contrary to appearances), and makes their views costlier: if we reject moral seemings *as a kind*, we must reject other less objectionable seemings too (e.g. intellectual seemings). Finally, this approach improves learning outcomes by ‘hooking onto’ student familiarity with seemings, e.g. seeing is (defeasibly justified) believing.

Introduction

Students in the ethics classroom sometimes invoke moral relativism or moral skepticism when ethical controversies arise with quips like:

‘But who’s to judge?’

‘Isn’t it all just relative? Or a matter of opinion?’

‘But how can we *know*?’

‘Had we been born elsewhere, we wouldn’t believe that!’

The trouble with views like *global* moral relativism and skepticism isn’t that they’re wrong, but instead that such views can be a *pedagogical impediment*. Suppose that your students hold moral

skepticism, then they may conclude further moral inquiry is futile; this can be an impediment to teaching ethics if students decide, on the basis of their metaethical views, it doesn't make sense to take ethical inquiry seriously. There is nothing wrong with thinking about moral skepticism and relativism in the ethics classroom. This paper outlines a *pedagogical strategy to defuse* moral skepticism and relativism¹ when they are an *impediment to ethics instruction*.

Why are *global* moral relativism and skepticism pedagogically problematic? Suppose that moral truths are culturally relative; we would then lack objective reasons (like scientific reasons) to condemn actions, not just in other cultures, but even in our own culture: moral reasons aren't objective reasons, but instead reasons that hold within a culture, and we could change culture to change moral truths. Here it looks like ethics would become glorified cultural anthropology, and this can turn off students who think we need *objectivity* to take ethics seriously. Here ethics would lose the normative authority it would otherwise enjoy if it were objective (Harman 1977; Gowans 2015). Global moral skepticism, too, can be a *pedagogical* obstacle (Mackie 1977; Joyce 2001): if global moral skepticism is true, we lack moral knowledge. Why probe moral claims, or evaluate moral issues, if we lack moral knowledge? We simply want students to be *open* to the possibility of objective ethical inquiry.

These positions should be taken seriously, and explored in detail; but *in some ethics classes*, these views may serve as an impediment to ethics pedagogy, and it is here we want an approach that defuses moral skepticism and relativism such that ethics instruction can continue. Think about the approach I develop here as a tool to allow the instructor to decide where the issue of moral

¹ These views come in an ontological and epistemological variety. For our purposes, we're *only* concerned with the epistemological version of these views.

skepticism and relativism is salient for the purposes of ethics instruction, instead of a blanket rejection of views like moral skepticism and relativism. An astute reader may wonder what moral skepticism and relativism share. Although philosophically distinct views, they're united by their potential to disrupt ethics instruction. If *global* moral skepticism or relativism is true, why study ethics? That would be the equivalent of taking a class on witchcraft. Though this sentiment may be wrong, many ethics students hold it. So these views are united in their *pedagogical* implications².

The approach here employs phenomenal conservatism *as a pedagogical tool*³: the epistemological view that appearances and seemings⁴ confer *defeasible* justification. The fact that it seems I'm writing this article on my laptop defeasibly justifies the belief that *I am writing an article on my laptop*. Unless I discover, say, I'm dreaming, I'm justified holding that belief—i.e., appearances that *p* justify belief that *p*. This applies to seemings across the board: perceptual, intellectual, mnemonic, and moral. Phenomenal conservatism can defuse moral relativism and skepticism in several ways: it puts the burden of proof on the relativist and skeptic, significantly raises the cost of views like moral relativism and skepticism, and 'hooks onto' knowledge students already possess about how appearances work, to improve learning outcomes. The beneficiaries of this approach span from advanced high school students to undergraduate students with a minimal background in ethics—but it's likely too elementary for graduate students.

² Moral skepticism and relativism in the classroom—held by ethics students with little background in philosophy—is more of a *pedagogical* than a philosophical problem. This is standardly recognized in the ethics pedagogical literature: see Balg (2020) and Pfiser (forthcoming).

³ For examinations of phenomenal conservatism—so instructors understand the strengths and shortcomings of phenomenal conservatism — see Tucker (2013), Bergman (2013), Tooley (2013), and Littlejohn (2011).

⁴ In this paper, we use the terms 'seeming' and 'appearance' interchangeably.

We should be clear here about a few important caveats in this paper. First, we do not anywhere in the paper defend phenomenal conservatism as *philosophically* compelling, but instead use it as an effective *pedagogical* tool (even if false). The reader should interpret the arguments given throughout the paper, both for phenomenal conservatism and using phenomenal conservatism to disarm skeptical and relativistic arguments, *as ones the instructor can employ in the classroom*; the arguments *aren't meant to be a philosophical defense of the view, but rather to highlight how, when confronted by relativistic and skeptical challenges, the instructor might respond*.

Second, students need not *reject* moral skepticism and relativism—the debate here still rages among philosophers; rejecting them would be intellectually premature—but instead to suspend judgment on those views so that they offer reason to discount the possibility of objective ethical inquiry. The appeal to phenomenal conservatism is *purely pedagogical* and defensive: to convince students drawn to global moral relativism and skepticism to *suspend judgment*.

The paper proceeds like so. First we explain phenomenal conservatism, and some support for it. Second we explore three *pedagogical* advantages of using phenomenal conservatism in the ethics classroom. And finally, we answer (some) objections one is likely to hear from students.

Introducing Phenomenal Conservatism

On phenomenal conservatism, the way things seem is some, though not conclusive, justification to believe that's how they really are. Consider a few examples:

Enjoyment is better than suffering.

It is unjust to punish someone for a crime she didn't commit.

Courage, benevolence, and honest are virtues.

We should care for our children as best we can.

These moral seemings appear *true*. However, there are many kinds of appearances: perceptual, mnemonic, introspective, and intellectual: it seems like I'm writing an article on teaching ethics to relativists and skeptics, and that is defeasible justification to believe that *I'm writing an article on teaching ethics to relativists and skeptics*, without good reason to doubt it; e.g. if I woke up from dreaming that I was writing an article. Rational beliefs are based on appearances, but not *only* appearances. And appearances aren't beliefs: it may seem that the room is spinning, but I know it isn't because I'm drunk. As Huemer (2005) explains:

There is a type of mental state, which I call 'appearance', that we avow when we say such things as 'It seems to me that p', 'It appears that p', or 'p is obvious', where p is some proposition. Appearances have propositional contents [...] 'Appearance' is a broad category that includes mental states involved in perception, memory, introspection, and intellection (99).

And:

All judgments are based upon how things seem to the judging subject: a rational person believes only what seems to him to be true, though he need not believe *everything* that seems true [...] Even the arguments of a philosophical skeptic who says we aren't justified in believing anything rest upon the skeptic's own beliefs, which are based upon what seems to the skeptic to be true (101; original emphasis).

Huemer holds epistemic justification trades in appearances—justified beliefs ultimately rest on how things appear, and the denial of that claim is itself based on how things appear—so that

denying phenomenal conservatism will result in the epistemic calamity of denying that we have knowledge of *anything*. So Huemer concludes we justifiably base our beliefs on seemings—*what else could we do?* We rely on appearances to navigate the physical world (perceptual), balance equations (mathematical), and evaluate moral relativism (intellectual). If we should form beliefs based on seemings, then that would suggest our moral beliefs operate similarly: if we have moral seemings, then in the absence of defeaters, those moral beliefs would be justified. We can roughly formulate phenomenal conservatism as:

If it seems to S that p , then S is defeasibly justified believing that p , in the absence of defeaters.

There are many versions of phenomenal conservatism as a philosophical view (Huemer 2005; Skene 2013), and epistemic defeaters are often an integral part. Defeaters are justified beliefs or evidence that rebut *defeasible* justification (overwhelms it), or undercuts the justification (cancels it). A classic example: I see what looks like a red ball, and believe that *the ball is red*. Upon closer inspection, I realize the ball is under a red light. This undercuts the justification for my initial belief in that it would look red whatever the color of the ball. This new evidence then cancels the justification to believe that *the ball is red* (Pollock 1986: 45-58). With a handle on the view, we should turn to pedagogical challenges from moral relativism and skepticism.

Finally: it may be tempting here to think I'm *defending* phenomenal conservatism, but that isn't quite right. Instead the point is that, *from a pedagogical perspective*, phenomenal conservatism is a good approach to preventing student' moral skepticism and relativism from halting discussions of moral issues; phenomenal conservatism may be the right view of epistemic justification, but regardless it is an effective approach to defusing moral skepticism and relativism enough so as

to facilitate ethics instruction. I only defend phenomenal conservatism *for pedagogical purposes* as the theory itself is intuitive for students with little background in the topic.

Pedagogical Advantages of Phenomenal Conservatism

Treating appearances as defeasibly justifying is plausible. It would be odd epistemic practice to form beliefs on the basis of how things *don't* seem: it seems *murder is bad*, so we should believe *murder is good*. Often when we change our minds, it is because on further reflection, how things first seemed was mistaken or unjustified. We justifiably act like appearances confer justification generally speaking: we take beliefs based on appearance to be justified, absent countervailing reasons. Since there doesn't appear to be a salient difference between *moral* and other kinds of appearances, relativists and skeptics who use *other kinds of* appearances must explain why *moral* appearances are different from the other kinds, or discard appearances entirely. The latter move undercuts the justification for their beliefs too, as they require intellectual appearances, raising the cost of moral relativism and skepticism. Phenomenal conservatism has an added benefit: students are already familiar with appearances, and rely on them, in their cognitive lives, prior to taking ethics.

Before we delve into the *pedagogical* strengths of phenomenal conservatism, we should say a bit about what the strategy looks like in the classroom. There is, of course, the question of whether we should explain to skeptical and relativistic students what phenomenal conservatism is, and how it is viewed by other philosophers (pro and con). If, by example, we tell students that we do not personally accept phenomenal conservatism, we should be prepared to answer the query as to why we would teach something that we do not believe. The answer here, I think, is pretty clear: we must teach things that we do not believe *all the time*. We could teach arguments for or

against the existence of God if we could only teach views we personally hold. I presume with this example that we cannot both be theists and atheists⁵.

So, what exactly *is* the phenomenal conservatism approach to ethics pedagogy? Maybe the best answer here is to simply explain how I use the approach whenever I teach ethics. Oftentimes, I have students who are friendly to moral skepticism and relativism, so I have some material on phenomenal conservatism on hand. If, and when, I need to use the material to address student concerns, I refrain from sharing my position on phenomenal conservatism with students—my approach when teaching philosophical classes more generally is to stay as neutral as possible. I present the view, and explain some philosophers reject phenomenal conservatism as a theory of epistemic justification. Nevertheless I explain that phenomenal conservatism offers a serious *prima facie* challenge to moral skepticism and moral relativism in that it seems that we have similarly good reasons to believe that morality is objective as we do to believe that lots of other things are objective, even if that justification is defeasible.

BURDEN SHIFTING

On phenomenal conservatism, appearances confer defeasible justification. This puts the burden of proof on moral relativists and skeptics. Rejecting appearances entirely isn't plausible as this would undercut perceptual and moral appearances alike. If a perceptual skeptic argues we don't know we're living in a world that accords with our perceptual experiences (maybe we're in the Matrix—how would we know?), we can push back: it *seems like* we're in the real world, which is good defeasible reason to believe it. If we must first prove the epistemic pedigree of appearances

⁵ Some philosophers hold (the author among them) that we do not need to believe in what we publish—the value of publishing is not defending what we believe, but critically evaluating views in philosophy that have some intellectual value, even if that value doesn't involve truth (see Plakias 2019).

prior to using them, skeptical challenges are (epistemically) doomed too. The burden of proof here must rest on the relativist and skeptic. Sometimes instructors accept the burden of proof, and then argue against moral relativism and skepticism. While this can be effective ('we cannot have moral progress without objective moral knowledge'), it can be onerous too.

Appealing to appearances puts the burden of proof on relativists and skeptics—we philosophers are often better at poking holes in arguments than defending them. Phenomenal conservatism forces relativists and skeptics to explain why we should grant their intellectual appearances, but must prove the credentials of moral appearances. This can illustrate for students why moral relativism and skepticism aren't as obvious as they seem: framing moral justification in terms of appearances, and pointing to similarities among appearances of various kinds, places the burden on the skeptic and relativist to explain why the epistemic pedigree of *moral* appearances is in question, but other kinds of appearances are (largely) above suspicion.

Framing moral justification as seemings enhances the pedagogical influence of phenomenal conservatism: if appearances had to be justified, prior to their use, they couldn't justify *anything*; to justify those seemings we must appeal to further seemings. And we would be in the same position again—a pernicious infinite regress beckons. Moral relativists and skeptics must rely on intellectual seemings to make their arguments. And if the skeptic concedes that much, she forfeits the game: her critics could then rely on appearances to argue against her position. The burden of proof must rest on those who reject appearances. If the skeptic or relativist argues moral appearances are saliently different than the others, she has the burden to explain why, despite their similarities, moral appearances are different.

INCREASING THE COST

Using phenomenal conservatism to defuse moral relativism and skepticism effectively raises the cost of throwing out moral appearances *as a kind*. Here we aim to find a pedagogical strategy to deal with *global* moral relativism and skepticism. And though there's value to skepticism as a philosophical query, such views can be a stumbling block to taking ethical inquiry seriously. I want to explain why phenomenal conservatism significantly raises the cost of rejecting moral appearances *as a kind*. We may have moral appearances that fail to confer justification. But that is the nature of seemings: they confer justification subject to cancellation by good reasons that cut against the seemings. This applies to perceptual and intellectual seemings too: we may find an argument convincing until we hear a compelling objection that cannot be answered. It was the objection that pushed us to look at the argument differently, and realize the first intellectual appearance was mistaken. Rejecting a specific moral appearance isn't enough to justify moral relativism or skepticism, just like rejecting a particular perceptual appearance isn't sufficient to justify external world skepticism.

Here is the rub: we cannot reject moral appearances *as a kind*, without also rejecting other kinds of appearances too: there aren't salient differences between them; they look too similar. We rely on perceptual appearances when forming beliefs about the external world; they aren't perfect, but they're reliable *enough*. We employ intellectual seemings too: they offer defeasible reason to accept some claims, but reject the others. If appearances justify corresponding beliefs by default in every other domain, except in the moral one, there must be a reason *moral* appearances are distinct. Underlying the idea that phenomenal conservatism greatly raises the cost of rejecting moral appearances is *epistemic* parity: perceptual and intellectual appearances seemingly confer *defeasible* justification on the corresponding beliefs. When I perceptually seem to see something,

the appearance I have confers *some justification* on a corresponding perceptual belief. Similarly when an objection strikes me as strong, it is good reason to take the objection seriously.

There's possible objection here: someone may argue perceptual seemings are straightforward in that how things appear provides some justification for believing that's how they are. But it isn't as straightforward with respect to intellectual seemings; so it could be that perceptual seemings and intellectual seemings are sufficiently different, such that we could consistently retain the former, while jettisoning the latter. But even granting that perceptual and intellectual seemings are somehow importantly distinct from perceptual seeming, so that we could disregard moral seemings, and yet consistently hold onto perceptual seemings, there is still trouble here for the critic who wants to reject moral seemings. This is because moral seemings look like a subset of *intellectual seemings*, even granting that perceptual and intellectual seemings are different kinds. It should be clear that there's a sense in which we rely on intellectual seemings across a variety of domains: philosophical, moral, and even mathematical.

Even if the intellectual seeming that ' $2+2=4$ ' is of a different kind than a perceptual seeming, the fact is that these intellectual seemings strikes us as true like moral seemings: it oftentimes just seems like certain actions are morally 'called for' or obligatory. For example, it seems to Peter that he morally ought to repay money that he borrowed from Rachel, just as it may strike Peter that the causal closure argument for physicalism is a compelling one. We need not state exactly what intellectual seemings are to appreciate that moral seemings have a lot in common, epistemically, with seemings of other kinds of seemings even the most ardent moral skeptic or relativist would be loath to surrender. She wouldn't give up her mathematical or philosophical

seemings—in the latter case, it is unclear how she would mount a case for moral relativism or skepticism without the use of *some* intellectual seemings.

Perhaps differences across cultures are at odds with many of our moral beliefs and views; this would imply moral values are relative. However, if so—as we saw earlier—we couldn't account for *actual* moral progress, and it looks like there has been substantial moral progress, to varying degrees, across a number of societies (Huemer 2016). How can there be moral progress if moral values are culturally relative? Moral values from a culture in the past were right *relative to the past culture*; moral values in the present are right *relative to current culture*. This may be true, but it would undercut the possibility of moral progress—it would be a costly implication of their metaethical views, and cuts against the compelling appearance that many cultures have made serious moral progress.

Here the appeal to seemings can greatly increase the cost of moral relativism by appealing to the appearance of moral progress, and pressuring the moral relativist to reject that there has been moral progress. This can happen in a couple of ways:

(A) An explanation friendly to objective morality that makes sense of moral appearances is that there are objective moral facts and values often expressed differently between different cultures as a result of factors unrelated to moral facts and values like historical accidents, geographical differences, and whatnot (Rachels 2009; Sauer 2019). And doesn't it *seem* like cultures would be different for reasons other than differences in moral values. When we combine the appearance of moral progress, and the mundane view that we should expect differences across culture unrelated to different moral values, the moral relativist view doesn't look appealing or cost

effective. The relativist or skeptic here can of course double down and hold that moral progress is morally relative to, say, a culture, but this view bumps up against the highly intuitive claim that there has been obvious moral progress over the last few centuries (a big bullet to bite).

Here though a critic may reply that just as *it looks like* there's been moral progress over the last few centuries, it *looks too like* in the face of widespread disagreement moral beliefs are relative to, say, cultural background (relativism) or just lack justification (skepticism). How then should we think about the *interaction* of these apparently conflicting seemings? We need to think about how to weigh these conflicting appearances, and the implications of accepting them, in order to decide how to address worries like this from students.

(B) Rejecting the appearance of moral progress is costly in that we must hold that despite the *strong* appearance of moral progress, there nonetheless hasn't been any *actual* moral progress; this may not convince the skeptic or relativist, but it remains a large bullet to bite. On the flip side, consider the implications of *accepting* that widespread disagreement among one's epistemic superiors, or across cultures, implies moral skepticism or relativism: we would then have reason to hold skepticism or relativism about many views, including philosophical views, as there is widespread disagreement on things like philosophy too. Is moral relativism true across a bunch of cultures, or just in our culture? What if another culture held morality is objective? We can't take philosophical arguments seriously if they're only true relative to a culture; students can't defend their moral relativism views using philosophical arguments. If widespread disagreement entails moral relativism, we must reject that there has been objective moral progress, and this is costly. But if we reject moral relativism, but acknowledge cultural disagreement, we can do this by (a) highlighting cultural agreement (Rachels 2009), (b) squaring moral objectivity and

cultural diversity by positing objective moral facts expressed differently across cultures, and (c) acknowledging there isn't as much moral disagreement as students, and philosophers, assume (Sauer 2019). Of course, the student may stick to their views, and refuse to withhold judgment, but the point is that these counterarguments raise the cost of holding them.

Here the moral relativist and skeptic is in a bind: they must either reject the parity claim—that moral appearances seem to operate like other kinds of appearances, or at least other intellectual appearance, and thus should be treated similarly—which introduces another burden of proof, or they can accept appearance parity, which would mean in rejecting moral appearances, they'd have to reject appearances generally. However, we cannot simply reject *perceptual* appearances, along with the moral ones, as this could easily verge into perceptual skepticism.

IMPROVING LEARNING OUTCOMES

Empirical research on pedagogical technique stresses the value of situating new concepts in the context of student background knowledge: asking what students already know about a topic or using familiar examples to illustrate a new concept can improve learning outcomes. And tying new material to what students already know can expedite their ability to master the material, and form connections between the new material and their prior knowledge adds depth to their understanding (Fuson, Kalchman, & Bransford, 2005; Christen & Murphy, 1991).

Phenomenal conservatism appeals to seemings across many modalities (perceptual; mnemonic), and thus helps students appreciate how seemings work, and highlights that they (rightly) rely on seemings for justification. We use perceptual seemings to navigate the world, make practical decisions and interact with others; mnemonic seemings to track of our stuff; and intellectual

seemings to navigate school work. It is odd to single out moral seemings, when students rely various kinds of seemings in their lives—and doing so usually works fine. And once they realize they take appearances to defeasibly justify many kinds of belief, this highlights the difficulty in either assuming that appearances must be justified prior to justifying anything else, or moral seemings are somehow different from the other kinds of seemings.

Since students are likely familiar with perceptual seemings, they can be used to illustrate why moral seemings operate (epistemically) similarly. We trust our perceptual seemings with good reason. Since moral seemings look perceptual ones, it would be *prima facie* inconsistent to think the former ones confer justification, but the latter ones don't. Moral seemings operate like other seemings we rightly epistemically rely on, so we shouldn't treat *moral* seemings differently than others. And tying moral seemings to other seemings students already use will likely improve their ability to see moral appearances as similar enough to other kinds of appearances such that they are a package deal.

Some Objections

Here we should address a few common objections to this approach that I've encountered in the classroom. The goal isn't to make a gripping (philosophical) case for phenomenal conservatism, but to offer a satisfying, and pedagogically effective, defense of ethics. It can be hard to take ethics seriously when one is in the grip of serious metaethical doubts. The objections below are only a few you're likely to hear from students, but they are the most common in my experience. And they nicely highlight the *pedagogical* power of phenomenal conservatism.

'Don't people disagree about ethics all the time?'

If ethical issues are the subject of deep disagreement—it isn't clear who, if anyone, is right—then we should be moral skeptics. This objection isn't half bad; sometimes disagreement is good reason to be skeptical—e.g. if we're on a jury, and witnesses disagree over *key* aspects of their testimony, this could tank the prosecution's case. So disagreement can be reason to doubt our beliefs in some cases. But this worry isn't as convincing as it first appears.

First, informed disagreement isn't specific to *moral* appearances. If Bob and Sally disagree over how to solve a difficult math problem, and each reach a different answer, they would each have reason to doubt their answers. Or if Bob thought he heard a gunshot, but Sally thought it was a car backfiring, and they can each trust that the other's hearing, they have *some* reason to doubt what they think they heard. But even here, cases of disagreement aren't reason to distrust our faculties *altogether*. At most, it's reason to distrust specific beliefs and appearances. We wouldn't treat perceptual or mnemonic appearances like this. A few bad appearances don't undercut the epistemic pedigree of our perceptual faculties; worst case, we shouldn't trust specific perceptual appearances, e.g., we may forget someone's name, but that doesn't show we should distrust our apparent memories across the board.

Second, sometimes disagreement matters; sometimes not. If we disagree with a family member over whether vaccines cause autism, but he lacks medical knowledge entirely, we shouldn't take that disagreement seriously. Disagreement can be evidence that we're somehow wrong in our views if the person with whom we disagree is *properly informed*; mere disagreement though, by itself, isn't higher-order evidence that we're wrong (Matheson 2009). But in cases of *informed* disagreement the fact that someone disagrees can be higher-order evidence we're wrong. Still,

cases of informed moral disagreement aren't enough to reject moral appearances *altogether*; at most, they show *some* moral appearances *may* be wrong.

For advanced students, we can show overreliance on informed disagreement, to defend moral relativism and skepticism, is self-defeating: the principle that we should reject claims subject to informed disagreement is *itself* susceptible to informed disagreement (Enoch 2009). If we should reject moral seemings subject to informed disagreement, then we should reject the claim that *informed disagreement is a defeater* too: many informed people disagree over how to think about the epistemic implications of informed disagreement. And it isn't enough to reply that we aren't epistemically superior to the people with disagree with; we find informed disagreement about the epistemic implications of informed disagreement among our superiors too.

And worse still for the skeptics and relativists appealing to disagreement to make their case: we find about as much disagreement in philosophy as we do in the moral sphere, and whether the skeptic and relativist realize it or not, they're making *philosophical* arguments. If disagreement from superiors is sufficient reason to abandon our views, we should abandon our philosophical views *altogether* in that there are epistemically superior philosophers who disagree over what to think of disagreement in philosophy among experts (Frances 2016; Grundmann 2019). Moral skepticism and relativism are philosophical positions, such that if disagreement with epistemic superiors is a defeater, it defeats those positions too.

Suppose you've dispatched initial skeptical and relativist worries raised by students, but those worries are raised in an assigned reading: it is common when teaching moral skepticism to, say, assign a reading from Mackie. Consider the following passage:

Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people's adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy (1977: 36).

A charitable reading of Mackie here would be he's appealing to moral *motivated reasoning*: the tendency to find arguments in favor of conclusions we want to believe or like to be stronger than arguments for views that we reject or do not want to believe (Kunda 1990). People think monogamous marriage is right, say, because they like the idea of monogamy, and dislike other marital arrangements. It is because we *want to believe* certain things, and defend certain values, that we hold the moral beliefs that we do; we choose (unwittingly) the moral beliefs that accord with our lifestyle, rather than determine what morally true and build our lives around that.

This objection is a double-edge sword: motivated reasoning doesn't just apply to moral realists, leaving moral skeptics and relativists untouched. Just as moral realists, say, may be engaged in motivated reasoning to defend their moral views, we could say the same of moral skeptics and relativists: they hold certain metaethical views for reasons other than moral ones; for whatever reason they do not want to believe there could be objective moral facts, and instead they think ethical inquiry is relative or an epistemic dead end. It seems that just as a matter of psychology, motivated reasoning doesn't leave the moral skeptic and relativist alone; if motivated reasoning is reason to doubt moral claims than reason to doubt metaethical claims like moral skepticism and relativism too, and philosophical views generally.

In the context of teaching *applied* ethics, topics like abortion, gun control, and famine relief are rife with moral disagreement amongst philosophical peers: they are equally smart, informed, rational, and so forth, on the applied ethics issues, but disagree. This looks like it would support disagreement-based moral skepticism with respect to many issues in applied ethics. We may think seemings and appearances don't much help us here. But that isn't right: in applied ethics debates few, if any, even among the epistemically superior, think we should be moral skeptics with regard to contentious applied ethics issues—it may be unclear how to think about such issues, but that isn't (usually) seen as a reason to adopt skepticism or relativism. That a dispute is difficult to epistemically resolve doesn't by itself support skepticism; otherwise we should be skeptical of (most) philosophy positions across the board.

So if students should take the superior epistemic standing and disagreement of the professional philosophers they read⁶ as reason to be skeptical of the issue, they should take their *agreement* that skepticism isn't a workable approach *to the issue in question* as reason not to be skeptical too. They cannot point to disagreement among epistemic superiors as reason to be skeptical without taking into account their disagreeing epistemic superiors on the issue don't think *skepticism* is warranted with respect to that issue either—they either both count, or neither count.

'You have those moral appearances because of where and when you were born.'

Had you been born in Pakistan, things would seem morally different. The contingency of moral appearances undercuts their epistemic standing. Similar things are said of religious beliefs: e.g., 'you're just Christian because your parents are'—see Bogardus 2013 for a critical survey of such

⁶ Instructors should be familiar with the literature on disagreement, see: Licon (2012), Christensen (2009), and Feldman and Warfield (2010) to help think through disagreement and ethics in the classroom.

arguments. (Of course, the same is often applicable to atheists and agnostics too: had they been born to religious parents, they'd be religious).

Although cultural diversity may be reason to doubt moral appearances in particular cases, moral seemings present themselves as objective. We don't think that we should only save a child drowning in a shallow pond because of our cultural background—there may evolutionary reasons for this intuition that cross cultures. It would be wrong to allow a child to drown in a shallow pond if we could *easily* save her (Singer 2009: 3). This moral seeming *as it stands* doesn't present as relative to a specific culture; it seems as though it would be *objectively wrong* to let the child to drown. This generalizes to moral appearances as a kind: it doesn't seem that certain actions are wrong relative to a cultural norm. Of course some moral seemings are false or mistaken; but that applies to seemings across the board, even perceptual ones.

An astute critic may argue that while moral relativism isn't obvious *in the appearances themselves*, we should treat them as culturally relative: cultural bias could easily taint moral appearances—it could be that though it seems to individuals in the West that they should save the drowning child, this is merely the product of Western culture. However, we should be skeptical of this response from a student. While a specific moral seeming may be a product of cultural bias, say, we should expect that most people will have moral seemings or one kind or the other. We have strong evolutionary and psychological reasons to expect that certain actions will strike us as morally obligatory and permissible: moral reasons, among their other functions, facilitate our cooperation and survival. To give an example from the psychological literature: folks will often aid strangers without calculating the costs and benefits—a tendency that is heightened when others are watching. The best explanation of helping behavior is that by coming to the aid of a

stranger in distress, without calculating the costs and benefits, is a compelling signal to others that one is warm and trustworthy; a reputational boost is often the product of cooperating without calculation (see Jordan et. al. 2016). Cases like the drowning child thought experiment are precisely cases where we would expect to find that people (often, though not always) have the moral seeming that they should help. In light of how compelling our sense of morality is, it would be rare to find someone who lacked moral seemings—even if sometimes moral seemings aren't enough to motivate action.

Second, even if the critic is right in this case, it isn't a sufficient reason reject moral appearances *as a kind*: cultural contamination may apply to appearances across the board, moral and non-moral alike. If we reject appearances where there is the possibility of cultural contamination, the skeptic wouldn't be able to motivate her argument: the case for skepticism rests on how the arguments and reasons for the view *seem intellectually*. Even granting there are objective moral facts, we should expect those facts to be expressed differently across situations and cultures; we could, say, have the correct moral theory, and yet apply it (somewhat) differently depending on the contingent facts on the ground.

Suppose we say that we should be moral relativists because culture differences are evidence that moral values are relative to a given culture: culturally relative moral judgments are made true by facts in that culture. The moral objectivist can appeal here to how things seem to *raise the cost of cultural relativism*: it would mean that, *despite appearances*, there cannot be moral progress, where a culture, say, treats women better than it did in the past. If moral judgments are made true by the relative values instantiated by a given culture, then we couldn't be in a position to criticize it, or claim that it has made progress. And that *looks* seriously mistaken: many cultures

look like they've made moral progress on various issues like the rights of women, homosexuals, people of color, and whatnot. A better read of the situation—one that doesn't force us to forego moral progress—is that moral progress can be objective and based on shared moral values and principles, yet is *expressed differently in different cultures*. This is one of many ways phenomenal conservatism raises the cost of moral relativism, since relativism forces us to reject beliefs in, say, moral progress, that are highly plausible independent of the debate over moral skepticism and relativism, and thus increasing the cost of such views.

Like most objections we've covered, this one 'proves' too much: we could say the same of many scientific beliefs, by example. Had you been born thousands of years ago, you wouldn't believe in Darwinian evolution. And so contingency challenges can *perniciously* overgeneralize: it would be reason to reject obviously justified beliefs. The contingency of moral appearances isn't good enough to disregard them. And had you been born elsewhere and elsewhere, you wouldn't know about the contingency of your moral appearances: the belief that contingency is a problem undercuts itself. Finally, sometimes you should believe something because of when and where you were born: you believe you were born in Michigan, say, because you were born there; had you been born in Arizona, you'd have believed *that* (Plantinga 1995).

Finally, there is markedly less moral disagreement between cultures than many students think: most candidates for moral disagreement turn out to be disagreements about non-moral facts or misinterpretations of other cultures (Moody-Adams, 2009; Rachels 2009). We may think, say, a culture that kills a child annually to appease the gods, holds distinct moral values from us. But upon examination, it may be folks in that culture believe (wrongly) that the practice ensures the group's survival. This is a *factual*, not a moral, disagreement. And of course this isn't to condone

such practices. Instead, it highlights the importance of factual knowledge for getting our moral judgments right, not that moral judgments are culturally relative by nature.

Conclusion

We began with a pedagogical issue: teaching ethics to students who are tempted by relativistic and skeptical sentiments such that ethics instruction is stymied. We explored how phenomenal conservatism can resolve that *pedagogical* issue: placing the burden of proof on relativist and skeptical students, and raising the cost of such views: it's hard to reject moral appearances, but keep other kinds of appearances, given their similarity. And students are already familiar with seemings, e.g. they use them to form justified perceptual beliefs. Phenomenal conservatism can defuse challenges to ethics, and improve learning outcomes by extending what students already know of appearances to *moral* appearances specifically. Finally, we wrapped up by answering a few popular objections to ethics, to demonstrate how phenomenal conservatism quickly defuses *general* challenges to the epistemic heft of moral appearances. And as we argued: the point here is for students to suspend judgment on the issue of moral relativism and skepticism but only to the extent that such that those views impede ethics instruction.

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