Subjectivism, Relativism and Contextualism

JUSSI SUIKKANEN

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Abstract

There is a family of metaethical views according to which (i) there are no objectively correct moral standards and (ii) whether a given moral claim is true depends in some way on moral standards accepted by either an individual (forms of subjectivism) or a community (forms of relativism). This chapter outlines the three most important versions of this type of theories: old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism, contextualism and new wave subjectivism and relativism. It also explores the main advantages of these views and the key objections to them.

Introduction

Subjectivist and relativist views have a long history in ethical theorizing.[1] They constitute a family of views according to which (i) there are no objectively correct moral standards but rather (ii) whether a given moral claim is true depends in some way on the moral standards accepted by an individual or a community. Given how many metaethical views fit the previous general description, a lot of talking past one another ensues in metaethics. Currently, for example, there are three main versions of subjectivism and relativism in the metaethical literature that frequently cause misunderstandings. One reason for this is that philosophers come to metaethics from different backgrounds – some have a background in ethics whereas others have received their training in philosophy of language and linguistics.

This chapter tries to clarify the debate by introducing the three main variants of subjectivism and relativism especially for those who are new to the debate. In the next three sections, I will explain

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[1] For a historical overview, see Fricker (2013). For textbooks presentations, see Shafer-Landau (2010: ch. 19) and Suikkanen (2015: ch. 5)). For overviews of the issues covered here, see also Rachels (1991), Wong (1991), Dreier (2006), MacFarlane (2012), Sturgeon (2010), Francén Olinder (2016), Silk (2018), Stojanovic (2018) and Björnsson (2021).

these variants and outline both the key motivations for them and some of the most frequently discussed objections to them too. Before that, it is worthwhile to note that below I will understand the difference between subjectivist and relativist views to be merely a matter of scope. Thus, according to the relativist views, right and wrong are in some way relative to the attitudes of an individual whereas according to relativist views right and wrong are relative to the attitudes of a whole community. Sometimes subjectivist views, as explained below, are also called 'individualist moral relativism', but for the sake of simplicity I will avoid this phrase.

The next section begins from the most traditional forms of subjectivism and relativism, which I call 'old-fashioned' moral subjectivism and relativism. In the second section, I then discuss a view that was first introduced by James Dreier (1990 and 1992), which I will call 'contextualism' to follow the more recent terminology. Contextualist views have recently become more influential in metaethics due to the growing influence of philosophy of language and linguistics in the field, and especially due to the popular semantic analyses of the so-called deontic modals developed by Angelika Kratzer (1977, 1981 and 1991).

Finally, the last section outlines the most recent form of subjectivism and relativism that was first introduced to the metaethical debates through the work of John MacFarlane (see 2003, 2005 and 2014) and Max Kölbel (2002, 2004a, 2004b and 2005). According to these views, even if the content of moral claims is not relative to the moral standards accepted by an individual or a community, the correctness and truth of those claims is relative to the relevant context of assessment, which is in part determined by the moral standards adopted by an individual or a community. I will call the views that have this structure forms of 'new wave' subjectivism and relativism.

Old-Fashioned Subjectivism and Relativism

This section first outlines a family of views that share the same structure, which I call old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism. It also introduces the most important versions of these views. The end of the section explores some of the key advantages of the resulting views and the main objections to them too.

Old-fashioned subjectivist and relativist views are often attributed to several historical figures, including Michel de Montaigne ([1572–1574] 1958), Thomas Hobbes ([1651] 2012), William Sumner (1906), and more recently, for example, to Gilbert Harman (1975).[2] The defining claim of the old-fashioned views is that moral claims, given the meaning of the moral terms used in them ('right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' 'bad' and so on), are invariably *about the attitudes* of a certain individual or a group. Let me begin from the simplest versions before introducing more complexity.

According to simplest old-fashioned subjectivism, when I use the moral predicate '… is wrong' to make the assertion that eating meat is wrong, what this assertion means is that I have an attitude of disapproval against eating meat. Given the meaning of the words used, my assertion reports that

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[2] With the historical figures, it is often difficult to determine which version of metaethical relativism they had in mind *if any*. For a discussion, see Fricker (2013). According to Harman (1975: 11) 'S ought to A' means roughly that given S's motivational attitudes, A is the course of action for S supported by best reasons (where those reasons are endorsed by both the speaker and S and so dependent on their motivational attitudes). Harman himself claimed that the attitudes of S thus feature in the 'metaphysical' truth-conditions of moral claims though not in their content or the meaning of the relevant words (1996: 4 and 2012: 3).

I have a negative attitude towards eating meat. Likewise, the positive moral predicates of '… is right' and '…is good' have meanings such that I can use them in assertions to describe my positive attitudes of approval towards different actions, outcomes, characters etc. On this view thus, the content of moral claims, the reference of moral predicates, what makes moral claims true and provides their truth-conditions are all given by my own psychological states of approval and disapproval.

Where the previous subjectivist view makes moral claims to be about the attitudes of the individual who is the speaker, old-fashioned relativism makes those claims to be about the attitudes of the speaker's community. Thus, on this view, when I assert that eating meat is wrong, this assertion means that most of the people in my community have attitudes of disapproval towards eating meat (and likewise if I use the positive moral predicates, my utterances will be about the positive attitudes of that majority). Thus, on this view, the content, the reference, and both the truth-conditions and the truth-makers of moral claims are given by the positive and negative attitudes of the majority in my community.

The previous two views give us a template that can be used to introduce more complexity. Firstly, the previous views make moral claims to be about the simple attitudes of approval or disapproval, but usually subjectivism and relativism are formulated in terms of some more complex attitudes, most often in terms of the moral standard internalized by the speaker or her community. Thus, according to the resulting subjectivist view, when I assert that eating meat is wrong, what I mean is that the moral standard I have internalized forbids eating meat (and likewise according to the relativist version I mean that the moral standard of my community forbids those actions). The moral standard I have internalized roughly a matter of which actions I am disposed to be motivated to do and avoid doing, and also towards which actions I tend to have reactive moral emotions such as blame, guilt, praise, admiration, and so on. As a result, according to these versions moral claims are about more complex sets of motivational attitudes and moral emotions – they are about the attitudes that constitute the acceptance of a moral standard that forbids and authorizes different actions.

Secondly, all theories introduced so far are versions of the so-called 'appraiser subjectivism and relativism'.[3] On these views, moral claims are about the attitudes of the person who is morally evaluating an action or about the attitudes of the appraiser's community. The other alternative is agent subjectivism and relativism according to which moral claims are instead about the attitudes of the agent who is doing a given action or the attitudes of her community. On this view, when I say that it would be wrong for Andrew to carry a concealed handgun the truth conditions of this claim are not given by my attitudes but rather either by Andrew's own attitudes towards carrying a concealed handgun or the attitudes of the American moral community. Relatedly, we also get different forms of old-fashioned relativism depending on which moral community the speaker or the agent belongs to that we take to be salient. As Russ Shafer-Landau (2010: 286) observes, we live in multi-cultural societies and so belong to many different moral communities. I, for example, belong to the moral communities of the Europeans, Finns, Brits, Brummies, academics, and so on.

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[3] This distinction was first introduced by Lyons (1976: 109–10). For a discussion, see Sturgeon (2010) and Beebe (2010: §1–3), and for a recent defence of agent subjectivism about reasons and well-being, Sobel (2016).

An old-fashioned appraiser relativist must then specify a way of determining the attitudes of which of these communities provides the content of my moral claims.[4]

Finally, we also get different versions of the old-fashioned views depending on whether we take moral claims to be about the actual attitudes of an individual or about some hypothetical attitudes she would have if she were, for example, better informed, more coherent and imaginative, and in other ways more rational and sensitive too. So, for example, my assertion that eating meat is wrong could either be (i) about whether or not I actually currently happen to approve or disapprove of eating meat, or (ii) about which attitudes I would have if I were imagining in a both vivid and informed way how the animals are treated.[5]

This means that old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism are both frameworks in which different views can be formulated even if all those versions accept that moral claims are invariably about the attitudes of an individual or a group. Rather than considering the different versions of these views further, let us turn to their advantages.

Firstly, it is often suggested that the previous views can be supported on empirical grounds. It has been known for millennia that different societies accept different moral standards – they have different views of which actions are right and wrong. For example, in a frequently quoted passage, the Greek historian Herodotus ([440BCE] 1998: 219–20) already described how the Persian King Darius was amazed by the fact that, where the Greeks burned the bodies of their fathers to show respect, the Callatians ate them for the same reason. And, today too, there are significant differences in the moral standards of different cultures when it comes to controversial issues such as abortion, same-sex relationships, animal rights, and so on.[6]

Now, we cannot conclude directly from the previous cultural differences that relativism is true, as Herodotus ([440BCE], 1998: 220) seems to do, but that observation can still provide a key premise for a powerful argument for that view. At minimum, the fact that different moral communities have different moral standards calls for an explanation.[7] Yet, the only explanation the moral realists who believe in objective moral facts seem to be able to give for it is that some communities are just better at moral inquiry. After all, all moral communities presumably try to acquire true moral beliefs by relying on the best means available for them, and so it would just have to be according to realism that some communities end up getting things right (usually us) and others wrong (usually the other communities). To many, this explanation is objectionably smug. For these relativist critics of moral realism, it is more appealing to think that the cultural differences are expressions of different forms of life, and so each community's own unique moral standard is equally suitable for that very community. This allows the relativists to avoid having to claim that many moral communities are completely morally mistaken as on their view there isn't anything objective for the moral communities to be right about beyond the moral standards of their

[4] This also leads to the problems discussed by Shafer-Landau (2010: 286–7) and Copp (1995: 221–3).

[5] The more traditional versions of old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism tend to be formulated in terms of actual attitudes. One example of the latter kind of hypotheticalist view is Michael Smith's (1986: 301) view according to which "'X is good' means 'X is such as to be approved of those who share our moral viewpoint under suitable conditions'." See also Lewis (1989) and the discussions in Shafer-Landau (2010: 288–91) and Egan (2012). On Egan's view, value claims are self-attributions of a property of being disposed to react in certain positive way to the value-bearer under certain conditions.

[6] For an overview of the empirical literature, see Rowland (2021: §1.2).

[7] J.L. Mackie (1977: 36–7) famously used this premise in an argument for error theory, but it could equally be used in an argument for relativism. For a discussion, see Dreier (2006: §3.5) and Rowland (2021: §2.2).

community.[8] This also connects to the idea that the old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism seem to support the idea that tolerance is a virtue, and so we shouldn't try to condemn the cultural practices and moral beliefs of other societies or impose our standards on them.

Old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism also seem to compare well to the other, competing metaethical views. Firstly, they are obviously metaphysically parsimonious.[9] One of relativism's main competitor is non-naturalist moral realism according to which moral claims are made true by distinct moral properties and facts of their own unique kind. One important advantage of relativism is that it, in contrast, requires nothing more than the positive and negative attitudes that we have.[10] This basic idea also arguably helps us to avoid the threat that there aren't any moral facts at all, and so the concern that we should accept a moral error theory is also diminished.[11] Old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism furthermore provide a way of explaining how we can know which actions are right and wrong. Roughly, according to these views, all we need to do is to become aware of what kind of attitudes we have towards actions and outcomes through reflecting on them together.

These views also promise to explain just why most of us tend to be motivated to do what we think is right and good (and avoid doing what we think is wrong and bad).[12] If to think that an action is right is to think that I have positive, motivating attitudes towards it and I'm generally pretty good at knowing towards which actions I have such attitudes, then it is not a surprise that when I believe that an action is right I am motivated to do it. After all, that belief is true, as I know it is, only if I am so motivated to act accordingly.[13]

The so-called expressivists tend to explain the very same connection to moral motivation by claiming that, instead of reporting our positive and negative attitudes, our moral utterances express those attitudes.[14] Yet, the subjectivist view that the meaning of moral predicates is given by the attitudes they report the speaker as having rather than by the attitudes they conventionally express (as the expressivists claim) has one clear advantage. The defenders of the subjectivist views can argue that the meaning of complex moral claims (for example, 'if lying is wrong, then getting your little brother to lie is wrong') can be given in terms of their truth-conditions that are a straight-forward function of the truth-conditions of their constituent parts ('lying is wrong' and 'getting your little brother to lie is wrong' in this case) that are given by the attitudes we have.[15] This can be done exactly in the same way as for all non-moral complex claims that have the same logical form as the complex moral claims. In contrast, this explanation is not available for the expressivists because according to them the meaning of even the simple moral claims is not given by their truth-conditions in the first place but rather by the attitudes they conventionally express.[16]

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[8] For an overview of recent realist responses to this argument, see Rowland (2021: §2.3).

[9] See Dreier (2006: 241).

[10] See John Bengson, Terence Cuneo, and Russ Shafer-Landau's chapter 'Moral Realism' in this volume and Suikkanen (2016).

[11] See Hallvard Lillehammer's chapter 'Constructivism and the Error Theory' in this volume.

[12] For discussions of this close connection between moral judgments and motivation, see Björklund et al (2012) and Suikkanen (2018).

[13] See Dreier (2006: §6) and the objection below.

[14] See Matthew Chrisman's chapter 'Ethical Expressivism' in this volume.

[15] Given that here the original claim is a material conditional, the meaning of that claim, for example, is based on the idea that it is false if the antecedent is true and the consequent false, and true otherwise.

[16] See the discussion of the Frege-Geach problem in Chrisman's 'Ethical Expressivism' chapter in this volume.

Yet, despite these advantages, the old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism also face several serious objections too. Here I focus on four.

The first problem is that old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism seem to make people systematically talk past one another in a way that makes moral disagreements almost impossible.[17] Take the following intuitive moral disagreement between two individuals who do not accept the same moral standard or belong to the same moral community:

A: "Typing thank-you notes is wrong."

B: "No, it's not. There is nothing wrong about doing so."

Here, the problem is that, according to old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism, A's utterance describes her own or her community's negative attitudes towards typing thank-you notes, whereas B's utterance states that she or her community lack such attitudes. The problem is that both these statements can be true at the same time.[18] It really can be that A has those negative attitudes and B lacks them, and so there is nothing A and B are disagreeing about. In fact, if subjectivist or relativist views were true, B could respond to A with 'What you say is true but typing thank-you notes is not wrong!', which would be a very strange thing to say. Something must thus be wrong with the outlined views.

The second problem is that the old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism in the end fail to explain the intuitive relation between the acceptance of moral claims and motivation – the thought that, other things being equal, we tend to be motivated in a way that fits our moral assertions and beliefs. This is because, even if these views can guarantee that I am motivated to act according to my moral assertions when those assertions are true (and so when I accurately describe my motivational attitudes), they cannot explain how I could be motivated similarly when I make a false moral claim (Dreier 1990: 16–7). In that case, after all, I make a claim about which motivational attitudes I have even if, because the claim is false, I don't have those motivations. Yet, intuitively, we are just as motivated by our false moral assertions and beliefs as we are by the true ones.

Thirdly, old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism seem to make what is right and wrong depend on our positive and negative attitudes in an implausible way. Take any morally objectionable cultural practice such as female genital mutilation (FGM). Some philosophers already object to subjectivism and relativism on the basis that these views make it difficult for us to express the thought that the individuals who take part in these practices in the other cultures are doing something wrong (more of that below).[19] Yet, given that according to the views under discussion, to say that an action is right is to report which attitudes I have (or my community has) towards actions such as FGM, this means that if I were to change my attitude (or we were to change ours) from disapproval to approval, FGM too would cease to be wrong and start to be right for me. Likewise, it would be true that, if I didn't have negative attitudes towards boiling new-born babies alive, then those actions would not be wrong for me. Thus, many people think that having to accept

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[17] This problem was introduced by Moore (1912: ch. 3). For discussions, see Dreier (2006: §7), Shafer-Landau (2010: 283–7), Finlay (2014: ch. 8), Suikkanen (2015: 149–50), and Rowland (2021: §3.1).

[18] This consequence is sometimes thought to be a hallmark of relativist views. See Lyons (1976).

[19] See, e.g., Kopelman (2011) and Nussbaum (1999: ch. 4).

that the moral status of obviously right and wrong actions could vary in this way depending on which attitudes we happen to have towards them is too high of a price to pay for the purported advantages of subjectivism and relativism.

Finally, it has also been questioned whether old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism are the right frameworks for those of us who find tolerance a virtue. Is it right to be tolerant and not to try to impose your own moral views on others? Well, according to subjectivism and relativism the answer to this question too depends either on your own attitudes or the attitudes of your moral community. If you are a tolerant person or belong to a tolerant culture, then, yes, being tolerant towards other cultures is the right thing to do, and yet it isn't otherwise! This suggests that the subjectivists and relativists who value tolerance need to grant that there is at least one virtue to which their own metaethical view does not apply.

Contextualism

The previous objections to the old-fashioned views are some of the reasons for why so-many metaethicists have more recently tried to develop more complex forms of subjectivism and relativism. These more complex views are designed to avoid those and other objections to the more traditional views. Hence this section first outlines a simple version of James Dreier's view, which he called 'speaker relativism' but which I will call here a simple version of 'contextualism'. It then explains a more sophisticated contextualist view, which is based on Angelika Kratzer's (1977, 1981 and 1991) standard ordering semantics for deontic modals. Finally, I will conclude this section by considering whether these contextualist views are able to respond to the previous objections to old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism.[20]

The simple version of contextualism introduced by Dreier (1990 and 1992) was inspired by a more complicated view of the meaning of moral terms.[21] The starting point of this view is that, on their own and irrespective of the context in which they are used, moral terms ('right', 'wrong', 'good', 'bad' and so forth) do not have a semantic value or a referent – there is nothing they are about as such, not even the speaker's attitudes. They are thus incomplete expressions. The meaning of these terms, however, has an element called 'character', which any speaker must rely on and understand when using these terms competently. This element of the meaning of a given moral term is a rule that determines how that term acquires a semantic value (that is, a property as a referent) in the given context in which the moral term is used to make an utterance. This means that, when a moral term is used by a speaker, the character element of its meaning and the context of utterance together determine to which property of an action, for example, the moral term refers.[22]

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[20] For overviews of metaethical contextualism, see Silk (2018) and Björnsson (2021).

[21] See also Dreier (2006: §6 and 2009: 79–81). Dreier's view was inspired by Wong (1984: §5). As explained by Dreier (1990), this view itself is inspired David Kaplan's (1989) work on the semantics of indexicals in philosophy of language. For helpful discussions of this type of contextualism, see, e.g., Brogaard (2008: 385–6, 400), Björnsson and Finlay (2010, 7–8), Silk (2018), and Björnsson (2021).

[22] I'll use examples below to illustrate the view, but here an analogy might be useful. Think of the word 'here'. On its own, it does not refer to any location, but rather only when the word is uttered in a context it acquires its reference, which will usually be the place where the word uttered.

Different contextualists can then formulate in different ways what the character of the moral terms is – what is the rule that gets us from the utterance in a context to a semantic value of the given moral term that is used. A simple 'subjectivist' or 'speaker' version of this type of contextualism claims that it is the attitudes of the speaker (i.e., her moral standard) that is the feature of the context that fixes the reference and semantic value of the used moral term (Dreier 1990 and 1992). A simple 'relativist' or 'group' version likewise claims that it is the attitudes that constitute the moral standards of the speaker's community that fix the semantic value of the moral terms to certain properties when they are used (see Wong (1984: ch. 5 and 2006) and Copp (1995)).[23] And, similar rules of how the reference of moral terms is fixed by the attitudes of some individual or a group could be formulated to correspond to the different versions of old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism discussed in the previous section.[24]

Here the attitudes of the individuals and groups play a different kind of a semantic role than in the old-fashioned forms of subjectivism and relativism. According to the contextualist views, these attitudes are not a part of what moral terms and assertions are about – in that sense, they are not a part of the content of our moral claims. Rather, given the general meaning of the moral terms – their character – the attitudes provide a context in which moral terms are used and then that context determines to which properties the used moral terms refer. Instead of functioning as the referent or the content of moral terms, the attitudes thus play a role as reference-fixers within the context. Once the attitudes have played that role in a context of use, what a moral utterance is about is whether the given action has the property to which the attitudes fixed the reference of the moral term that was used. That will be the content of the moral claim (and so what information is communicated and what proposition is asserted), and the attitudes are not part of that content.

Let me use a toy example to illustrate this. Imagine two individuals – a utilitarian called Peter and a virtue ethicist Julia. Peter thus has internalized a moral standard that authorizes maximising the total amount of happiness and forbids all other actions, whereas Julia's moral standard authorizes the actions which a fully virtuous agent would do and forbids all others. According to the simple subjectivist version of contextualism introduced above, the word 'good' for example has the same character – the same rule of reference-fixing – when it is used by Peter and Julia. This is because, on this view, if either one of them uses the word 'good', the relevant rule says that the word refers to whatever property the given speaker happens to approve of in actions. Yet, the word comes to refer to different properties of actions when they use the word because their different moral standards provide different contexts of use that fix the reference of the word to different properties. When Peter utters 'eating meat is wrong', the content of his claim is that actions of eating meat do not maximize the total amount of happiness. Likewise, when Julia utters the very same sentence, the content of her claim is that fully virtuous agents would not eat meat. Because they are using the word in different contexts determined by their attitudes, their claims come to ascribe different properties to the same action.

[23] According to more flexible approaches (and hence the name 'contextualism'), the reference is sometimes fixed by the attitudes of the speaker, sometimes by those of her community, and sometimes by something else depending on which standards are salient in the context (see Finlay (2004, 2009 and 2014) and Silk (2016)).

[24] Different contextualists disagree about what the relevant attitudes are – whether they are justified social moral codes (Copp 1995), moral norms (Silk 2016: 126–7 and 2017), ends or interests (Finlay 2004, 2009 and 2014), or motivational attitudes (Dreier 1990 and 1992).

More recently this simple view has been developed into a more sophisticated view based on Angelika Kratzer's (1977, 1981 and 1991) standard ordering semantics for deontic modals ('must', 'ought', 'can' and the like).[25] The resulting views are highly systematic, formal and rigorous. Furthermore, they often try to explain how the truth of moral claims can depend, not only on the moral standards salient in the context, but also on what information individuals have in it. One way to understand these views is that they provide a slightly more complicated account of both the character of moral terms (the rule that fixes the reference of the moral terms in a given context of utterance) and also of to what kind of a property the reference of these terms gets fixed. This happens, as we will see next, in two stages.

Let's begin from Ben's assertion that we must not eat meat, where this claim is about what we must not do morally speaking. According to the Kratzerian accounts, when the deontic modal 'must' is used in a 'moral flavour' in this way, it functions as a propositional operator that takes other propositions (here the proposition that we do not eat meat) under its scope.[26] We can call the propositions that embed under this propositional operator 'prejacents'.

For the purposes of the analysis, we then need first a set of worlds known as the 'modal base'. We can think of the modal base as the possible worlds that correspond to the relevant options that are salient in the context of Ben's utterance. That is, the context of utterance here determines what the relevant options are in the form of possible worlds. In the example above, the modal base consists of a set of possible worlds that are otherwise mostly identical with our world with the exception that in some of them no one eats meat whereas in others different amounts of meat are eaten. Of course, as a result of that difference, the worlds will also come to differ in other ways as well given that whether meat is eaten will shape those worlds in other ways too. Here the contextualist will then have to choose between (i) a modal base that includes worlds that match what would be the actual consequences of the relevant actions and (ii) one that consists of worlds that match with what the consequences would be expected to be in the relevant context of utterance – worlds that are compatible with what the people in the context of utterance believe.[27]

The second step of the view is that the context of utterance must then also provide an 'ordering source'. It is a moral standard that ranks the worlds that belong to the previous set of worlds based on how good morally speaking the moral standard in question deems those worlds to be. Here the moral standards accepted by the individuals and groups play their role in the same way as already discussed in this section above. Thus, according to the subjectivist or speaker versions of this type of contextualism, the attitudes of the speaker – the moral standard she has internalized – determine the ranking of the possible worlds in the modal base. Likewise, according to the relativist or group versions, the moral standard accepted by the speaker's community determines how the worlds in the modal base rank with respect to one another.

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[25] See, e.g., Dowell (2012 and 2013) and Bronfman and Dowell (2016 and 2018). The basic contextualist idea has also been developed further in different ways, for example, by Finlay (2004, 2009, 2014 and 2016), Cariani (2013), and Silk (2013, 2016: ch. 5 and 2017).

[26] If we extended this analysis to moral terms such as 'good', 'right', 'wrong', then these terms too would be propositional operators rather than predicates at the level of logical form, and so the logical form of the claim that eating meat is wrong would be Wrong(that meat is eaten). For an objection and a defense of the claim that 'ought' relates an agent to an action, see Schroeder (2011) and for a response Bronfman and Dowell (2018: §5).

[27] That is, the modal base could be argued to be either 'circumstantial' or 'epistemic'. For a discussion, see Finlay (2016: §5), Bronfman and Dowell (2018: §2), and Björnsson (2021).

The last element of the analysis then is that the semantic role of the propositional operator expressed by the moral 'must' is to quantify over the previous set of ranked worlds. More precisely, this operator functions here as a universal quantifier. So, according to the subjectivist/speaker version, when Ben asserts that we must not eat meat, his assertion means that in *all* the worlds that his moral standard ranks first from the modal base no meat is eaten. And, if this really is the case and only vegetables are eaten in those worlds, his assertion will be true (and false otherwise). To extend this analysis to other moral terms, we need to take them too to be quantifying phrases that in different ways quantify over the contextually determined ranking of the worlds in the modal base. So, maybe, 'being morally permissible but not required' could express the idea that a given action is done at least in some (but not in all) of the top-ranked worlds, 'good' could expresses that something is the case in the worlds that are ranked higher than most other worlds, 'wrong' and 'bad' could express what is never done in the highest ranked worlds (or what is done only in the lowest ranked worlds) and so on.[28]

The rest of this section then first explains how contextualist views can avoid at least three of the objections to old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism discussed in the previous section.[29] I will then conclude by raising one much discussed objection to these views that has led to sophisticated further developments.

Firstly, contextualist views appear to go at least some way towards avoiding the intuitively most objectionable forms of attitude-dependence. The end of the previous section explained how the old-fashioned views entail that, if we had different attitudes towards horrendous actions such as boiling new-born babies alive, those actions would be right. To avoid this objection, the contextualist can, however, argue that the actual context of utterance fixes (via our actual attitudes in the context we are in) what properties the moral terms refer to in all worlds.[30]

Let us assume that, when I assert that it is wrong to boil new-born babies alive, I ascribe the property of not maximizing the total amount of happiness to the actions of boiling new-born babies alive because that is the property to which my attitudes fix the reference of 'wrong' in the context of my utterance. This does not entail that it would be true that, if I had different attitudes towards those actions, then those actions would cease to be wrong. When I consider the worlds in which I have different attitudes – where I don't disapprove boiling new-born babies – the question of whether those actions are right and wrong would still depend on whether they fail to maximize the total amount of happiness (the property I ascribe to actions when I call them wrong in the context of conversation that is fixed by my actual attitudes). It does not depend on what attitudes I have in that counterfactual world we are considering. Thus, on this view, if boiling new-born babies is actually wrong, it is also wrong in the worlds in which I am not against those actions. The semantic analysis thus guarantees that we don't get objectionable forms of attitude-dependence.

The previous section also suggested how the old-fashioned views furthermore fail to explain how false moral assertions are closely related to what we are motivated to do. Now, initially, it might

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[28] There is debate about how the notion of moral ought could be understood in this framework given that it is weaker than the moral must discussed above but stronger than moral may. See, e.g., Finlay (2014: §3.7 and 2016: §4).

[29] In addition, I should say that contextualist views do share all advantages of old-fashioned subjectivism and relativism such as metaphysical parsimony (see Finlay (2009 and 2014) and Silk (2018: 114)) and the ability to avoid the Frege-Geach problem.

[30] This strategy follows Simon Blackburn's (1984: 217–20) response to a similar objection to expressivism.

look like the contextualists are even worse off in this respect. After all, on their view, the content of the moral assertion that eating meat is wrong is a proposition of the form that meat eating has a certain property F, where F is some natural, non-moral property determined by whatever moral standard is salient in the conversational context. If F is, for example, the property of not maximising the total amount of happiness or not being what a virtuous agent would do, there is no reason to expect agents to be in some special way motivated by thoughts that have that content (and, in fact, most of us are not). And, so, it doesn't seem like the view could explain the reliable way in which moral beliefs seem to motivate us.

The solution to this problem is to suggest that thinking that eating meat is wrong and thinking that it is F (whatever the F is as fixed by the moral standard I accept as the speaker) are *different ways of representing the very same content* (Dreier 1990: 20).[31] When I represent the Fness of the actions of eating meat by applying the concept of wrongness in my judgment, I represent the Fness of those actions under a different mode of representation compared to thinking of them merely as being F under that concept. This is because, when I apply the term 'wrong' in speech or thought, as a competent speaker I must understand the meaning of the concept and especially how the character of the term and the context of utterance together fix the semantic value of the term. This means that I must think that, by using the term, I ascribe a certain property to the relevant actions that I believe to be determined by my own motivational attitudes, and so without those attitudes I would be hesitant to use the concept to ascribe the relevant property in the first place. This seems to be sufficient to explain why we would expect speakers generally to be motivated by their moral assertions and beliefs.

This connection to motivation can be used to respond to another important objection to the old-fashioned views. As we saw, those views seem to make speakers talk past one another and thus unable to disagree. Again, it seems like this is a problem for contextualism too.[32] Here too it seems like, when people who accept different moral standards meet, they end up using the same moral terms to talk about different properties. In the example above, if A's assertion that typing thank-you notes is wrong ascribes a certain property F to those actions (as fixed by her moral standard), then B's utterance that those actions are not wrong could only mean that those actions do not have a different property G (as fixed by her different moral standards). These propositions could again both be true at the same time (the action could, in principle, be both F and not G), and so we intuitively don't have a disagreement as that seems to require one person accepting and another rejecting the very same proposition.

In response to this problem, many contextualists follow the expressivists by granting that there isn't a factual disagreement between A and B in the previous case after all.[33] Yet, if the previous

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[31] For discussions, see Finlay (2004, 2014: ch. 5 and 2017: 187–188), Velleman (2015: ch. 5), Silk (2018: 113–4) and Björnsson (2021).

[32] See, e.g., Kölbel (2004a: §4), Beebe (2010: §3), MacFarlane (2007: §1), Brogaard (2008: §1), Dreier (2009: 81–2), Francén Olinder (2010: 22), Silk (2017: §2 and 2018: 105–8), Björnsson (2021), Suikkanen (2019: 49–50) and Sodoma (2021: §2).

[33] For defenses of this response, see Harman (1996), Dreier (1999: 569 and 2009: 109), Jackson (2008: 81–2), Björnsson and Finlay (2010: 27–8), Finlay (2014, ch. 8), Wong (2011), and Björnsson (2015). Other responses are based on metalinguistic negotiations (see Plunkett and Sundell (2013 and 2021), Khoo and Knobe (2016), Silk (2016: 125–6 and 2017: 214 and 222–5 (though see Finlay (2017: 196 fn. 26)) and Sodoma (2021: §5)), proposition clouds (Suikkanen 2019), or rejecting our semantic intuitions about disagreements (see Rovane (2013: 30 and 113), Velleman (2015: 55 and 76), Finlay (2017 and 202) and for a discussion see Sodoma (2021: §3.1)). For an overview, see Francén Olinder (2016), Finlay (2017), and Rowland (2021: §3.3).

account of the connection to motivation is along the right lines, we know that in their exchange, even if A and B are talking about different properties of typing thank-you notes, they are also guaranteed to have conflicting motivational attitudes towards those actions. Because A thinks that those actions are wrong, she will have negative attitudes towards them – motivation to avoid those actions. In contrast, because B doesn't think that those actions are wrong, she will have more positive, motivating attitudes towards them. The suggestion then is that, even if there isn't a factual disagreement, there still is a clash of motivational attitudes between A and B – a disagreement in attitudes as Charles Stevenson (1944: 2–8) put it. It could be then suggested that the presence of this practical conflict is enough to explain our intuition that A and B disagree. It's just that we sometimes mistakenly think that moral disagreements are factual when they in fact are more practical disagreements in attitude.

Let me finally introduce Niko Kolodny and John MacFarlane's (2010) important objection to the more sophisticated form of contextualism outlined above, which they also used to motivate the kind of relativism that will be discussed in the next section.[34] The crux of this objection is that, even if those contextualist views can try to take the information the speakers have into account in the way in which the modal base is determined in the context of utterance, these views will still fail to offer a plausible account of the way in which the truth of moral claims is information-sensitive.

Consider the following case (Kolodny and MacFarlane 2010: 115):

> Ten miners are trapped either in shaft A or in shaft B, but we do not know which. Flood waters threaten to flood the shafts. We have enough sandbags to block one shaft, but not both. If we block one shaft, all the water will go into the other shaft, killing any miners inside it. If we block neither shaft, both shafts will fill halfway with water, and just one miner, the lowest in the shaft, will be killed.

Intuitively, the right action in this case is to block neither shaft. However, it is not clear how this claim could come out as true given the contextualist analysis sketched above. Presumably, the modal base here is a range of worlds some in which the miners are in A and some in which they are in B (as both are sufficiently similar to the actual world and compatible with what you know). Furthermore, you will block A in some of these worlds, B in others, and neither in the rest. The problem is that presumably your own moral standard – the one that is salient in the context – will rank the worlds in which all the miners survive always the highest. Of the worlds where the miners are in A, these would be all the worlds where you block A and of the B worlds all the ones where you block shaft B as those are the only worlds where everyone survives. This means that in none of the highest ranked worlds you block neither shaft. Thus, it just cannot be that doing so would be what you must do according to contextualism.[35]

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[34] There are other important objections to contextualism too. Other frequently discussed ones include, for example, the question of whether the view can make sense of moral attitude ascriptions and especially factive attitude ascriptions (for discussions, see Björnsson and Finlay (2010: 28–34), Egan (2012: 565), Schroeder (2009), Silk (2013: 207–208, 2017: §6.1 and 2018: 108–9), Weatherson (2008) and Brogaard (2008: 388–9)).

[35] The more sophisticated objection by Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010: 122–3) is that, in the contextualist framework, an advisor who knows where the miners are would end up talking past you when trying to advise given that her utterances would be about a different property, which would in part be fixed by her better informational state and so there would also be no way for you to integrate the advice into your deliberation.

There are, of course, many sophisticated contextualist responses to this problem. One suggestion, for example, is to require that the ordering source – the moral standard salient in the context – must rank the relevant options (the actions done in the worlds that constitute the modal base) in an information-sensitive way itself, that is, in terms of which action available to you would maximize expected moral value in the modal base. If this is right, then from your perspective not blocking either shaft might rank highest of the options available to you across all the worlds that are compatible with your state of information. Doing so would have more expected value that blocking either shaft because in some of the worlds in the modal base where you block a shaft, the miners are in that shaft and so they all die. Thus, if you blocked either shaft (or a combination of them) across the worlds in the modal base, you would end up with more deaths than you would if you blocked neither shaft in them.[36] Yet, instead of exploring this type of solution further, let us move to a completely different form of subjectivism and relativism that also promises to solve this problem more neatly.

New Wave Subjectivism and Relativism

Even if the old-fashioned views and contextualism as discussed above differ from one another, they still also share one key feature. Namely, once a speaker makes a moral assertion in a context of utterance and (i) the meaning of the moral terms used, (ii) the context, and (iii) the speaker's (or her community's) attitudes determine together the content of that assertion, then that content – a certain proposition – will be absolutely, timelessly, and objectively true, full stop. The asserted proposition – that the speaker has attitudes of (dis)approval towards the given action or that the action is F – will be true (or false) from whichever perspective you consider it. Thus, on these views, even if the truth-value of the sentence 'eating meat is wrong' can vary depending on in what context it is asserted, the truth-value of the proposition that gets expressed by a specific utterance of that sentence cannot.

The new wave subjectivists and relativists turn the previous idea around.[37] According to them, an assertion of a given moral sentence has always the same content in whatever context it is done. Thus, in whatever context anyone asserts that eating meat is wrong, the content of this assertion – the proposition asserted – is always the same and in no way depends on the attitudes or moral standards of the speaker or anyone else. It is always the proposition that the actions of eating meat have the property of wrongness (or the proposition that worlds in which meat is eaten morally rank lower than ones where it isn't).

The second claim of the new wave subjectivists and relativists is that the proposition invariably expressed by a given moral sentence does not have an absolute truth value, full stop or in and of itself. Rather, the key idea is that the proposition can be only true relative to a context of

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[36] For discussions of this and other contextualist solutions to the miners case, see Björnsson and Finlay (2010), Dowell (2012 and 2013), Charlow (2013), Cariani, Kaufman and Kaufman (2013), Silk (2014 and 2016: §5.6), and Finlay (2014: ch. 8 and 2016: 186–7), Cariani (2016), Wedgwood (2016) and Bronfman and Dowell (2016 and 2018: §4)).

[37] For both general discussions and ones that focus on the moral domain, see MacFarlane (2003, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2012 and 2014), Kölbel (2002, 2004a, 2004b and 2005), Brogaard (2008 and 2012), Dreier (2009: §3), Francén Olinder (2010: §2), Kolodny and MacFarlane (2010), Beebe (2010), Schafer (2012), Evers (2021), Wright (2021) and the essays in Carcía-Carpintero and Kölbel (2008).

assessment. Moreover, the thought is that the very same proposition can be true relative to one context of assessment and false relative to another.

Already before the view was introduced, it was common in semantic theorising to think that the circumstances of assessment include parameters for worlds and times.[38] Is the sentence 'there are more than 10 dinosaurs' true? Well, it depends on whether we evaluate its truth in the actual world or in some other possible world, and also when we do so. The key suggestion then is that the context of assessment should not include just world and time parameters but rather also an ethical standard parameter and perhaps also an information-state parameter. The consequence of this is that the proposition that eating meat is wrong (that always has an invariable content) can be true relative to a context of assessment that in part consists of one moral standard and false relative to a different context of assessment consisting in part of a different moral standard. This is because whether a given moral claim is true relative to a context of assessment is determined by whether the moral standards that constitute the context of evaluation forbids the relevant actions, and different moral standards of course forbid different actions.

The subjectivist versions can then claim that the attitudes of each individual, i.e., her own moral standard or a moral perspective, constitute a context of evaluation – there is a unique set of moral propositions that are true relative to it. Relativist versions would, in contrast, claim that the moral standard parameter of a context of assessment is always a moral standard accepted by a certain community – the perspective of that community. One important thing to note is that the context of assessment can often come apart from the context of utterance on this view. So, when the Victorians asserted that chastity is a virtue, the very proposition they then expressed can be true relative to the context of evaluation that also in this case was the context of utterance (i.e., the Victorian moral standard) but false relative to the context of evaluation provided by the moral standard accepted today (i.e., our moral standard).

The new wave forms of subjectivism and relativism have important advantages over the previous two views. Firstly, they seem to offer a solution to the miners case (Kolodny and MacFarlane 2010: §4.3, MacFarlane 2014: §11.7)). In that case, for the agent, the claim that she ought to block neither shaft is true relative to her ignorant informational state and moral standard. This is because her moral standard will rank the worlds in which she blocks neither shaft higher than the worlds where she blocks either A or B in the set of worlds that is compatible with her own ignorance. Yet, that very same proposition can be false relative to an advisor's better state of information that can rule out the miners being in one of the shafts, which is why the advisor can truthfully (relative to her standard) disagree and say 'No, you ought to block shaft A' for example. This is because the advisor's moral standard will rank blocking A higher than blocking neither shaft in the worlds in where the miners are in A as the advisor knows they are.

The second advantage of the view is that it entails that speakers who accept different moral standards and belong to different moral communities seem to be able to disagree with one another.[39] For example, in the example above where A asserts that typing thank-you notes is wrong

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[38] See Kaplan (1989: 502–9).

[39] See Kölbel (2004a: 54 and 2004b: 307), MacFarlane (2007 and 2014: §2.2) and Brogaard (2008: 392 and 404), though see below for an objection. MacFarlane also motivates the view by considering how we are willing to retract our previous moral claims, which suggests that we have come to reject the very same propositions we once accepted. See MacFarlane (2014: §2.1) and Brogaard (2008: 388 and 393–4).

and B responds that 'No, it's not', A is expressing the attitude of belief towards the very same proposition that B expresses disbelief towards. That is, both speakers express here conflicting attitudes towards the very same content given that the content of the proposition asserted does not depend on their attitudes.

Furthermore, the new wave forms of relativism and subjectivism are also able to interpret the previous type of moral disagreements as 'faultless disagreements'.[40] This is because in the case above, even if A and B disagree, it can still be the case that both A's claim is true relative to the context of assessment that is the context where she makes her moral claims (i.e., her own moral standard or the standard of her community) and B's claim is true relative to the context of evaluation consisting of her or her community's moral standard. In this sense, neither A nor B is mistaken despite their disagreement and so neither of them is at fault either. This nicely fits with the original virtue of tolerance that is often used to motivate relativism. Even if I might not agree with the moral beliefs commonly held in another culture, on this view I can also happily grant that the people in that culture are getting things right relative to their perspective, and so I have no reason to try to impose my own views on them.

Much can thus be said to motivate new wave subjectivism and relativism, and yet these views also face challenges. Let me here raise just three concerns.[41]

Firstly, according to the new wave views, a moral sentence such as 'eating meat is wrong' always expresses the same proposition in every context of utterance. It's easy to understand moral propositions as representations of states of affairs – of, for example, the one in which the actions of eating meat have the property of being wrong. However, what kind of a property could that property ascribed to the actions of eating meat be like on this view?[42] It cannot be a relational property the instantiation of which depends on how those actions are related to a moral standard of some individual or a group as that would make the view collapse into contextualism. It cannot be an intrinsic natural property of those actions either, because in that case whether the actions of eating meat have the property could not be true relative to one context of assessment and false relative to another (it could depend only on the intrinsic nature of the actions in question). It would also not be appealing to think of the property as a special, 'unspecific' kind of property of its own unique kind where what counts as having the property could vary relative to a context of assessment. That comes too close to accepting a form of non-naturalism which relativists generally want to avoid.

The only plausible model is to think of the relevant proposition as not representing any states of affairs per se but, perhaps, as sets of centred worlds. We can think of each centred possible world as a possible world that has an arrow for 'you are here' somewhere that picks out an individual, a time, and her moral standard at that time. The suggestion would then be that the proposition that eating meat is wrong would be the set of all the centred worlds such that the moral standard at the centre of each world is against the actions of eating meat. When you then believe this proposition

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[40] See Brogaard (2008: 392–3), Kölbel (2002: 98–100 and 2004a), and for a discussion Rowland (2021: §11.1.1). For empirical evidence for the idea that some disagreements are seen as faultless, see Khoo and Knobe (2018) and Finlay (2017: 188). There are also versions of contextualism that can accommodate faultless disagreements (see Silk (2017: 203–204 and 2018: 114)).

[41] There are other objections too. For example, it has been questioned whether the view can accommodate moral attitude ascriptions and especially factive moral attitude ascriptions. For a discussion, see Brogaard (2008: §3).

[42] For a discussion, see Evers (2021: §2) and Wright (2021).

or assert it to be true, you are then ascribing yourself the property of actually being at the centre of one of the previous centred worlds.[43]

The problem is that, if the new wave subjectivists and relativists are pushed to this understanding of the relevant propositions, the intuitive moral disagreements again seem to disappear (Francén Olinder 2010: 26 and Dreier 2009: 99–100). Let us return to the sentences 'Typing a thank-you note is wrong' and 'Typing a thank-you note is not wrong'. The previous account of the propositions, which these sentences express, means that there is no context of assessment – a moral standard that is at the centre of one of the previous centred worlds – in which both propositions would be true at the same time. This is because any such moral standard either forbids or authorizes the action of typing thank-you notes. Yet, the problem is that, when A and B assert these sentences, according to the outlined model they would still fail to disagree. In asserting that those actions are wrong, A ascribes herself the property of being at the centre of a centred world the relevant moral standard of which forbids typing thank-you notes. Likewise, in asserting that those actions are not wrong, B asserts that she is in the centre of a centred world the relevant moral standard of which authorizes those same actions. This means that, ultimately, their assertions end up being about what is the case at their own location at the different contexts of assessment constituted by different moral standards and both can be right about that. In effect, consequently they can both agree that it is true relative to A's standard that typing thank-you notes is wrong and false relative to B's standard, and so the intuitive disagreement has again disappeared.[44]

The last concern I want to raise has to do with whether, even if the new wave relativists could make sense of disagreement, they could do so in the right kind of a way (Sodoma 2021: 8).[45] There is some reason to think that we take at least some moral disagreements to be epistemically significant. When being confronted with people who hold different moral standards, we tend to think of this as a reason to engage in both argumentation and self-reflection. We attempt to convince the other party by offering them reasons for our own view, and yet at the same time we can take the reasons they offer seriously – as reasons to examine our own views and whether they are correct. Yet, according to new wave relativism, this practice would be confused. That there is someone who holds different moral standards and thus is embedded in a different context of assessment just doesn't seem to give any reason to doubt that your own moral claims and beliefs would be mistaken relative to the context of evaluation (i.e., your own moral standard) that is salient for evaluating them for being mistaken. After all, the disagreement is advertised as being faultless and thus one that contains no mistakes by either party. And, so, the new wave relativists would need to be able to explain why we are so confused in our current epistemic practice in the moral domain or explain the epistemic significance of the faultless disagreements.

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[43] See Dreier (2009: 89–90) and Evers (2021, 86).

[44] For what it's worth, the new wave relativists can still try to use the contextualist means of making sense of disagreements (see Dreier 2009: 106 and fn. 33 above).

[45] For a discussion of this problem and a potential response, see also Kölbel (2005: 64–70) and Schafer (2012) whose responses resembles the metalinguistic negotiation strategy mentioned above (fn. 33).

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed three different views that entail both that there are no objectively correct moral standards and that whether a given moral claim is true depends in some way on a moral standard accepted by an individual or a group. The old-fashioned views entail those theses because according to them moral assertions just are about the attitudes of an individual or a group. The contextualist views, in contrast, claim that the previous attitudes merely fix in the context of utterance what properties our moral assertions are about. Finally, the new wave views suggest that, even if moral assertions always invariably have the same contents, they are true or false only relative to a context of evaluation that is constituted by an individual's or a group's moral standard. In addition to outlining these views, I have also discussed their main advantages and some of the key objections to them.

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