

Moral Relativism in Context

JAMES R. BEEBE

SUNY, Buffalo

Consider the following facts about the average, philosophically untrained moral relativist:

- (1.1) The average moral relativist denies the existence of “absolute moral truths.”
- (1.2) The average moral relativist often expresses her commitment to moral relativism with slogans like ‘What’s true (or right) for you may not be what’s true (or right) for me’ or ‘What’s true (or right) for your culture may not be what’s true (or right) for my culture.’
- (1.3) The average moral relativist endorses relativistic views of morality without endorsing relativistic views about science or mathematics.
- (1.4) The average moral relativist takes moral relativism to be non-relatively true and does not think there is anything contradictory about doing so.
- (1.5) The average moral relativist adopts an egalitarian attitude toward a wide range of moral values, practices and beliefs, claiming they are all equally legitimate or correct.
- (1.6) The average moral relativist often admonishes others to be more tolerant of those who engage in alternative ethical practices and to refrain from making negative moral judgments about them.
- (1.7) The average moral relativist sometimes makes negative moral judgments about the behavior of others—e.g., by harshly judging moral absolutists to be intolerant—but is less inclined to do so when the relativist’s metaethical views are salient in a context of moral judgment.
- (1.8) The average moral relativist takes anthropological evidence concerning the worldwide diversity of ethical views and practices to support moral relativism.

While most philosophers agree that the metaethical views of the average relativist are mistaken, there is considerably less agreement as to what those views amount to.

According to a common, uncharitable interpretation of ordinary moral relativism, relativists contradict themselves both when they take moral relativism to be non-relatively true and when they make negative moral judgments about the behavior of others.¹ The second contradiction is said to stem from the incompatibility between the relativists' egalitarian attitude toward alternative moral practices and the making of negative moral judgments about some of them. The uncharitable interpretation also claims that the reason why relativists are more likely to make negative moral judgments when their metaethical views are not salient is simply that they forget or perhaps fail to properly understand that such judgments are ruled out by their metaethical commitments. Relativists are also accused of committing a naïve logical error in thinking that purely descriptive facts about the diversity of ethical opinions and practices could ever establish normative facts about what is really right or wrong. Proponents of this kind of uncharitable interpretation often attribute a substantial degree of irrationality to ordinary relativists because of the allegedly obvious nature of the logical errors that are said to characterize relativistic thinking. While it is often possible to explain why subjects engage in certain irrational behaviors, the mere attribution of irrationality does not itself constitute such an explanation. Indeed, in the present case the charge of irrationality seems to indicate that the interpretation is simply unable to explain the relativistic behaviors in question. Such an interpretation should be accepted only if there are no others that can provide more satisfying explanations of the relevant data.

In what follows I canvass a series of more promising interpretations of garden variety moral relativism and evaluate them in light of how well they explain the phenomena described in (1.1) through (1.8). Many of the interpretative models I consider are derived from the work of philosophers who defend relativism as the correct view of the nature of morality rather than as the best interpretation of ordinary relativism (e.g., Harman 1975; 1977; 1978a; 1978b; 1996; Dreier 1990; 1992). Other models are drawn from defenses of relativism in other domains (e.g., Cohen 1988; DeRose 1992; 1995; Lewis 1996; MacFarlane 2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2007; 2008; forthcoming)². In sections I through III I consider interpretations of ordinary moral relativism that ascribe to relativists the view that ethical terms are (perhaps hidden) indexicals. Section I lays out some of the basic commitments of indexical moral relativism, while the following two sections examine in further detail the agent-centered indexical relativism proposed by Gilbert Harman (section II) and the attributor-centered version defended by James Dreier (section III). In section IV I consider the nonindexical relativism of John MacFarlane. After singling out the versions of indexical and nonindexical relativism that serve as the best models for understanding ordinary moral relativism, I offer a relevant alternatives account of moral judgment that reconstructs relativistic thinking about how changes in ethical standards affect the correctness of moral judgments (section V). I conclude

that the best interpretations of ordinary relativism satisfy the following constraints:

- (2.1) Theories that adequately model the linguistic behavior of the average relativist do not take the ethical standards of moral agents to be the sole determinants of the truth values of moral judgments.
- (2.2) Theories that adequately model the linguistic behavior of the average relativist take the ethical standards of those who attribute moral praise or blame or who assess attributions of praise or blame for truth or falsity to be the primary determinants of the truth values of moral judgments.
- (2.3) Theories that adequately model the linguistic behavior of the average relativist allow an agent's practical reasons to affect the truth values of moral judgments when those reasons are sufficiently salient in an attributor's or an assessor's context.
- (2.4) Theories that adequately model the linguistic behavior of the average relativist explain the ways in which relativists take the truth values of moral judgments to vary in terms of the conversational mechanisms responsible for changes in the ethical standards in place in contexts of attribution or contexts of assessment.

Each of these constraints and their relevance will be explained in the sections that follow.

I

The family of indexicalist interpretations of moral relativism is characterized by the common attribution of the following metaethical theses:

- (MR1) The central normative terms of normative ethical judgments—e.g., 'right,' 'wrong,' 'good,' 'bad,' 'permissible,' 'impermissible'—are indexicals.³
- (MR2) The contents that get expressed by ethically normative terms are determined by the ethical standards in place at the contexts in which those terms are used.

Call the conjunction of these theses 'IMR.' According to the view that IMR captures the heart of ordinary moral relativism, relativists take the contents expressed by ethical terms to vary from context to context in ways that are analogous to more familiar indexical expressions like 'I,' 'here,' 'now,' 'he,' 'she' and 'that.' Just as the content of distinct utterances of 'I am a philosopher' and 'It is warm and sunny here' vary as the values of 'I' and 'here' (and perhaps other contextual features) change, distinct utterances of 'Infanticide is morally wrong' express different propositions in different contexts.⁴ Indexical relativists take moral sentences like 'Infanticide is morally wrong' to have linguistic meanings (or 'characters,' in Kaplan's

1989 terminology) that remain the same in all contexts. However, when considered in isolation from any particular occasion of use, proponents of IMR claim these sentences fail to express any proposition. They are rather like the sentence ‘That man is a philosopher’ when it is divorced from any demonstrative gesture or communicative intention to refer to someone in particular. In each case, contextual facts about the communicative intentions of speakers and hearers are needed to supply semantic values that “complete” these expressions and give them determinate contents.⁵

Consider the following relativist slogans:

- (3.1) What’s true (or right) for you may not be what’s true (or right) for me.
- (3.2) What’s true (or right) for your culture may not be what’s true (or right) for my culture.

Let a ‘normative ethical sentence’ be any sentence that can be used to express a normative ethical judgment, and let a ‘normative ethical proposition’ be the proposition expressed by an assertive utterance of a normative ethical sentence on a particular occasion of use. According to the IMR interpretation, what garden variety relativists are trying to communicate with these slogans is something like the following:

- (3.1′) Normative ethical sentences that express true normative ethical propositions when asserted by you (in certain contexts) may express false normative ethical propositions when asserted by me (in other contexts).
- (3.2′) Normative ethical sentences that express true normative ethical propositions when asserted by members of your culture (in certain contexts) may express false normative ethical propositions when asserted by members of my culture (in other contexts).

Strictly speaking, relativists should not assert (3.1) or (3.2) because (i) the first occurrence of ‘right’ in each sentence depends for its content on a certain kind of context in which the hearer finds herself, (ii) the second occurrence depends upon a context familiar to the speaker, and (iii) the assertions, as most commonly used, are intended to convey the idea that the ethical standards in these two contexts may differ. Since the hearer’s use of ‘right’ may be associated with a different content than the speaker’s, anyone who asserts (3.1) or (3.2) is using ‘right’ in two possibly divergent ways in the same sentence, which is akin to committing the fallacy of equivocation. Because it can be quite difficult to distinguish between sentences and propositions and between other subtle differences of meaning, proponents of the IMR interpretation can claim it should be unsurprising if philosophically untrained relativists do not articulate these ideas about semantic relativity as perspicuously as they might.⁶

As a general model for understanding ordinary moral relativism, IMR can underwrite plausible explanations of most of the phenomena described in (1.1) through (1.8). Since IMR claims that the contents expressed by ethical terms vary with context, it offers a straightforward explanation of the relativist notion that there are no normative ethical sentences that are absolutely or non-relatively true. Furthermore, because the metaethical theses that comprise IMR apply only to ethical terms, they do not require moral relativists to endorse relativistic theses about the claims of physics, chemistry, biology or mathematics. IMR also explains how relativists can take their views to be non-relatively true. Since (MR1) and (MR2) are metaethical theses about normative ethical judgments and posit semantic relativity only in the domain of such judgments, there is no chance for these metaethical claims to undermine their own non-relative truth. Furthermore, there is nothing in IMR that prohibits the making of negative ethical judgments. (MR1) and (MR2) simply entail that when such judgments are made, the contents they expressed will be fixed by the ethical standards in place in their respective contexts of use.⁷ A further consequence of the IMR model is that it readily explains the relativist's egalitarian attitude toward ethical judgments that are made in different contexts. (MR1) and (MR2) imply that, of all the contexts in which ethical judgments are made, none has any greater privilege than any other and thus that the true ethical judgments made in one context are not any more or less correct than the true ethical judgments made in another context.

The family of IMR interpretations subdivides according to whether they are (a) agent- or attributor-centered, (b) sensitive or insensitive to the practical reasons of agents, (c) individualistic or intersubjective or (d) able or unable to account for changes in ethical standards that affect the truth values of moral judgments. In section II I examine two agent-centered versions of IMR that are suggested by the work of Harman and argue that neither of them can serve as an adequate model of ordinary relativism. In the following section I critique the individualistic, attributor-centered version of IMR proposed by Dreier and argue that the versions of IMR that serve as the best interpretations are attributor-centered, sensitive to the practical reasons of agents, and able to account for the semantic relativity engendered by shifts in ethical standards, regardless of whether they are individualistic or intersubjective.

II

In a substantial body of work Harman (1975; 1977; 1978a; 1978b; 1996) offers what is perhaps the most famous philosophical defense of moral relativism. Although he does not explicitly appeal to the indexicalist framework, his position is best understood from within that framework because he takes normative ethical sentences to be semantically incomplete and to depend

upon facts about their occasions of use to fix their designation.⁸ In Harman's (1975) original foray into moral relativism, he formulated his relativist theory only as an account of what he calls 'inner judgments'—viz., judgments of the following form:

(4.1) *S* ought to do *A*.

Harman (1975, 11) suggested that judgments like (4.1) have the same content as:

(4.1') Given *S*'s motivational attitudes (e.g., goals, desires and intentions) and relevant nonmoral facts about *S*, *A* is the course of action for *S* that is supported by the best reasons.⁹

Harman (1975, 4) claims that ethical judgments only make sense in relation to implicit agreements of intention among speakers and hearers and that such agreements obtain when "each of a number of people intends to adhere to some schedule, plan, or set of principles, intending to do this on the understanding that the others similarly intend." Harman also claims that unless some indication is given to the contrary, an assertion of (4.1) will be appropriate only if *S*'s reasons are endorsed by both the speaker and the hearer(s). Given Harman's view of practical reasoning, endorsing *S*'s reasons means sharing a relevant subset of *S*'s motivational attitudes.

However, despite the strong initial emphasis given to agreement between speakers, hearers and agents, Harman ultimately assigns agreement no role to play in the semantics of moral judgments, relegating it to the realm of pragmatics. Thus, according to Harman, if I assertively utter '*S* ought to do *A*,' my assertion generates something like the pragmatic implicature that I endorse *S*'s reasons for doing *A*.¹⁰ At bottom, however, the truth value of my utterance has nothing to do with my endorsement or rejection of *S*'s reasons. Only facts about *S*'s ends and motivational attitudes determine the content and truth value of the assertion.

On the Humean view of practical reason Harman (1975, 9) endorses, practical reason can only tell us what means would best serve our ends but cannot choose those ends or even rank them, except in light of their ability to promote further ends. This means that "the best reasons" in (4.1') should be understood as "the best in light of the ends *S* has chosen," where there is no expectation that reason will lead everyone to adopt the same ultimate ends. According to the particular version of ethical internalism that Harman (1978b, 152) endorses—viz., 'existence internalism'—moral demands apply to a person only if that person either accepts those demands or fails to accept them because of (i) ignorance of the relevant nonmoral facts, (ii) a failure to reason something through, or (iii) some sort of nonmoral defect like irrationality, stupidity, confusion or mental illness.¹¹ In short, a moral

demand applies to someone only if it is rational for that person to accept the demand. Harman (1978b, 154) also argues that for any moral demand it is possible there is someone who does not accept this demand, where this nonacceptance is not the result of ignorance, failure to reason something through, irrationality, stupidity, confusion or mental illness. In other words, it can be rational for different people to accept different basic moral demands.

Employing Harman's agent-centered IMR as a model of ordinary relativism allows us to explain some important facts about relativist behavior. For example, relativists often claim that, while they would consider a particular practice to be wrong for them or wrong for someone in their society, they do not want to pass judgment on those who engage in it. In these cases relativists remove their own values (and perhaps those of their surrounding cultures as well) from the sets of facts that determine whether the practices in question are morally permissible. Agent-centered IMR can plausibly explain these facts because it implies that judgments about moral rightness or wrongness should be made only in light of morally relevant facts about the agents in question.

Unfortunately, however, a thoroughly agent-centered IMR cannot underwrite explanations of all the relativist behaviors described in (1.1) through (1.8). In particular, it is unable to account for the fact that—at least some of the time—ordinary relativists are not willing to let the values, ends and attitudes of moral agents be the sole determinants of the truth values of moral judgments. Most relativists, for example, do not want to judge the actions of Hitler, hitmen or intolerant absolutists solely in light of the values or ethical standards these agents endorse. One consequence of Harman's agent-centered semantics for moral judgments, however, is that an assertion of the following sentence will be true in every context:

(4.2) Hitler ought to have ordered the murder of millions of Jews.

Regardless of what anyone else thinks about Hitler's actions, inner judgments such as (4.2) should take into account only the values, ends, standards and attitudes that Hitler adopted. The problem with (4.2) that I want to focus on is not the intrinsic implausibility of supposing that (4.2) could ever be true. Rather, the difficulty is that ordinary moral relativists believe they can correctly assert 'Hitler ought *not* to have ordered the murder of millions of Jews,' even if this judgment is only relatively true.

In subsequent work Harman extended his relativist theory to encompass 'non-inner' judgments like the following:

(4.3) *S*'s action was wrong.

(4.4) Actions of type *T* are wrong.

Although Harman never provides a detailed semantics for non-inner judgments, he does tell us that the content of such judgments is determined by agreements of intention between speakers and hearers but that the agreement of the agents whose actions are being judged is not required.¹² Thus, it seems likely that Harman understands the contents of (4.3) and (4.4) to be approximated by something like the following:

- (4.3') Given our motivational attitudes (e.g., goals, desires and intentions) and relevant nonmoral facts about *S*'s action, refraining from that action is supported by the best reasons.
- (4.4') Given our motivational attitudes (e.g., goals, desires and intentions) and relevant nonmoral facts about actions of type *T*, refraining from *T* actions is supported by the best reasons.

In neither case is there any assumption that the reasons mentioned are available to anyone other than the speaker and hearers.

This development of Harman's theory, however, only leads to deeper problems. On the one hand, Harman (1975; 1977; 1996) insists that because certain agents—e.g., Hitler, Stalin, hitmen for the mob—are beyond the motivational reach of considerations that lead us to think murder is immoral, they are not bound by the prohibition against murder that we endorse. At the same time, however, Harman (1978a, 116) maintains, "One can judge that certain outsiders are good or bad or evil from the point of view of one's morality even if they do not share that morality, just as one can judge that outsiders are friends or enemies." Harman (1975, 6–7; 1978a, 116; 1996, 59–60) makes it clear that his metaethical view allows certain agents to use the following sentences to express true normative ethical propositions:

- (5.1) Hitler (Stalin, the hitman, etc.) is evil.
- (5.2) Hitler's (Stalin's, the hitman's, etc.) actions were morally wrong.

This curious combination of views, however, means that Harman's account allows for the following "abominable conjunctions" to be true¹³:

- (5.3) Hitler's murder of millions of Jews was morally wrong, but no moral prohibition against murder applies to Hitler.
- (5.4) The hitman's murder of the bank manager was morally wrong, but murder is not morally wrong for the hitman.

According to Harman, the second conjunct of each of these claims is true because the moral considerations we take to speak against murder carry no weight with agents like Hitler or hitmen who are "beyond the pale." At the same time, however, Harman wants to permit us to make correct negative

moral judgments about their actions and characters. It is far from clear how these seemingly conflicting commitments can fit together.

The most obvious way to be a consistent agent-centered relativist is to disallow criticism of agents on the basis of values other than those of the agents themselves. Such a view, however, implies that relativists can morally criticize Hitler, Stalin and the hitman only if these unsavory agents are not being true to their own values or principles. Harman recognizes that this kind of consistency is purchased at too high a price and thus is motivated to allow for judgments such as (5.1) and (5.2). However, this move lands him in inconsistency or at least in the bad company of abominable conjunctions like (5.3) and (5.4). Because ordinary relativists sometimes want to make judgments such as (5.1) and (5.2) but never want to countenance abominable conjunctions like (5.3) and (5.4), none of the views suggested by Harman seems able to provide an adequate interpretative model for understanding ordinary moral relativism.

III

A. The key to avoiding the problems that plague agent-centered versions of IMR is to adopt an attributor-centered model of the view instead. On attributor-centered IMR, the motivational attitudes of the agents whose actions are being judged have no essential role to play in determining the contents of moral judgments. Attributors are thus free to make moral judgments about agents whose moral systems differ greatly from their own. Attributor-centered IMR also prevents assertions of abominable conjunctions from being true. Harman's difficulty with abominable conjunctions arose because he allowed the situation of the speaker—*qua* agent subject to certain moral demands—to determine the content of the first conjunct in either (5.3) or (5.4) and the situation of the agent being judged—*qua* agent subject to different moral demands—to determine the content of the second conjunct. However, because an assertion of either (5.3) or (5.4) will take place within a single context of utterance, attributor-centered IMR dictates that the affective and motivational attitudes of the speaker in that context will determine the content of both conjuncts of the assertion. Thus, if it is correct in a context for a speaker to assert that the murder of millions of Jews by Hitler was morally reprehensible, it will not be correct for the speaker in that same context to assert that no moral prohibition against murder applies to Hitler. Conversely, if the latter assertion is correct, the former assertion will not be.

Let 'extreme attributor-centered IMR' denote the view that only the values, ends and attitudes of attributors are relevant to determining the contents of moral judgments and that agent-centered considerations are relevant only when agents and attributors are identical. Like extreme agent-centered IMR (which takes moral judgments to be based solely on facts about the values and attitudes of moral agents), the extreme attributor-centered model fails to

explain the full range of moral judgments that relativists wish to make. Some of the time relativists caution against making negative moral judgments about the behavior of others who endorse different sets of ethical values, while at other times relativists make such judgments themselves. The key to accommodating this variability is to modify the attributor-centered model so that an agent's practical reasons can affect an attributor's moral judgments when those reasons are sufficiently salient in the attributor's context. Call the resulting view 'agent-sensitive, attributor-centered IMR.' Thus, if the deliberative processes and motivational attitudes of an agent are salient in a context of attribution, judgments about what is right or wrong for that agent may be constrained by those factors. If, on the other hand, the practical reasons of an agent are not salient and the attributor's focus is simply on the action itself, they may play no role in constraining moral judgments. The agent-sensitive approach allows relativists in certain contexts to make judgments about agents whose moral understandings are quite different from their own, but it also allows them in certain other contexts to say that judgments about agents with different moral understandings may be inappropriate precisely because of those differences.¹⁴

B. Dreier (1990; 1992) has articulated one of the more well known versions of attributor-centered versions of IMR.¹⁵ Unfortunately, however, he takes on theoretical commitments that prevent his version from serving as a fully adequate model of ordinary moral relativism. Dreier (1992, 27) offers the following statement of his metaethical position:

[E]ach speaker has what we may call a 'moral system,' comprising the sorts of moral attitudes and affective states which anti-realists generally say exhaust the semantic content of moral utterances. When a person with a moral system, *M*, says '*x* is morally good,' according to this view, she is asserting that *x* has a certain natural property, *P*. Which natural property? *P* is the property of being rated highly by *M*. It follows, of course, that when different speakers say '*x* is morally good' they may be asserting of *x* that it has different natural properties, each determined by the speaker's own moral system.¹⁶

The motivational attitudes of speakers determine the content of their moral judgments, regardless of whether there is any agreement in attitude between speakers and their hearers. Thus, Dreier endorses an individualistic, attributor-centered IMR. On such a view, each conversational participant has a 'semantic scoreboard' (in Lewis' 1979b sense) which reflects the set of things taken for granted by that participant at any point in the conversation and which imposes requirements on the truth conditions of her utterances. On the multiple, personal scoreboards view, a speaker's utterances are not subject to requirements imposed by the scores on anyone else's scoreboard.¹⁷ By contrast, on an intersubjective or single scoreboard semantics there exists only one (or at least one privileged) conversational record, which contains a

set of background assumptions that are shared by conversational participants and that they recognize each other as sharing. Because these shared assumptions impose the same requirements on all conversational participants, the truth conditions for a speaker's use of moral terms will not be particular to that speaker.

Dreier's individualistic semantics for moral terms leads to some difficulties. When a multiple scoreboard semantics is applied to subjects keeping roughly (but not fully) equivalent conversational scores, no serious interpretive problems immediately arise because subjects with slightly different conversational scores will often be able to interact well enough for a variety of practical purposes. If the subjects have widely divergent scores, problems may be kept to a minimum if we never imagine the subjects interacting with one another. That is, it does not seem to be a clearly fatal objection to individualistic attributor-centered IMR that it allows subjects separated by great spatial, temporal and cultural distances to fail to express contradictory propositions when one utters '*x* is wrong' and another utters '*x* is not wrong.' However, once we begin to consider subjects with dissimilar scores participating in the same conversation, individualistic or multiple scoreboard semantics has the potential to deliver highly counterintuitive results.

If, for example, Seymour and Edna have different scores on their personal scoreboards, and Seymour looks into Edna's eyes and says, '*x* is wrong' and Edna replies, '*x* is not wrong,' multiple scoreboard semantics seems to imply that Seymour and Edna will be speaking past each other instead of disagreeing. That a theory allows people to speak past each other is not especially noteworthy. A classic criticism of moral relativism, however, is that it does not allow for genuine moral disagreement in a sufficiently wide range of cases (cf. Stevenson 1963, ch. 5; Lyons 1976). The central question for an individualistic relativism, then, is whether it implies that speakers with divergent scores will always (or at least in general) talk past one another.

Perhaps despite initial appearances, there are ways an individualistic or multiple scoreboard semantics can be developed so that genuine disagreement becomes generally achievable. For instance, by appealing to the Lewisian theory of accommodation proponents of multiple scoreboard semantics can argue that conversational participants can adjust their individual scores in order to facilitate successful communication. Consider the following analogy, employed by David Lewis (1969, 24) in another context:

Suppose you and I are rowing a boat together. If we row in rhythm, the boat goes smoothly forward; otherwise the boat goes slowly and erratically, we waste effort, and we risk hitting things. We are always choosing whether to row faster or slower; it matters little to either of us at what rate we row, provided we row in rhythm. So each is constantly adjusting his rate to match the rate he expects the other to maintain.

Like rowers who coordinate their movements to achieve a common purpose, speakers can often adjust the scores on the personal scoreboards in order to accommodate their interlocutors' assertions and to smooth the progress of communicative interaction. Full accommodation, of course, does not always take place. The key, however, is that if subjects are sufficiently accommodating and their scoreboards sufficiently flexible, a multiple scoreboard semantics can make genuine moral disagreement possible between subjects with initially divergent scores in a wide range of cases.¹⁸

It is precisely the issue of scoreboard flexibility, however, that poses a problem for Dreier's account. Dreier appears to endorse an inflexible individualistic semantics that permits changes in conversational score only when there are fundamental changes in a subject's moral system.¹⁹ Such an account does not allow conversational partners to adjust their personal scores within a given conversational context to accommodate the assertions of others. This means that conversational participants with divergent scores will almost always talk past one another.²⁰ Furthermore, as (1.6) through (1.8) illustrate (and as I will argue in detail below), there is wide variation in the ethical standards that are in force in different contexts and, consequently, in the moral judgments that relativists make and take to be true. Since Dreier's account does not appear to allow speakers to accommodate such variation, it seems unfit to serve as an interpretation of ordinary moral relativism.

Single scoreboard semantics has the virtue of being consistent with the general tendency among semantic theorists to eschew individualistic frameworks in favor of intersubjective ones. However, even when there is one privileged conversational record that imposes the same requirements on all conversational participants, a significant degree of scoreboard flexibility will still be required. The single scoreboard view requires scoreboard agreement among conversational participants for any propositions to be expressed at all by context-sensitive sentences, whereas the multiple scoreboard view requires agreement in order for the context-sensitive sentences that conversational partners use to express propositions with the same content. On neither view is it desirable for interlocutors to keep different scores and for them to be unwilling or unable to accommodate the assertions and pragmatic presuppositions of others. Because there are both individualistic (i.e., multiple scoreboard) and intersubjective (i.e., single scoreboard) versions of agent-sensitive attributor-centered IMR that can provide plausible explanations of the relativistic behaviors identified in (1.1) through (1.8), in what follows I will not try to decide between the two. In the explanations that follow, however, I will often employ a single scoreboard view for the sake of simplicity.

C. Although affirming and denying moral judgments with the same content is an important component of genuine moral disagreement, it may be helpful to note that speakers can express disagreement in a variety of ways that do not involve shared contents. For example, when Seymour asserts, 'x is

wrong' and Edna asserts, '*x* is not wrong,' Seymour and Edna are clearly disagreeing in the attitudes they express toward *x*. Seymour is expressing a con-attitude, whereas Edna is expressing a pro-attitude. Harman (1996, 35) suggests that in asserting '*x* is wrong' Seymour is expressing approval of standards that prohibit *x*, while in asserting '*x* is right' Edna is expressing approval of standards that do not prohibit it. They are thus disagreeing about which values are to be adopted and which standards they take to be authoritative. Furthermore, because assenting to a judgment involves undertaking a practical commitment to act in a particular way, Seymour is expressing a commitment to act in one way, while Edna is expressing a commitment to act in a conflicting way. These commitments conflict in the sense that no one could act in accordance with both of them at the same time.²¹ Seymour and Edna also disagree in a sense that concerns the meaning of '*x* is wrong.' Because indexicals have the same linguistic meaning in every context, Seymour is assenting to a sentence whose meaning contradicts the meaning of a sentence to which Edna assents. The meanings of the sentences contradict each other in the sense that they can never have the same truth value when evaluated at the same contexts of use. There are, then, several kinds of disagreement that speakers can express that do not require shared propositional contents for their utterances. Other things being equal, however, it is clearly preferable for an interpretation of ordinary moral relativism to make disagreement concerning shared contents possible as well.

IV

MacFarlane (2003; 2005a; 2005b; 2007; forthcoming; 2008) has recently developed a semantic framework that might be used as an interpretive model for understanding ordinary moral relativism. According to the indexical forms of relativism considered above, the contents of normative ethical sentences are relative to contexts of utterance. An ethical sentence can express one proposition in one context and another proposition in a different context. However, once a context of use has determined which proposition gets expressed, no further relativization of the moral judgment is hypothesized. Thus, while the truth value of the sentence 'Lying is morally wrong' may vary across contexts of utterance, the truth value of the proposition expressed by a particular utterance of that sentence cannot. IMR, then, is a form of relativism about the *contents* of normative ethical *sentences* but not about the *truth* of normative ethical *propositions*. The non-indexical form of moral relativism derived from MacFarlane's work (hereafter 'NMR'), however, is a form of relativism about propositional truth.

According to NMR, ethical terms express the same contents in all contexts of use, but the truth values of the normative ethical propositions they are used to express can vary across different contexts of assessment. A context of assessment is a setting in which a proposition is being assessed for truth or

falsity. MacFarlane (2003, 329) notes that it is already customary in semantic theory to define the truth of propositions at points of evaluation that include parameters for worlds and times.²² Thus, a contingent proposition will be true at one possible world while false at another, and it may be true at one time but false at another. Nonindexical moral relativists suggest, in a somewhat analogous fashion, that propositional truth should be relativized to contexts of assessment that include an ethical standards parameter. On this view, the ethical standards in place at a given context of use do not contribute to determining which proposition gets expressed by an assertive utterance of 'Lying is wrong.' Rather, the ethical standards in contexts of assessment determine whether the proposition expressed is true.

Suppose, for example, that Selma assertively utters 'Lying is wrong' in a context where the ethical standards in place make lying morally impermissible. And suppose that Patty assertively utters 'Lying is not wrong' in a context in which the relevant standards do not make lying morally impermissible. If some version of IMR were true, Selma's and Patty's assertions would not involve contradictory propositions. According to NMR, however, they do. Furthermore, on NMR, in order to know the truth value of a normative ethical proposition, one needs to know what standards are in place at the context at which the proposition is being assessed. Suppose that Selma's utterance is evaluated from the perspective of her own context of use. From that standpoint, Selma's assertion is true. However, from the perspective of Patty's context of use (understood as a context of assessment), the proposition expressed by Selma's assertion is false. Thus, unlike IMR, NMR implies that the truth values of normative ethical judgments depend upon who is asking about them.²³

How well does NMR model the behavior of ordinary moral relativists? Obviously, NMR can easily accommodate the ordinary relativist's denial of absolute (i.e., non-relative) moral truths because the truth of normative ethical propositions is relative to contextually varying ethical standards. NMR can also provide the following explications of the relativist slogans that appear in (3.1) and (3.2):

- (6.1) Normative ethical propositions that are true when assessed by you (in certain contexts) may be false when assessed by me (in other contexts).
- (6.2) Normative ethical propositions that are true when assessed by members of your culture (in certain contexts) may be false when assessed by members of my culture (in other contexts).

Because no context of assessment enjoys more privilege than any other, NMR also underwrites a thoroughgoing egalitarianism with respect to normative ethical judgments.

Can the NMR model account for the allegedly non-relative truth of moral relativism? On the one hand, NMR implies that the truth value of every

proposition is relativized to contexts of assessment. On the other, NMR implies that only some propositions are assessment-sensitive—i.e., not every proposition varies in truth value as contexts of assessment vary (keeping the context of use fixed).²⁴ Thus, although every context of assessment includes parameters for ethical (and perhaps also epistemic and aesthetic) standards, these parameters only have an effect on certain kinds of propositions. Since the theses that comprise NMR are metaethical and allege only that normative ethical claims are assessment-sensitive, NMR can thus allow for its own assessment-insensitive truth.²⁵ The fact that parameters for ethical standards have no affect on the truth values of most propositions can also help to explain why moral relativists tend not to defend relativistic theses about scientific or mathematical claims. The latter are simply not assessment-sensitive.

MacFarlane (2005a; 2007) contends that his semantic framework can account for various phenomena involving disagreement that indexical relativists cannot explain. Above we considered the case of Selma, who found herself in a context in which the ethical standards in place made lying morally impermissible. Suppose that Selma's assertive utterance of 'Lying is wrong' occurred on Monday and that on Wednesday Selma found herself—for whatever reason—in a context where the relevant ethical standards do not prohibit lying. On Wednesday how should Selma assess the truth value of her prior assertion? According to IMR, she should say that the assertion was correct. IMR also dictates that it would be correct for her to assert on Wednesday both that 'Lying is wrong' is false and that this assertion does not contradict her previous one. According to NMR, however, the assertions do conflict because the proposition expressed by 'Lying is wrong' on each occasion is the same. MacFarlane claims that this feature of NMR enables it to better account for the sense in which Selma is disagreeing with her earlier self.

However, the "truth" of Selma's assertion on Monday (as assessed by her on Monday) is merely truth-relative-to-Monday's-context-of-assessment, whereas the "falsity" of her Monday assertion (as assessed on Wednesday) is falsity-relative-to-Wednesday's-context-of-assessment. Importantly, the extensions of these two notions are not complementary. So, although the proposition expressed by 'Lying is wrong' remains the same in each case, truth and falsity do not. According to NMR, then, the propositions that are expressed are the same but the notions of truth and falsity are different; whereas according to IMR the propositions that are expressed are different but the notions of truth and falsity remain the same. In order to provide a framework within which ordinary moral relativism can be understood, each theory must relativize some aspect of the semantics of moral judgments. It is not clear, however, that relativizing truth while preserving sameness of propositions is explanatorily superior to relativizing content while preserving sameness of extension of 'truth' and 'falsity'.²⁶

At one point MacFarlane (2007, 26) proposes that two parties genuinely disagree about a subjective matter if (a) there is an assessment-sensitive proposition that one party accepts as true and the other rejects as false and (b) the acceptance and the rejection cannot both be accurate when both are assessed from the same context of assessment. According to MacFarlane (2007, 17–18), a claim is subjective if its truth depends not just on how things are with respect to the things it is about, but also on how things are with some subject (or perhaps some larger group) who is not part of the subject matter. It seems that an indexical relativist could equally well claim that two parties genuinely disagree about a subjective matter if (a) there is a context-sensitive sentence that one party accepts as expressing a truth and the other rejects as expressing a falsehood and (b) the acceptance and the rejection cannot both be accurate when the expressions of acceptance and rejection are uttered in the same context of use. NMR and IMR, then, each have their preferred extension-determining contexts. Proponents of NMR claim that the ethical standards at contexts of assessment determine the extensions of ethical terms, whereas proponents of IMR claim that ethical standards at contexts of use determine their extensions.

For present purposes I do not ultimately need to decide whether IMR or NMR does a better job of explaining the phenomenon of disagreement because both models agree in the following, important respects. NMR and the best versions of IMR reject the view that agent-centered considerations determine the truth values of moral judgments, maintaining instead that the ethical standards of those who assertively utter normative ethical sentences or assess such utterances for truth and falsity determine the truth values of the propositions expressed. For reasons similar to those given above, the most defensible versions of NMR should also be agent-sensitive—i.e., an agent's practical reasons must be allowed to affect the truth values of moral judgments when those reasons are sufficiently salient in the assessor's context. In order to explain the phenomena described in (1.6) through (1.8), proponents of the NMR interpretive model should also explain how differences in the ethical standards in place at contexts of assessment differentially affect the truth values of moral judgments. MacFarlane (2005a, §2.1) acknowledges both the existence and the relevance of such variation but offers no explanation of the mechanisms underlying it. Without further supplementation, then, MacFarlane's NMR is unable to explain the data in (1.6) through (1.8). In the following section I develop a relevant alternatives account of moral judgments that provides the requisite explanation. The account, which is strongly analogous to the relevant alternatives account of knowledge offered by Lewis (1996), is compatible with both indexical and nonindexical interpretations of ordinary relativism—and doubtless other models as well—and enables each kind of model to explain a wider range of relativist behavior than it would otherwise be able to explain.

V

A. We have seen how certain versions of IMR and NMR can explain how ordinary moral relativists can think it is permissible for them to make the following claims about the truth of normative ethical judgments and their own metaethical views:

- (1.1') There are no absolute moral truths.
- (1.2') What's right for your culture may not be what's right for my culture.
- (1.3') There are absolute truths in science and mathematics.
- (1.4') Moral relativism is true for everyone at all times and at all places.
- (1.5') No set of moral values, practices or beliefs is any better than any other.

What is more difficult to explain, however, is how relativists can issue the following value judgments without contradicting fundamental tenets of their view:

- (1.6') We should treat those who engage in alternative ethical practices with tolerance.
- (1.6'') None of us has the right to pass judgment on those who engage in alternative ethical practices.
- (1.7') It is wrong for moral absolutists to display intolerance toward those who engage in alternative ethical practices.
- (1.8') While it might have been permissible (or at least excusable) for past cultures to think that their ethical practices were the only right way of doing things, it is no longer permissible for us to think this in light of the tremendous diversity in ethical practices that we know exists in the world.

Underlying the charge that relativists contradict themselves when asserting (1.6') through (1.8') is the widely shared assumption that relativists must embrace at least one of the following theses:

- (7.1) If moral rightness or wrongness is determined by an individual's values, ends and attitudes, then if an assertion of '*x* is *F*' is true in one conversational context in which an individual finds herself, then an assertion of '*x* is *F*' will be true in every context in which that individual finds herself.
- (7.2) If moral rightness or wrongness is determined by a culture's shared values, ends and attitudes, then if an assertion of '*x* is *F*' is true in one conversational context in a culture, then an assertion of '*x* is *F*' will be true in every context in that culture.

The idea is that while morally relevant conversational scores can change across cultures or individuals, they cannot change within them. I contend

that the attribution of these theses to ordinary moral relativists results in interpretations that fail to do justice to their metaethical views.

The present section offers a relevant alternatives account of moral judgments that aims to provide a charitable interpretation of how relativists can reasonably assert (1.6') through (1.8') in conjunction with (1.1') through (1.5'). This framework is intended to be supplementary to the general semantic frameworks provided by IMR and NMR. Like IMR and NMR, the relevant alternatives theory is intended not as an accurate account of the nature of moral judgment but only as an interpretive model of the thought and behavior of ordinary moral relativists.

There are two main parts to the relevant alternatives account of moral judgments. The first is a model of how the truth values of moral judgments can vary across conversational contexts when different sets of relevant alternatives are salient in those contexts. The second part consists in a set of rules that characterize many of the factors responsible for changes in the sets of alternatives that are relevant in conversational contexts. The central thesis of the relevant alternatives theory is that in order for a moral judgment of the form '*X is F*' to be true, the moral attitudes of conversational participants must render an assertion of '*Y₁ is G₁*' false, for every relevant alternative to *X*'s being *F* of the form '*Y_n's being G_n*.' Allow me to introduce the key notions here by way of example.²⁷

Suppose that Jimbo, Dolph and Kearney are talking about the fact that a burglar named 'Molloy' recently stole a valuable cubic zirconia, and suppose that Jimbo asserts, 'Stealing is wrong.' Suppose that there is sufficient agreement in the values, ends and attitudes of Jimbo and his conversational partners to make this assertion true (according to either IMR or NMR). Consider, however, the normative state of affairs of it's being morally permissible for someone in dire financial circumstances to steal food in order to feed his/her starving family. Because an unqualified assertion of 'Stealing is wrong' and an assertion of 'Stealing in order to feed one's starving family is morally permissible' cannot both be true in the same context, the normative state of affairs underlying the former assertion would be an alternative (in my sense) to the normative state of affairs underlying the latter. If the alternative of stealing's being permissible when it is done to feed one's starving family were to be made salient in Jimbo's conversational context, it would become a relevant alternative. As a relevant alternative, the motivational attitudes of Jimbo and his interlocutors would need to make an assertion of 'Stealing food in order to feed one's starving family is morally permissible' false (even if this sentence is never, in fact, asserted) in order for Jimbo's original assertion to be true. However, as long as this alternative lacks salience, it counts as an irrelevant alternative and the motivational attitudes of the conversational participants do not need to make an assertion of 'Stealing food in order to feed one's starving family is morally permissible' false. The conversational

score thus determines both which alternatives are relevant and whether or not they are ruled out in a given context.

Normative states of affairs can also fail to be relevant alternatives when they are salient in a context without satisfying the requirements for being genuine alternatives. If the conversation between Jimbo, Dolph and Kearney is an ordinary one, making salient the putative impermissibility of torturing cats for the fun of it will not make this normative state of affairs an alternative to stealing's being wrong. The reason is that under normal circumstances bringing up the wrongness of torturing cats has no power to affect the truth values of moral judgments about stealing. Salient non-alternatives will be especially common features of contexts in which judgments of goodness or permissibility are being made. If it is correct to assert '*X* is good' or '*Y* is permissible,' it will typically be correct to assert that many other things are good or permissible as well. It is only when an assertion of the goodness or permissibility of these other things conflicts with the original moral judgment that the normative states of affairs in question become alternatives to *X*'s being good or *Y*'s being permissible.

Because the relevant alternatives theory is intended to be embedded within a broader semantic framework such as IMR and NMR, it is premised on the idea that the values, ends and attitudes of conversational participants contribute to the determination of the truth values of moral judgments. Because the values and attitudes of the participants in one conversation will often differ from those in another, it will be possible for there to be two contexts in which (i) the same normative ethical sentence is asserted in each context, (ii) the same sets of alternatives are relevant, but (iii) the asserted ethical sentence expresses a true moral judgment in one context but not in the other. Consider, for example, the well-known example of the Persian king Darius entertaining the Greeks and Callatians. Knowing that the Greeks customarily burned their dead, Darius asked a group of Greeks how much money he would have to pay them in order for them to eat the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks replied that no amount of money could get them to do such a thing. Darius then asked a group of Indians, known as 'Callatians,' how much money would be required to get them to burn the bodies of their dead. The Callatians, who eat their dead ancestors, reacted with horror and asked Darius not to speak of such a thing. If we suppose (i) that the same set of alternatives concerning what to do with the bodies of one's dead relatives was relevant for both the Greeks and the Callatians while appearing before King Darius, (ii) that an assertion of 'Burning our dead fathers is permissible' would be true in a characteristically Greek context, and (iii) that an assertion of 'Burning our dead fathers is permissible' would be false in a characteristically Callatian context, we get the result that sameness of relevant alternatives does not guarantee sameness of truth value for one's moral judgments.²⁸

In summary, where '*X*' ranges over actions, events, persons and other targets of normative ethical judgments, the following represent the central theses of the relevant alternatives account of moral judgment:

- (RA1) '*X*'s being *F*' denotes a 'normative state of affairs' iff '*F*' is a normative term.
- (RA2) *Y*'s being *G* (where *Y* and *X* are not necessarily distinct) is an alternative to *X*'s being *F* iff an assertion of '*X* is *F*' and an assertion of '*Y* is *G*' cannot both be true in the same context.
- (RA3) An alternative is relevant in a context *C* iff the alternative is salient in *C*.
- (RA4) In order for an assertion of '*X* is *F*' to be true in *C*, the moral attitudes and affective states of the speakers and hearers in *C* must make an assertion of '*Y*₁ is *G*₁' false in *C*, for each relevant alternative to *X*'s being *F* of the form '*Y*_{*n*}'s being *G*_{*n*}.'
- (RA5) What counts as a relevant alternative can vary across contexts.²⁹

A normative state of affairs may or may not be an alternative to *X*'s being *F*. If it is an alternative, it may or may not be relevant. And if it is relevant, it may or may not be ruled out by the motivational attitudes of the conversational participants.³⁰

The relevant alternatives theory of moral judgment clearly entails the falsity of (7.1) and (7.2). Because different alternatives can be relevant for a speaker in different contexts, it is false that if an assertion of '*x* is *F*' is true in one conversational context in which an individual finds herself, an assertion of '*x* is *F*' will be true in every context in which that individual finds herself. The variation in truth value of moral judgments across contexts allowed by the relevant alternatives theory enables it to explain how an average moral relativist can, at one time, admonish others to refrain from making negative moral judgments about others and, at other times, make harsh moral judgments about moral absolutists who display intolerance toward others. If different sets of alternatives are salient in the two contexts, different moral judgments may well be called for.

B. Another key to explaining (1.6) through (1.8) and (1.6') through (1.8') is to supplement the general framework provided by the relevant alternatives theory with an account of the factors that cause some alternatives to be relevant in one context but not in another. Both IMR and NMR agree that the truth value of a normative ethical judgment in a context is determined by the moral attitudes and affective states of the speakers and hearers in that context. According to IMR, the relevant contexts will be contexts of use, whereas according to NMR they will be contexts of assessment. On both views, variations in motivational attitudes can result in changes that are semantic and not merely pragmatic. According to IMR, for example, differences in the moral attitudes and affective states of conversational partners can lead to

different propositions being expressed by normative ethical sentences, while according to NMR such changes can result in different truth values being assigned to the same propositions. Thus, any account of the mechanisms responsible for shifts in the relevant sets of motivational attitudes will be an account with semantic import.

Above we noted the importance of 'agent-sensitivity,' whereby an agent's practical reasons can affect an attributor's moral judgments when—but only when—those reasons are sufficiently salient in the attributor's context. Agent-sensitivity allows relativists in some contexts to make judgments about agents whose moral understandings are very different from their own and also allows them in other contexts to say that judgments about agents with different moral understandings may be inappropriate precisely because of those differences. We also noted that any theoretical model of ordinary moral relativism must recognize that the relevant set of motivational attitudes can change from context to context. Such changes can occur when conversational partners adjust the set of presuppositions they take to be relevant to determining the meanings and truth values of assertions made by their conversational partners.

On the relevant alternatives account, the most basic rules governing context change are Lewisian rules of accommodation. If, for example, a speaker asserts that a certain action is morally impermissible, then if the other conversational participants acquiesce in the presuppositions and implications of that assertion, the boundary specifying what actions are permissible in that context shrinks (if necessary) so that the speaker's assertion will be true. If a speaker asserts that a certain action is permissible, the boundary may expand.³¹ Drawing upon Stalnaker's (1972; 1973; 1974) work on presupposition, Lewis (1979b, 340) formulates the following fundamental rule of accommodation:

Rule of Accommodation for Presupposition If at time *t* something is said that requires presupposition *P* to be acceptable, and if *P* is not presupposed just before *t*, then—*ceteris paribus* and within certain limits—presupposition *P* comes into existence at *t*.³²

Believing that hearers are generally willing to be accommodating, speakers can make statements whose presuppositional requirements they know are not already satisfied by the existing conversational record. Whenever the content of these requirements is recognizable and has some chance of being accepted by their hearers, speakers believe they can rely upon hearers to accommodate their statements by adding their presuppositions to the shared conversational scoreboard. In this way, speakers can change the conversational score in a context simply by making certain assertive utterances.³³ Lewis (1979b, 339) famously suggests:

[I]t's not as easy as you might think to say something that will be unacceptable for lack of required presuppositions. Say something that requires a missing presupposition, and straightway that presupposition springs into existence, making what you said acceptable after all. (Or at least, that is what happens if your conversational partners tacitly acquiesce. . .)

Of course, accommodation does not always occur, and if it does, it does not always occur quite as easily as these comments suggest. Nevertheless, presupposition accommodation is a fundamental factor in changing conversational scores.³⁴

According to the relevant alternatives theory of moral judgment, the boundary specifying what actions are morally permissible in a context is sensitive to the particular comparison or contrast classes pragmatically presupposed by speakers' assertions. These classes can influence the relevant standards in a context by restricting the range of cases to which a target of judgment may be compared. If, for example, a salient comparison class includes only Nazi soldiers, a Nazi guard who treats Jewish prisoners with some degree of kindness may be judged somewhat positively, whereas if the comparison class includes a wider range of subjects that same guard would likely be judged more negatively. These considerations suggest the following rule:

Rule of Comparison When a comparison class is salient in a context and a target of moral judgment clearly belongs to that class, differences between the target and other members of the class tend to become more salient but differences between the target and members of the complement of the comparison class tend to become less salient.

Comparison classes can perform a converse function when the target action clearly does not belong to the relevant class. For example, if one compares a white lie to acts of genocide, the lie will likely appear fairly innocent. However, if one compares the lie to some standard of moral perfection, it will appear to fall short. Thus, we have:

Rule of Contrast When a comparison class is salient in a context and a target of moral judgment clearly does not belong to that class, differences between the target and members of the comparison class tend to become more salient and differences between the target and other members of the most salient class to which it belongs tend to become less salient.

On the relevant alternatives theory, contrastive foci can also play a role in determining which comparison or contrast class is relevant for a given moral judgment (cf. Dretske 1972; 1981). For example, the focus of an assertion of 'It was morally wrong for Mr. Burns to accept money from the lobbyist' might be on the fact that it was wrong for *Mr. Burns* (as opposed to someone

else) to accept money from the lobbyist. Or it might be on the fact that it was wrong for Mr. Burns to accept *money* (as opposed to some other type of gift) from the lobbyist. Or it might be that it was wrong for Mr. Burns to accept money from *that lobbyist*, where it might not have been wrong for him to accept money from someone else.

Just as skeptical hypotheses about the external world are designed to neutralize the evidence we have for believing various empirical propositions, relativists often take relevant practical alternatives to neutralize the moral considerations that underwrite certain moral judgments. Regarding the skeptic, Lewis (1979b, 355) writes:

The commonsensical epistemologist says: “I *know* the cat is in the carton—there he is before my eyes—I just *can’t* be wrong about that!” The sceptic replies: “You might be the victim of a deceiving demon.” Thereby he brings into consideration possibilities hitherto ignored, else what he says would be false. The boundary shifts outward so that what he says is true. Once the boundary is shifted, the commonsensical epistemologist must concede defeat. And yet he was not in any way wrong when he laid claim to infallible knowledge. What he said was true with respect to the score as it then was.

In a similar fashion, suppose that Nelson makes a negative moral judgment about Waylon’s sexual lifestyle. And suppose that one of Nelson’s interlocutors, Milhouse, responds by describing cultures in which Waylon’s lifestyle is embraced and treated as normal. Suppose that Milhouse also argues that if Nelson lived in one of these cultures, he would have very different views about Waylon’s lifestyle. By making salient certain alternatives and suggesting that Nelson’s moral considerations do nothing to rule out their moral permissibility, Milhouse—at least according to the relevant alternatives account—may succeed in changing the conversational score so that Nelson’s moral judgment no longer counts as true.³⁵

The relevant alternatives account also provides a ready explanation of (1.8)—i.e., of how relativists can reasonably think that anthropological evidence concerning ethical diversity supports the claims of relativism. Ethnographic studies make salient practical alternatives than are not ordinarily salient in contexts of moral judgment. When these alternatives become salient, relativists (and perhaps even some of their conversational participants who do not self-identify as relativists) have a tendency to make different judgments than they are inclined to make when such alternatives are not salient. It is also significant that the ethnographic reports of moral diversity cited by early twentieth-century defenders of moral relativism—e.g., Benedict (1934; 1946) and Sumner (1906)—concerned actual groups of people. Facts about real people who abandon their elderly parents to death by starvation or throw their infants to wild animals have far more context-changing power than any philosopher’s fanciful thought experiments. In other words:

Rule of Actuality If an alternative is part of the entrenched practices of an actual group of people, it will more easily become salient than alternatives that are merely hypothetical.

The fact that some of these people may have sensible reasons for engaging in such practices also seems to have an impact on how they are treated in contexts of moral debate:

Rule of Reasonableness The degree to which subjects who embrace an alternative are portrayed as being reasonable tends to affect the ease with which an alternative becomes salient and how strong a subject's moral considerations must be to rule it out.

If a practical alternative is described as being a traditional rite of passage or an identity-defining practice, relativists (and, in my experience, other subjects who do not self-identify as relativists as well) are less likely to think negative moral judgments based about those practices are warranted:

Rule of Centrality The degree to which an alternative is portrayed as being integral to the fabric of a society or to an individual's identity will affect the ease with which the alternative becomes salient and how strong a subject's moral considerations must be to rule it out.

Students in my introductory courses sometimes confess to being gay, Catholic, on Prozac, or to have had an abortion. In addition to making for some rather uncomfortable social situations, these confessions also have the effect of softening the stances of hard-liners in the classroom. Relativists can claim these behaviors are governed by the following rule:

Rule of Future Interaction The more likely it is that an attributor will have a face-to-face encounter with someone engaging in an alternative practice, the easier it will be for the alternative to become salient and the stronger a subject's moral considerations will have to be to rule it out.

It is one thing to pass judgment on faceless, nameless people. It is another thing to pass judgment on someone directly in front of you. The Rule of Future Interactions is thus a rule of social proximity, with greater proximity strengthening the context-changing and standards-raising power of practical alternatives.³⁶

When the question of the moral permissibility of some action is raised in a university classroom, invariably there are some students who reply that they don't think it would be right for us to pass laws that would prevent people from performing these actions or to undertake political or military action to keep people from doing so on the other side of the world. Philosophy professors are often dismayed at the way students seemingly conflate

the question of whether we should judge an action to be right or wrong with the question of what, if anything, should be done about it.³⁷ While there is certainly a distinction to be made here, the relevant alternatives account can explain how these professors fail to give students sufficient credit for appreciating the important connection between endorsing a moral judgment and being willing to act on that judgment. On the relevant alternatives account of moral judgment, students who are disinclined to make certain kinds of moral judgments are often sensitive to the following factors:

Rule of Stakes The more that appears to be at stake in making a moral judgment, the higher the standards will tend to be for the correctness of that judgment.

Rule of Intrusion The more likely it is that a negative moral judgment will lead to some kind of intrusion into the lives of others, the higher the standards will tend to be for the correctness of that judgment.

Rule of Publicity The more public or formal a context of moral judgment is, the higher the standards will tend to be for the correctness of judgments made within that context.

The Rules of Stakes, Intrusion and Publicity show how it can be reasonable for subjects to be reluctant to make negative moral judgments in public discourses when they have practical reasons for wanting to avoid certain courses of action—particularly those involving intervention or force.

Peter Unger (1995) argues that ordinary moral standards for what counts as morally acceptable behavior can be replaced with uncommonly high standards for acceptable behavior, with the help of a few thought experiments and some plausible formulations of ethical principles. In the light of the higher standards, our behavior will be judged quite harshly, even if, in light of ordinary, undemanding standards, our behavior will be deemed morally acceptable. The strategies Unger (1995, 9–11) describes for effectively raising moral standards in a context can be reformulated as the following rules:

Rule of Attention If several behaviorally demanding but intuitively appealing ethical principles are brought before one's attention, the standards for morally acceptable behavior will tend to be raised.

Rule of Life and Death Appealing to ethically demanding standards that concern the saving of people's lives tends to make those standards more salient than ordinary moral standards which do not directly concern the saving of lives.

Rule of Gradualism Attempts to raise the moral standards in a context will generally encounter less resistance if the attempts proceed by a series of small steps rather than large jumps.

Rule of Future Focus Attempts to raise the moral standards in a context will generally encounter less resistance if the attempts focus on possible, future behavior rather than actual, past behavior.

Rule of Self-Application By willingly applying ethically demanding standards to one's own behavior, one will tend to raise the standards for morally acceptable behavior in that context.

Rule of Specificity By including highly specific information about what certain ethically demanding courses of action would involve, one blocks certain kinds of excuses that could be raised to the following of those courses of action and it becomes more difficult for one's interlocutors to claim they do not need to follow them.

Rule of Pathos Making vivid certain kinds of horrible scenarios—e.g., the impending suffering and death of innocent little children—tends to raise the standards for morally acceptable behavior in a context.

Unger (1995, 14) argues that contexts determine not only what the relevant moral standards are but also what sort of behavior counts as close enough to complete conformity to those standards.

According to the relevant alternatives account, a moral judgment will be correct only when the ethical standards in place rule out all relevant alternatives. This means that the more alternatives there are on the table, the more difficult it can be to make correct moral judgments. When too many alternatives are relevant, the norms, values, attitudes and commitments that underwrite many ordinary moral judgments may be unable to retain their force. This situation is analogous to one in which the extended discussion of skeptical hypotheses makes almost any knowledge claim about the external world seem unwarranted. Lewis (1996, 550) writes:

Maybe epistemology is the culprit. Maybe this extraordinary pastime robs us of our knowledge. Maybe we do know a lot in daily life; but maybe when we look hard at our knowledge, it goes away. But only when we look at it harder than the sane ever do in daily life; only when we let our paranoid fantasies rip. That is when we are forced to admit that there always are uneliminated possibilities of error, so that we have fallible knowledge or none.

Metaethical reflection may have a similar tendency to deprive us of the ability to make certain kinds of moral judgment in certain contexts.³⁸ Call a context in which the range of moral judgments that subjects can correctly make has significantly shrunk a 'neutral context.'

The notion of a neutral context can help to explain why relativists feel entitled to make cross-cultural judgments in some contexts but not in others. In other words, it can explain (1.7). When relativistic metaethical theses are salient in a context, the perceived fact that the truth of a judgment made in one's "home" (or default) context does not transfer to all other possible contexts will also be salient. It is easy to see how the salience of this fact might blunt the force of one's "home" values, particularly if the qualitative distance between oneself and others is also made salient.³⁹ Relativists, then,

can admit there is a kernel of truth in the objection that relativistic metaethical views undermine the legitimacy of many normative ethical judgments they wish to make (cf. Postow 1979). Relativists often cannot at the same time attend to certain features of their metaethical positions and correctly assert certain kinds of moral judgments. However, relativists can also claim that the objection errs in assuming that relativists can never make normative ethical judgments.⁴⁰ They can do so as long as they are not in contexts that prevent the standards, norms and values that underwrite such judgments from being in force.⁴¹

The aforementioned rules do not exhaustively characterize the factors responsible for changes in the sets of alternatives that are relevant in conversational contexts. However, in conjunction with the general framework provided by relevant alternatives account of moral judgment, they can be seen to model—down to a fine-grained level of detail—the ways in which the linguistic behavior of ordinary relativists is sensitive to subtle differences in the normative states of affairs that are salient in a conversational context. Without the relevant alternatives theory, extant versions of IMR and NMR will be unable to explain many aspects of relativist behavior, such as the phenomena described in (1.6) through (1.8). However, combining the relevant alternatives account with an agent-sensitive, attributor-centered IMR or an agent-sensitive, assessor-centered NMR results in a powerful explanatory model for understanding ordinary relativism.

VI

There are no doubt many other formulations of relativism and related notions (e.g., expressivism) that could be used to construct alternative interpretive models of ordinary moral relativism but that I have not had space to consider here (cf., e.g., Barker 2000; Copp 2001; Richard 2004; Finlay 2004; 2005; 2006; 2008; Brogaard 2008; MacFarlane 2009).⁴² And, indeed, since I do not claim to have shown in any comprehensive fashion what model of the semantic and pragmatic features of moral judgments best captures the views of ordinary moral relativists, some of these theories might well be superior to any suitably supplemented version of IMR or NMR. However, I hope that my discussion has shed important light on the general constraints that any adequate interpretation of ordinary relativism must satisfy. Neither a completely agent-centered nor an entirely attributor- or assessor-centered perspective will do. Nor will any account that cannot explain the ways in which relativists' moral judgments are sensitive to changes in the changing salience of certain possibilities across contexts. I also hope that the relevant alternatives account of moral judgment reveals how much explanatory work can be done within both the IMR and NMR frameworks and that this will positively contribute to the debate about relativism in general and moral relativism in particular.⁴³

Notes

¹ Charges of self-defeat have been leveled by Singer (1961, 332), Williams (1972, 20ff.), Lyons (1976), Postow (1979), Carson & Moser (2001) and in a qualified form by Pojman (1999, ch. 2), among others.

² Epistemic contextualists count as indexical epistemic relativists (cf. section I below).

³ (MR1) is intended to generalize beyond sentences and their utterances to the realm of unspoken thoughts. For ease of exposition, however, I will focus only upon sentences and their utterances. I also think that (MR1) can be extended to cover the ethically normative components of partially descriptive terms like 'murder.' However, extending the present analysis to such "thick concepts" introduces complexities that I do not have space to address here.

⁴ In Kaplan's (1989) terminology, ethical terms are 'true demonstratives' rather than 'pure indexicals' because their references are determined in part by facts about speakers and their contexts that go beyond the most basic features of contexts, such as the time, place and identity of the speaker. The references of pure indexicals (e.g., 'I,' 'today'), by contrast, are determined more or less automatically, given ordinary linguistic conventions and public facts about the context of utterance. No recourse to the actions or mental states of speakers is needed to determine their referents.

⁵ IMR counts as a form of moral cognitivism because it takes normative ethical judgments to have truth conditions (realistically understood) and thus to be apt for objective truth or falsity. Proponents of IMR can argue that, just as the semantic variability of utterances of 'It is warm and sunny here' does not undermine the objectivity of this claim, the variability of 'Lying for personal gain is wrong' and 'Adult children have a moral duty to care for their aging parents' does not rob them of theirs. In one sense of 'realism,' IMR also counts as a form of moral realism because it seems to imply there are moral facts in light of which moral judgments are true or false. However, since moral facts are not determined by mind-independent facts, IMR may fail to count as a form of realism in another sense of the term. If there weren't particular sets of ethical standards that are endorsed by particular groups of people, there would be no truthmakers for ethical judgments. Dreier (1992, 33) also claims that if one takes the existence of one correct moral scheme to be central to moral realism, IMR will count as antirealist. Cf. Sayre-McCord (1991; 2006) and Copp (2001) for further discussion of these issues.

⁶ None of the interpretive models to be considered assumes that ordinary relativists explicitly represent any of the complex details about the semantics of moral judgments that they posit. Rather, the models seek to reconstruct the tacit knowledge of ordinary relativists in much the same way that a linguist's reconstruction of the grammar of a natural language attempts to model the linguistic competence of average speakers without supposing that the latter possess explicit representations of the model.

⁷ Whether IMR undermines the motivation for making negative judgments about the behavior of others is something I address in more detail in section V below.

⁸ Wright (2001), Kölbel (2004), Brogaard (2008) and MacFarlane (unpublished) also interpret Harman as an indexical moral relativist.

⁹ In order to fit Harman's account properly into the mold of indexical relativism, we should say that (4.1) has the same content but not the same character as (4.1'). Roughly, meaning or character is primarily a property of types of expressions (rather than tokens or utterances) and is fixed by linguistic conventions, whereas content is a property of individual utterances and is tied to truth conditions and cognitive significance. Cf. Braun (2001) and Perry (1997) for more on the distinction between content and linguistic meaning as it pertains to indexicals.

¹⁰ It is not completely clear what sort of communicative act Harman thinks would be involved in the expression of a speaker's endorsement. Cf. Barker (2000), Copp (2001) and Finlay (2004) for some recent theoretical models of how endorsement may be expressed.

¹¹ The term 'existence internalism' was coined by Darwall (1983, 54).

¹² Harman (1975; 1977; 1996) allows that there are limiting cases in which speakers can make contentful moral judgments without there being any agreement in motivational attitudes between speakers and hearers because the relevant “group” contains only one person.

¹³ The term is due to DeRose (1995).

¹⁴ Despite of his official commitment to the universal applicability of existence internalism, Harman (1975, 18; 1996, 59–60, 63) occasionally comes close to suggesting such a salience-based treatment of an agent’s practical reasons.

¹⁵ Cf. also the views of Barker (2000) and Finlay (2004; 2005; 2006; 2008). Copp (2001) defends a view he calls ‘realist-expressivism,’ which bears a great deal of similarity to IMR. Indeed, on certain ways of developing the views, they might well be equivalent.

¹⁶ Although Dreier thinks that utterances of ‘*x* is good’ have the same content as ‘*x* is highly evaluated by standards of system *M*,’ he claims that in making moral judgments subjects are doing something more like expressing beliefs by asserting them than talking directly about those beliefs. Moral standards get expressed in moral judgments, but talking about them is not the point. Dreier (1992, 27) notes that this version of IMR is “simple, and too crude,” but the simplicity and crudeness he has in mind have nothing to do with the problems I raise for the account.

¹⁷ The terms ‘single scoreboard semantics’ and ‘multiple scoreboard semantics’ are due to DeRose (2004). The notion of a ‘conversational scoreboard’ comes from Lewis’s (1979b) account of scorekeeping in a language game. Although Lewis originally appeared to take accommodation to be a pragmatic phenomenon that did not affect the truth conditions of utterances, in later work (1980) he clearly took it to be a semantic phenomenon, and it is this later picture that has been taken up by various relativists.

¹⁸ Cf. Finlay (2006) for another account of how moral discourse involves presupposition accommodation.

¹⁹ If Dreier intends to allow for semantic flexibility, he never makes it clear that he intends to do so. Cf. Finlay (2005, 7–8) for analogous criticisms of the indexicalist theories of Dreier and Barker (2000).

²⁰ At one point Dreier (1990, 6) claims that moral judgments depend upon the most salient moral systems in contexts of use, but a social or intersubjective notion of salience plays no role in his theory.

²¹ This point is due to Scanlon (1995, 222).

²² Kaplan’s (1989) semantic theory, for example, includes a time parameter among the circumstances of evaluation for propositions.

²³ Like IMR, NMR also comes in both individualistic and intersubjective varieties, but again I will not try to decide between the two variations.

²⁴ Cf. MacFarlane (2005b, 326).

²⁵ Alternatively, nonindexical relativists can follow MacFarlane (2005b, 338, n. 19) in taking themselves to be describing a relativistic language in a metalanguage that is devoid of assessment-sensitivity.

²⁶ MacFarlane acknowledges that the existence of genuine disagreement between two subjects concerning the truth value of an assertive utterance does not always require sameness of the proposition expressed. MacFarlane (2007, 24) allows that genuine disagreement can occur between a subject who accepts a certain proposition and another who rejects a different but suitably related proposition. The example MacFarlane uses involves Mary accepting at noon the tensed proposition that Socrates is sitting and Peter rejecting at midnight the tensed proposition that Socrates was sitting twelve hours ago. Relevantly similar examples could be multiplied. Cf. also the considerations offered in section III.C.

²⁷ Thanks to Stephen Finlay for offering many helpful suggestions that greatly improved the discussion in this section.

²⁸ Thanks to Stephen Finlay for bringing this example to my attention for purposes of the present discussion.

²⁹ Although (RA1) through (RA5) are focused primarily on singular moral judgments, the relevant alternatives approach can be generalized to cover categorical moral judgments as well. For example, most of the time ordinary relativists—and indeed ordinary subjects in general—are willing to treat assertions of ‘Lying is wrong’ as straightforwardly true, and their natural inclination is to treat the implicit quantifier as universal. However, when alternatives are presented in which lying seems morally permissible—e.g., when confronted by Nazi soldiers asking whether you are hiding Jews in your cellar—subjects often no longer take ‘Lying is wrong’ to be true without qualification. According to the relevant alternatives account, when subjects initially agree to the unqualified truth of the judgment, practical alternatives involving Nazi soldiers are not relevant. Instead, more common alternatives involving lying for personal gain, etc. are relevant. In light of these alternatives, it is wrong to lie—full stop. In light of different sets of alternatives, however, it may not be wrong. Alternative explanations of the variability of categorical moral judgments must claim either that the implicit quantifiers are generalized quantifiers like “most” or that subjects are speaking loosely, but strictly speaking falsely, when they agree to their truth. By contrast, the relevant alternatives account can easily preserve the commonsense intuition that the quantifiers in categorical judgments are universal and that subjects can sometimes speak truly when uttering them in an unqualified form.

³⁰ Cf. Finlay (2009) for a different, but related, relevant alternatives account of normativity and the meaning of ‘ought.’

³¹ Cf. Lewis (1979a) for further details and complications concerning the kinematics of permissibility assertions.

³² Stalnaker (1974, 200) offers the following initial characterization of a pragmatic presupposition: “A proposition *P* is a pragmatic presupposition of a speaker in a given context just in case the speaker assumes or believes that *P*, assumes or believes that his addressee assumes or believes that *P*, and assumes or believes that his addressee recognizes that he is making these assumptions, or has these beliefs.” He modifies this definition to allow presuppositions that involve subjects merely acting as if they take certain things for granted. Stalnaker (1974, 202) also claims, “Presupposing is thus not a mental attitude like believing, but is rather a linguistic disposition—a disposition to behave in one’s use of language as if one had certain beliefs, or were making certain assumptions.”

³³ MacFarlane (unpublished, §7; 2005a, §5.1) argues that the Lewisian theory of accommodation can be incorporated into his relativist framework; in fact, he contends that Lewis’ theory presupposes the kind of assessment-sensitivity he defends.

³⁴ What happens when two conversational participants are executing maneuvers that have a tendency to push the conversational score in different directions and neither sufficiently accommodates the other? Will either of them be speaking the truth? Lewis (1979b; 1996) appears to think that when one of the subjects is a skeptic and the other is a Moorean, the skeptic wins. Many scholars believe there is something about the skeptic’s challenge that make his scoreboard-changing maneuvers more powerful than the Moorean’s. Because many of the relativist’s strategies parallel those of the skeptic, the former might be taken to have the power to trump an absolutist’s maneuvers. DeRose (2004, 15) suggests that if a belief counts as knowledge according to both of the “personally indicated standards” of two disagreeing subjects, it is correct in that context to call it ‘knowledge.’ If it does not count as knowledge on either set of standards, it is not knowledge. However, if it counts as knowledge on one but not on the other, DeRose suggests that ‘*S* knows that *p*’ will be neither true nor false in that context. The deeper the disagreement between them, the larger the gap region will be. Similar considerations could apply to subjects who disagree about moral matters. Cf. DeRose (2004) for valuable, detailed discussion of this issue.

³⁵ Cf. Brogaard (2003) for another recent comparison between the issues surrounding moral relativism and those concerning epistemological skepticism.

³⁶ Because familiarity is roughly equivalent to a kind of continuing or commonplace salience, it is somewhat trivial that the judgments of ordinary relativists are sensitive to the

Rule of Familiarity: The more familiar a practical alternative is, the more easily it will become and remain salient.

³⁷ Cf., e.g., Rachels (1999, 33).

³⁸ Theoretical discussions of ethical issues also seem to have the power to give rise to neutral contexts because such discussions often call for some degree of impartiality or neutrality on the part of conversational participants. Scanlon (1995, 232), for example, writes:

The reasons that a person has to follow the traditions that are part of his or her way of life depend on the particular meaning that those actions and that history have for that person. They need not derive this importance from any beliefs about the value of 'tradition' in general. In fact, once one reaches that level of abstraction reasons of the kind in question largely lose their force. (When people start talking in general terms about 'the value of traditions' they are usually on the edge of ceasing to care about their own.)

Thus, there may be something about the abstract and penetrating nature of theoretical reflection itself that tends to bring about neutral contexts.

³⁹ Just as it seems to be easier to raise ethical standards than it is to lower them as long as one remains in the same conversation, it may also be easier to move from a non-neutral context to a neutral one than it is to go in the other direction. Lewis (1979b, 352), for example, writes, "I take it that the rule of accommodation can go both ways. But for some reason raising of standards goes more smoothly than lowering." Unger (1995, 15) suggests that explicitly discussing the semantics of moral terms or talking about the rules or strategies one has used for raising standards has the effect of lowering standards in a context. Otherwise, the gradual passage of time seems to be the most common way that standards become lowered. One thing that seems capable of bringing one immediately out of a neutral context is an urgent circumstance that seems to call for immediate action. If, for example, one is having a leisurely metaethical discussion and one's interlocutor begins to have a heart attack or suffers a gunshot wound, whatever theoretical distance may have been generated between oneself and one's convictions will rapidly be closed. I have doubts about the old saying that there are no atheists in foxholes, but foxholes certainly seem to be no place for serious metaethical reflection.

⁴⁰ Some critics (e.g., Williams 1972, 20–21) erroneously contend that relativists cannot assert 'One should respect the privacy of others' or 'Murder is wrong' because such assertions would have to make use of a nonrelative sense of 'wrong.' Clearly, however, moral relativists can make these assertions—'should' and 'wrong' will simply express different contents in different contexts. Pojman (1999, 34) asserts, "If, as seems to be the case, valid criticism supposes an objective or impartial standard, then relativists cannot morally criticize anyone outside their own culture." Since relativists challenge the assumption that valid criticism presupposes a non-relativist standard, Pojman's objection is question-begging in the present context.

⁴¹ The fact that ordinary relativists balk at the idea that there might be contexts in which 'It is wrong to torture infants for the fun of it' or 'Serial murder and serial rape are morally abhorrent' are false suggests they tacitly accept some limits on the range of relevant practical alternatives. Critics of relativism contend that relativists contradict themselves when they refuse to countenance the possible truth (i.e., the truth in some context) of these examples. However, there are various ways that relativists can account for the existence of limits to the degree to which they can accommodate differences in the conversational scores of their interlocutors and the degree to which they can distance themselves from their deepest moral convictions in neutral contexts. If, for example, what is asserted or presupposed runs contrary to deeply held values, goals, desires, commitments or intentions, subjects may be unable to accommodate the assertion. Strongly held convictions will also be more likely to retain their salience in neutral contexts. Williams (1975) proposes an account of when the norms and practices of one group count as real options for members of another group. This account suggests an interesting constraint on what kinds of practical alternatives may become relevant. According to Williams (1975, 222), a practice is a real option for a group of subjects if it possible for those subjects to begin engaging

in the practice while at the same time “retain[ing] their hold on reality” and making rational sense of their transition to the new practice. Williams (1975, 224) claims, “In this sense many [moral systems] which have been held are not real options now. The life of a Greek Bronze Age chief, or a mediaeval Samurai, and the outlooks that go with those, are not real options for us: there is no way of living them.” Options that are not real may be incapable of becoming relevant alternatives and thus may have no tendency to change the conversational score—even when they are salient in a context of judgment. Although Williams (1975, 223) claims it is an objective matter whether an option is real or not, relativists might want to argue that the context-changing power of an option is a function of the degree to which it is plausible to think the option is real. Other conceptions of real options are of course compatible with the general framework adopted here. (The notion of a real option might even help to explain why some are more attracted to moral relativism than others. Individuals for whom more alternative practices are real options might be more inclined to accept moral relativism, whereas individuals for whom few alternatives are real options might be drawn to absolutism.)

⁴² The relevant alternatives account of moral judgment is consistent with the nonindexical contextualism of MacFarlane (2009) and Brogaard (2008) and many other interpretive models as well.

⁴³ I would like to thank Stephen Finlay, audience members at the Spring 2008 Eastern Regional Meeting of the Society of Christian Philosophers, and participants in my Spring 2008 graduate epistemology seminar for helpful comments on previous versions of this article.

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