Moral Relativism and Moral Nihilism

James Dreier

The Oxford Handbook of Ethical Theory
Edited by David Copp

Print Publication Date: Jun 2007 Subject: Philosophy, Moral Philosophy
Online Publication Date: Sep 2009 DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195325911.003.0010

Abstract and Keywords

According to this article, moral “properties,” such as rightness, are *relations* to the moral standards of relevant person(s). For example, there may be rightness-relative-to-Alice as distinct from rightness-relative-to-Bill, and an action that is right-relative-to-Alice might not be right-relative-to-Bill. Here is an analogy. Weight is a *relation* between an object's mass and the local gravitational field. This is why an object has a different weight on the moon than it has on the earth. The relevant gravitational field must be specified or assumed before one can fully understand an assertion to the effect that something has a given weight. Similarly, a system of moral rules must be specified or assumed in order to understand what proposition is expressed by an assertion to the effect that something is right or wrong. This article proposes a “speaker relativism,” according to which the moral system of the speaker is the relevant one.

Keywords: rightness, moral rules, gravitational field, speaker relativism, moral system

1. What Are Nihilism and Relativism?

Moral nihilism and moral relativism are metaethical theories, theories of the nature of morality. Nihilism is the view that there are no moral facts. It says that nothing is right or wrong, or morally good or bad. Nihilists believe that moral language is infected by a massive false presupposition, much as atheists understand religious talk. While nihilism is sometimes associated with the ‘anything goes’ outlook that Nietzsche seems to be propounding in some of his writings, nihilists nowadays typically deny that their doctrine is a moral position. John Mackie, who called his own nihilism an “error theory,” was careful to insist that his was not a theory of what to do.

Relativism is the view that moral statements are true or false only relative to some standard or other, that things are right or wrong relative to Catholic morality, say, and different things are right or wrong relative to Confucian morality, but nothing is right or wrong *simpliciter*. Just as Einstein's theory of relativity says that various physical attributes like mass, length, and duration have definite quantitative measures only relative to a frame of

reference, so moral relativism says that determinate answers to questions about what we morally ought to do can only be had once a frame is specified, either explicitly or tacitly. There are a (p. 241) number of versions of relativism, because there are various candidates for sources of frames.

Relativism and nihilism share ontology. Both doctrines are skeptical about freestanding moral facts, of some principles of action having a special authority that picks them out of the hodgepodge of conventions. Instead, relativists and nihilists see just us people with our moral feelings and social rules, valuing some things in a special way, perhaps, and then projecting these values into the world. Relativism can then be seen as a tactical retreat made by common sense in the face of the nihilist threat. Persuaded that absolute morality is a pipe dream, a relativist suggests that we might still salvage much of moral practice, moral thought, and moral talk by relativizing. Relative morality may be less than common sense could hope for, but it is better than nihilism's nothing. For their part, nihilists don't reject the relativized judgments of relativist theory, but (like many absolutists) they don't believe that the relativized practice, thought, and talk are *moral* practice, thought, and talk.

It might be thought that relativists and nihilists do differ on a crucial point of ontology. Relativists do believe that there are such things as moral properties, only they are relative properties (as Einsteinians believe that there is such a thing as duration, only it is duration relative to an inertial frame), while nihilists do not. But this is a misleading way to think of the situation. Nihilists do agree that there is such a thing as an act's being wrong-relative-to-utilitarianism, or good-relative-to-Aristotelian-virtue-theory. They count these relative properties among the constituents of the universe. They differ from relativists in doubting that these relative properties are ‘the moral properties’. This difference is a difference over language, though, not a difference over ontology.

Nihilism especially is a radical thesis, violently contrary to common sense; relativism is less radical but still revisionary of common sense. At least, in one way nihilism is more radical: it says that every positive moral judgment (to the effect that something or other is wrong, or right, or morally good or bad) is false, whereas relativists think that most common sense moral judgments are likely to be true. There is another sense, to be explained in section 7, in which relativism is more radical, because it is more revisionary.[1] This sense is a semantic sense. In any case, each metaethical theory is at odds with common-sense moral thinking. But their common skepticism can also seem to be forced on us by serious, hard-nosed reflection. Moral absolutist philosophers often portray relativism as an exotic skeptical doctrine delivered by some special philosophical theory, and they see (and portray) themselves as defenders of common sense against the bizarre, much as traditional epistemologists think of themselves as defending our ordinary claims to knowledge against radical skeptical challenges. I doubt, though, that relativism and nihilism about morality really do have a relation to common sense that is similar to the one that epistemological skepticism has. Few people, even (p. 242) sophisticated and reflective people, ever take seriously the idea that nobody knows anything at all, or anything about the external world. Many nonphilosophers do take seriously the idea that there is no absolute

morality, however, and not always or only because they have been influenced by moral philosophers.

Why does the rejection of Absolutism seem so plausible to many people?

2. Why Reject Absolutism?

It is easy to see how something could be good *relative to a standard*, but difficult to see how something could be good, not merely according to this or that standard, but simply. The idea of something's being good, not according to some standard but just by possessing a property of goodness, does not even make much sense. If some standard were special, were the *right* one, then something could be good absolutely by being good relative to that standard. In some contexts, there does seem to be a standard that is built in conceptually, and in these contexts we are comfortable with attributions of goodness. Even here, though, we are not apt to resist the suggestion that good and bad are relative to the standard in question.

We can start with some straightforward attributions of goodness and badness, attributions that have no problematic feel. Once we make clear and explicit what is going on in these straightforward cases, we can better understand what does seem problematic in the problematic cases.

We know that a good clock is one that (among other things) tells the time accurately. That clocks that lose a minute each hour are not good clocks is not controversial. Suppose someone personally preferred analog clocks whose hands do not move at all. He might have reasons, or he might just prefer stopped clocks on a whim. If he expressed his preference by saying that stopped clocks are good, though, he would simply be mistaken. Similarly for a computer operating system: even if someone prefers an operating system that crashes frequently, she cannot correctly say that stability in an operating system is bad. In general, the standards for artifacts seem to be built in to the concepts we use to pick out the artifactual kinds. We might put it this way: to understand the concept of a clock is already to know what makes a clock a good one. And someone whose standards for can openers are very different from the ordinary one has thereby lost contact with the concept of a can opener.

Next, consider what makes a good astronomer, or a good shepherd. These questions could be a bit controversial at the edges. For example, it may be controversial among astronomers whether doing lots of observation is more impor (p. 243) tant than working out mathematical theories. Still, there cannot be controversy about whether an astronomer who knows physics is better than one who doesn't, and it is not a possible view that shepherds are better when they feed their sheep to wolves. Like artifact concepts, many concepts of jobs or roles come with standards built into them.

What about kinds that are not defined by their function? We do not expect anyone to ask which in a pile of stones is the best stone, or which element in the periodic table is the

best element. Which is the best artificial fiber? Well, some fibers are better for making sleeping bags, others are better for making socks. When no standard comes automatically with a concept, we have no idea what to think about which such things are good and better until we bring in a standard. In cases when a number of different standards could be in play, we are happy to disambiguate and answer relative to one standard, then relative to another, but it is hard even to understand a question about which standard is the right one. This maple would make a better spot for a tree house, and that cherry is better for producing food, and the spruce will make a better Christmas tree, but which is really the better tree?

The question about good trees is distinct from a question about what is good for a tree. We do seem to have some conception, perhaps inchoate and vague, of what counts as good *for* an organism.[2]

So much for good (and bad); what about right and wrong? Wittgenstein pointed out that we understand the question of which road is the right road once a destination is specified (though really we would probably also need to know whether the traveler wanted a scenic route or a fast one), but only relative to the destination (1965, pp. 3–12). Questions of right action show up in games, and in law. The right move in chess is relative to the rules of chess, including the specified goal of checkmating the opponent. A legal wrong is relative to a system of laws: something that is legally wrong in Pittsburgh may not be legally wrong in Calcutta, and vice versa. Rules forbid and permit, and right and wrong need a specification of rules before they get a determinate content.

How, then, can things be morally good and bad, and morally right and wrong? If the concept of morality came with a definite set of rules and standards, moral goodness would be no more controversial than clock goodness, and moral wrongness would seem no more mysterious than the wrong move in chess. Doesn't the concept of morality come with at least some built–in rules? A restriction against harming innocent people, a requirement that we tell the truth, a low evaluation of refusing to help those in need? Some have thought that the concepts of the virtues can fill the role filled by functions in attributions of goodness to artifacts or professions. But although we may have more or less firm views about what is morally permissible and which traits of character are virtuous, these views are not matters of linguistic or conceptual competence in matters of ethics as they are in (p. 244) discussions of artifacts and jobs and games. Someone who thinks that rooks are permitted to move diagonally simply doesn't know chess. Someone who thinks that killing the innocent is permissible when it increases gross domestic product may be morally defective, but his deficit is not semantic.

Good and bad are relative to standards; right and wrong are relative to rules. When standards or rules are built into a concept, questions of bad and wrong can be answered ‘absolutely’ because they can be answered relative to the standards that everyone accepts by virtue of their conceptual or semantic competence. In questions of morality, no such standards seem to be available. If no set of rules is built into the concept of morality, where might we find some? One possibility is that there are many sets of moral rules, and

that we can decide which things are wrong only relative to one or another of them, much as we can decide which fibers are better only relative to a purpose. If this possibility is the most plausible, then relativism will also be a plausible account of moral rightness and goodness. Another possibility is that although there is no particular set of rules whose acceptance is constitutive of competence with the vocabulary or concepts of morality, there are nevertheless considerations that will or would force all rational beings in the end to accept the same rules. The situation might be something like the situation of mathematicians debating Goldbach's conjecture. Nobody thinks a number theorist who doubts the conjecture is thereby shown to be incompetent in the language of arithmetic, even supposing that there is an undiscovered proof of the conjecture. If there is such a proof, it is unobvious (in the extreme!), deriving its conclusion from axioms of number theory in an enormously complicated way. Suppose, as some rationalists believe, there is some sort of derivation of a certain system of moral rules from the basic precepts of rationality. Morality might then be said to be ‘relative’ to that system of rules, but still in some sense absolute. For taxonomic purposes, we can count this kind of rationalist view as relativist, since it does say that all moral facts are relative to a system. Admittedly, it is what you might call a ‘degenerate’ version, as if there turned out to be a single *correct* physical frame of reference (the ether, say) to which all judgments of duration, length, speed were to be relativized in the ideal physical account of the world. Some people would not call this possibility ‘relativism’. I will not fight over the word.

These considerations are not decisive. They are merely suggestive. I think they are responsible for the intuitive plausibility of relativism. Some people think that moral judgments are intrinsically, conceptually, by their very nature nonrelative. They think that if relative judgments of right and wrong are all that are available, then rather than showing morality to be relative, this will show that there is no moral rightness.

(p. 245) 3. Arguments for Nihilism

The most influential and best known arguments for moral nihilism are from John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. As Mackie presented them, his argument from queerness and argument from relativity are independent arguments to the same conclusion, namely, that there are no objective moral values. As I understand them, the two arguments are not really independent, and, furthermore, they are both closely related to Gilbert Harman's argument for nihilism. I will set out the three arguments, and then explain how they are related.

3.1. Mackie's Queerness Argument

Mackie wrote:

> If there were objective values, then they would be entities of qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. Correspondingly, if we were aware of them, it would have to be by some special faculty of moral perception or intuition, utterly different from our ordinary ways of know-

> ing anything else. … This queerness does not consist simply in the fact that ethical statements are ‘unverifiable’. (1977, pp. 38–39)

What *is* so ‘queer’ about objective values? And does this queerness cast doubt on their existence? Mackie seems to have had two queer features in mind. First, although it is not merely being ‘unverifiable’ that he thought queer, Mackie did think that the apparently complete separation of objective value from ordinary perception and observation was very suspicious. The ‘faculty of moral perception’ he thought a ‘very lame answer’ to the question of how we might find out about objective right and wrong. Gilbert Harman's observation argument follows up this complaint. Second, Mackie argued that the role that objective values would have to play in motivation is completely unlike the role that ordinary properties play.

> Plato's Forms give a dramatic picture of what objective values would have to be. The Form of the Good is such that knowledge of it provides the knower with both a direction and an overriding motive; something's being good both tells the person who knows this to pursue it and makes him pursue it. … Similarly, if there were objective principles of right and wrong, any wrong (possible) course of action would have not-to-be-doneness somehow built into it. (1977, pp. 38–39)

I will develop Mackie's line of thought in the subsection hereafter entitled “Mackie's Internalist Argument.”

(p. 246) 3.2. Mackie's Argument from Relativity

Mackie starts the relativity argument by pointing out that moral codes have varied from society to society and time to time. “Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality,” he says, “a fact of anthropology which entails neither first order nor second order views.” Still, he argues, “radical differences between first order moral judgments make it difficult to treat those judgments as apprehensions of objective truths” (1977, p. 36).

Mackie's argument seems to be misnamed. An argument *from* relativity ought to proceed from a relativistic premise. Mackie's does not so proceed, nor could it, since it would be question-begging to assume that moral values are relative when arguing against the existence of absolute moral values. The starting point of Mackie's argument is not the relativity of moral value, in any case, but rather the *diversity* of moral values, across cultures and throughout history. Here, by “moral values” I mean not the moral facts of the matter (if there are any) but the values *held* or *subscribed to* by one or another group of people. So the diversity premise is empirical, and though no detailed evidence for it is presented, it does seem to be fairly secure. But how, precisely, does the argument go? On the face of it, the argument is as follows.

> Moral values have differed from time to time and place to place.
>
> Therefore, there are no objective moral facts.

Now, this argument is obviously missing a premise. What is the missing premise? To make the argument valid, the missing premise must be (or entail) the following.

> If moral values differ from time to time and place to place, then there are no objective moral facts.

What reason is there to believe this conditional premise? Is it just obvious? It is certainly not obvious to everyone. To see why it looks problematic, compare this argument:

> Theories of the nature of stars have differed from time to time and place to place.
>
> If theories of the nature of stars differ from time to time and place to place, then there are no objective stellar facts.
>
> Therefore, there are no objective stellar facts.

(p. 247)

It is possible that there really are no objective facts about stars, but this argument is unlikely to convince anyone that there aren't. The first premise is true, but the second, conditional premise is very dubious. The mere existence of difference of opinion does not, obviously, show that there is no truth of the matter.[3]

Both of Mackie's arguments get a little help from an argument for nihilism from Gilbert Harman, to which I now turn.

3.3. Harman's Observation Argument

Harman's observation argument begins from the fact that

> [o]bservation plays a role in science that it does not seem to play in ethics. The difference is that you need to make assumptions about certain physical facts to explain the occurrence of the observations that support a scientific theory, but you do not seem to need to make assumptions about any moral facts to explain the occurrence of … so-called moral observations (Harman, 1977, p. 6)

Suppose you see some boys pouring gasoline on a cat and setting the cat on fire. Your 'moral observation' is that these boys are very bad (or at least, that they are doing something very bad). Now suppose that a physicist sees a vapor trail in a cloud chamber. Her observation: "There goes a proton." Now in each case, the 'observation' depends on some background theory that the observer holds. Your moral observation depends on your holding certain moral views, otherwise you would not see what the boys were doing as 'bad'. But similarly, the physicist would not see the vapor trail as a proton if she did not hold a certain background theory of atomic particles. Observations are *theory laden*. Yet there is an important difference. When we try to explain the physicist's observation, we have no choice but to mention the proton itself. At first, we might just cite the existence of a vapor trail plus the physicist's background beliefs. But what explains the vapor trail? The presence of a proton. Perhaps not; perhaps there is an alternative explanation. If there is a

better explanation available, then the observation does not, in fact, support the conclusion that there is a proton present. If *no* observations require that we suppose that protons are present for their explanation, then we do not have any real reason to believe in protons. And that, according to Harman, is our actual situation with respect to moral properties. The moral badness of the boys' actions does not enter into our best explanation of the ‘moral observation’. Rather, we fully explain the observations by referring to the plain, nonmoral features of the boys and the cat, and also the moral feelings and upbringing of the observer (you). “The fact that you made a particular moral observation when you did does not seem to be evidence about moral facts, only evidence about you and your moral sensibility” (Harman, 1977, p. 6).

(p. 248) 3.4. The Best Explanation

Harman's argument is explicitly about explanation. The best explanation of the phenomena of moral experience, he claims, involves no mention of moral facts or properties. This claim has been disputed (Sturgeon, 1985). But if it is true that moral properties and facts do not explain anything, that is a compelling reason to doubt their existence. It's not so much that there could not be facts and properties that don't explain anything. Maybe there can be. The point is rather that we have no good reason to believe in purported properties and facts if it turns out they play no role in our explanations (of observations, Harman says). Could there be some subatomic particles, *eudaemons*, that, unlike photons, electrons, neutrinos, have no effect on observed phenomena? Nothing rules out the possibility. But we have no reason to believe in eudaemons. If for some reason someone did believe in eudaemons, we would expect to raise doubts in his mind if we could show him that nothing they do ever explains anything we observe.

Both of Mackie's arguments are also about explanation, although not explicitly. First, Mackie could not have overlooked the glaring problem with the diversity argument as I presented it. Could he have intended some other version? Here is some evidence:

> [T]he argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values. (Mackie, 1977, p. 37)

Mackie's point is that the *best explanation* for the diversity of moral views is a nihilist explanation. Compare the unconvincing argument about stellar facts. The diversity of astronomical theories seems to be best explained by defects in the observational capacity or theoretic understanding of ancient astronomers; without telescopes and radio observations, they could not hope to understand the nature of stars. When we try to explain why early observers thought that the stars were tiny pinpricks of light, our best explanation involves the facts as we know them about the stars themselves (their distance, their actual luminosity, complicated facts of relativity physics). If Mackie is right, then our best explanation of why other cultures at other times and places disagreed with our own moral

views involves our different customs, psychology, and interests, but never the moral facts themselves. So the argument from relativity, which might better be called the argument from diversity, is really an argument to the best explanation.

Again, why exactly is the queerness of moral properties supposed to impugn their status? What exactly is so queer about them? In part, the answer is that moral properties do not seem to enter into causal relations with the world we (p. 249) know. The epistemology of moral facts is queer because we are not in causal contact with the moral realm; our basic moral values do not depend counterfactually on the moral properties themselves. In the ordinary course of discovering that a rock is radioactive, we test by means of a device that registers the presence of radioactivity. Our belief that the rock is radioactive then depends counterfactually on the radioactivity itself: if the rock *were not radioactive*, the Geiger counter *would not have beeped*, and then we *would not have believed* that the rock was radioactive. But our moral values do not seem to depend counterfactually on the presence of moral properties.

The point is not merely that we have available some other explanation for moral judgment that does not mention any moral properties explicitly. After all, when you judge that I am in a good mood, there is presumably some explanation for your judgment that does not explicitly mention my mood. That explanation might instead mention the expression on my face, and my expression might in turn be explained by the state of my brain. Where are the moods? Well, presumably, my mood just is (a function of) the state of my brain. There are no special mood properties of me, above and beyond the states of my brain. It is rather that some families of brain states hang together in 'mood' categories. Similar points might be made about biological properties (say, being alive) and even chemical properties (whose role in explanation might be replaced by the properties recognized by physics). Might moral properties *reduce* to physical ones, in the way that chemical or biological or mood properties reduce to some more basic properties? Some philosophers have thought so.[4] If they do, then the nihilistic explanation argument is rendered harmless. I explain in section 6 why it is doubtful that moral properties could reduce to any descriptive ones.

The metaphysics of moral properties is queer because they are causally isolated. Of course, there may be other sorts of explanation than causal explanation. Mackie himself recognizes that mathematics may seem as queer as ethics, since numbers, like wrongness, are not to be found in time and space. But mathematical facts enter into scientific explanations all the time, so our reasons for believing in mathematical facts are reasonably secure.[5]

As I mentioned, there is another queer feature of moral properties, what Mackie calls their intrinsic action-guidingness or "to-be-doneness." I will explain later how that feature figures in arguments for relativism and nihilism. For now, I will sum up the arguments about explanation.

We value things, some of them in a specially moral way, and we commonly and unreflectively think and say that laws are wrong, that people are no good, that rights are being violated. However, our best explanation of the facts of our valuing, and of the courses of events surrounding bad laws and men, is itself couched in nonmoral terms: the history of our community and our own upbringing explains why we value what we value, and the ordinary, nonmoral features of (p. 250) laws and men explains their causes and effects. If moral properties do not explain anything, then we have no reason to believe in them, and we do have reason to doubt their existence.

3.5. Relative Moral Facts Explain

Notice, though, that the explanation arguments apply to *absolute* moral facts and properties. A relativist need not fear them. First I shall show that this is true, and then explain why. When the Patriots beat the Steelers in fall 2002, that was because the Patriots were a better team. Their being a better team does explain the victory. Longtime chess champion Gary Kasparov is enjoying the moment because he just made the right move; its being the right move explains Gary's mood. Evaluative and normative facts can comfortably fit into naturalistic explanations when they are relative to definite standards. The standards for football teams have as their whole point to approve of teams with stable tendencies to win games, so one team's being better than another *according to those standards* quite naturally explains a victory.[6] Moves of chess are right or wrong relative to the rules of chess (including the objective), with the right ones being those that give their maker the best chance of winning. According to moral relativists, moral rightness and wrongness and moral goodness and badness are also relative to standards; they are, therefore, fit to play the same sort of role in explanations that football team goodness and chess move rightness can play.

What explains this difference? Why are relativized evaluative facts fit to explain phenomena while absolute ones are not? We might put it this way. The fact that A is better than B *according to standard S* is itself a natural fact. There is nothing more to the fact that the Patriots are a better football team than the Steelers (according to the standard for evaluating football teams—but this relativization literally goes without saying) than the fact that their members have physical and mental abilities that give them the stable disposition to win a game against the Steelers under ordinary circumstances. There is nothing more to the fact that Kasparov's move was the right one than the fact that it increases his chance of winning. Once relativized, the evaluative and normative claims *reduce* to natural or empirical ones, in the sense that there are natural or empirical facts that, once they are mentioned, complete the explanation; mentioning the relativized evaluative facts doesn't add anything. Reduction here is a metaphysical relation. A chair is nothing more than the clump of molecules that compose it, and the fact that Kasparov's move was the right one (according to chess standards) is nothing more than the fact that among the available legal moves, it was the one that maximized his chance of winning. Likewise, the fact that giving lots of money to famine relief is *good-according-to-utilitarianism* can ex-

plain why some people (p. 251) do it, and perhaps why someone who does it is likely to perform other acts that reduce suffering.

Could absolute moral facts also reduce to natural facts? Rightness and wrongness of chess moves, after all, are, in a sense, absolute: they are relative to *the correct* rules and objective of chess. Maybe there is such a thing as absolute moral wrongness, namely, wrongness according to *the correct* moral rules. For instance, if utilitarianism is the correct moral theory, then moral rightness just is the tendency to increase the net sum of happiness over unhappiness. That tendency can certainly figure in perfectly good explanations of natural facts. But it is very doubtful that moral facts could reduce to natural ones in this way, at least if they are absolute moral facts. The obstacle to reduction is the essential practical aspect of moral judgment, the second queer feature that Mackie discusses. I will postpone my discussion of this feature to section 6.

4. Relativism

Here is one version of moral relativism.[7]

Evaluative and normative expressions need a standard to give them a determinate content. The essence of relativism is that moral expressions are no different from other evaluative and normative expressions. They are incomplete; they need a standard to complete them. The semantic value of a moral expression, then, is a function that takes standards as its argument and returns determinate contents as its values. Compare the semantic values of *indexicals*, expressions like ‘me’, ‘yesterday’, and ‘here’. According to the standard semantics for these terms, their meaning is a function from *contexts* (of utterance, inscription, or thought) to *contents* (Kaplan, 1989). For example, the semantic value of ‘here’ is the function that takes any context to the place in that context, so that ‘here’ refers directly to the place in which it is uttered or written, ‘yesterday’ refers directly to the day before the context of utterance or thought, and ‘me’ refers directly to the speaker. The point of including ‘directly’ in each case is that once fixed by the context, the terms carry their reference no matter how they are embedded into a complex sentence. Thus, if I say, “Mom told you to come here,” I do not report that Mom told you to come to *her* location but to mine (the location of the context of utterance, not the embedded context), and if you tell me on April 1, “Last Christmas I promised you that I would send you the paper yesterday,” you aren't reminding me that you'd promised to send me the paper on Christmas Eve but rather on March 31, the day before the day of *utterance*.

To be a bit vague, we might say that the predicate ‘morally good’ always picks (p. 252) out some property, but different properties in different contexts. To be a little more specific, we could say that it always picks out the property of meeting the relevant standards in the context, to a high degree. And similarly for ‘wrong’: it picks out the property of violating a rule of the relevant system of rules in the context, and likewise for other moral predicates. But this still leaves things rather vague. What *are* the relevant standards and systems? What makes some standard the relevant one in a context? To a first approximation, a relativist can say that the relevant standards are those of the speaker (or writer, or

thinker; but hereafter I will restrict attention to spoken sentences). Presumably, when you say that abortion is morally wrong, you are adverting to *your* moral system of rules. As a first approximation of an explication of relativism, this specification is not too bad, but it does seem a little too simplistic. When I report Peter Singer as believing that eating meat is morally wrong, I am not saying that he believes eating meat violates a rule of *my* moral system. A more plausible version of relativism will say that a number of factors go into determining which system or standard is relevant; the speaker's own moral outlook is one, but other factors, especially considerations of conversational salience, may override. Notice that even those expressions that are uncontroversially indexical are more complicated than the simplest semantic model makes them out to be. When I remind you on Halloween, “I've been saying all month that you shouldn't put off till tomorrow what you can do today,” I am not reminding you that all October I've been telling you not to put off until All Saints' Day what you can do on Halloween. When a mountain climber points to his map and worries, “I thought we were here but apparently we aren't,” he isn't announcing that he is not after all in his location. So even if it turns out that moral terms cannot plausibly get their content always from the moral system and standards of the speaker, even if it turns out that it is very difficult to specify clearly in advance exactly which system is going to be the relevant one, that needn't be an objection to the theory. It is a feature of indexicals in natural language that the specification of their semantic value is messy.

This indexical account of moral judgment has several advantages. I will mention two. First, it explains the connection between, say, calling something wrong and the natural features of something that make it wrong. Calling something wrong does attribute a property to it, but the property it attributes isn't a special *sui generis* property; rather, it is just some natural property, the ‘wrong-making’ property. Similarly, saying that something occurred yesterday is, obviously, saying that it occurred on some actual day, even though ‘yesterday’ is not a name of a special day, apart from Halloween, October 27, January 3, and the other days of the year. It is no mystery that for any pair of events you name, *if* they both occurred on the same day of the year, then *either* they both occurred yesterday *or* neither of them did. That this conditional should be true is a consequence of the proper understanding of indexicals. Similarly, the fact that any two actions (p. 253) that are alike in their natural properties must either both be wrong or both not be wrong is a consequence of the indexical understanding of moral judgment.

Second, and related, the indexical account of moral judgment explains why moral judgment does not reduce to nonmoral judgment. Famously, we cannot deduce indexical judgments from nonindexical ones. For example, unless we already know which day is *today* (more naturally, unless we know *what day it is*, an indexical kind of knowledge), we cannot deduce from the date of an event whether it occurred yesterday. Similarly, the moral properties of an event do not follow analytically from its natural properties. The moral judgment is always another judgment, above and beyond naturalistic description. The indexical account says that this gap is, in fact, the gap between nonindexical and indexical statements. So the ‘autonomy of the moral’, as it is sometimes called, is an instance of the well–understood autonomy of the indexical.

There are other versions of relativism. The indexical version is just an example.

5. Should We Be against Relativism?

In many circles, including some professional philosophical ones, moral relativ-ism is something of a bogeyman. That a certain position "leads to moral relativism" is supposed to be a serious objection to it.[8] In American politics, moral relativism is decried as a symptom and cause of cultural decay. Is moral relativism something to fear, something to stand against?

In the first place, awful social consequences of the spread of moral relativism, if there are any, in no way count against the truth of the theory. Suppose we decided that belief in moral relativism leads to a meaningless life with no hope. That would obviously not show that the theory is false. Compare a common view about determinism: some people (incompatibilists, philosophers call them) think that if laws of nature determine the behavior of human beings, then nobody is ever responsible for anything he does. It would probably be a bad thing if most people believed that they are not responsible for anything they ever do. But that is not an argument against incompatibilism or determinism.

Second, it has been claimed that moral relativists are not consistent. For instance, Bernard Williams attributes the following argument to (unnamed) anthropologists:

> 'Right' means (can only be coherently understood as meaning) 'right for a given society'.
>
> **(p. 254)**
>
> 'Right for a given society' is to be understood in a functionalist sense.
>
> Therefore, it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.

"This is *relativism*," says Williams, "the anthropologists' heresy, possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy" (1972, p. 20). The absurdity, it turns out, is that the conclusion is inconsistent with the premises, since "wrong" is intended there absolutely, and not in the relative sense allowed by the premises; so Williams says, at any rate, and since the anthropologist is a character in Williams's discussion rather than a real scholar, Williams's characterization is definitive.[9] In any case, the point is that having denied the meaningfulness of absolute attributions of rightness and wrongness, the heretical anthropologists find themselves with moral beliefs that can only be expressed in absolutist language. Similarly, philosophy professors sometimes report that their students (and colleagues) hold both relativistic metaethical views and also absolutist particular moral views (for instance, Pojman, 1989, esp. p. 25).

These are anecdotes, and Williams's is not even an anecdote about a real person. But suppose that it does turn out that many moral relativists end up making absolutist judgments. What would that show? Is it an argument against relativism? It looks like an *ad*

hominem argument. That adherents of a theory contradict themselves may count against *them*, but it doesn't per se count against the theory. Imagine that many seventeenth–century physicists accepted Newton's mechanics but frequently found themselves describing the world around them, in everyday conversation, with Aristotelian concepts. Their backsliding wouldn't count against Newtonian mechanics, so why should backsliding by anthropologist or undergraduate relativists count against relativism?

The real objection might be a little different. Suppose the reason anthropologist and undergraduate relativists backslide is that relativism has implications that we do not or even cannot accept. Then the objection could be cast as a *modus tollens* argument: if moral relativism is true, then so are these consequences; but the consequences are false, so moral relativism is false. If moral relativism has unbelievable or highly counterintuitive *logical* consequences, then we have an important philosophical objection. What might these consequences be?

Bernard Williams thought it a fallacy to infer a principle of tolerance from relativistic premises, and the form of argument he presented certainly is fallacious.[10] Yet moral relativism is commonly associated with tolerance, indeed with an extreme, paralyzing tolerance. Relativism is thought to destroy grounds for moral criticism, leaving us with only the thought “Well, they have their way and we have ours.” What can we make of this thought?

On the face of it, Williams was right to think of this inference as a fallacy, indeed a non sequitur. Consider this argument:

(p. 255)

> Moral rightness and wrongness are always relative to some standard.
>
> Therefore, we cannot (or ought not) judge other cultures (or people).

Plainly the conclusion does not follow, and the argument looks so bad that we ought to try to find a better one in the neighborhood. We might try adjusting the conclusion, or else add a plausible premise, or both. Now the conclusion might be adjusted by adding “according to our own standards.” If some other culture does not subscribe to a morality that affords individuals protections, in the form of rights, against the will of the majority, relativism might imply that we cannot or ought not to evaluate their laws and other state actions according to how well they protect those rights.[11] Why should *they* abide by *our* standards, if there is no sense in which ours are correct? Compare systems of etiquette. In some cultures it is a compliment to the chef to slurp your soup at the table. In ours, it is rude. But if someone from our culture considered diners in the other rude because they slurped their soup, that would display a misunderstanding. Once we understand what etiquette is, we realize that behavior at a given time and place is rude only when it violates the etiquette standards for (accepted in) that time and place. Why should *they* follow *our* standards?

Even if morality is relative, it is not relative in the way that etiquette is relative. If it is relative, it is so more in the way that judgments of beauty and taste are relative. A thirteenth–century Cherokee might find Debra Winger very ugly. By her own culture's standards, she is beautiful, but that needn't sway the Cherokee. He judges beauty from his own perspective, by his own standards. Of course! I personally find Vegemite disgusting. Australians eat a lot of it, produce a lot of it, and apparently find its taste pleasing. Nevertheless, I stand by my own judgment. Vegemite tastes terrible. Australians eat something with a terrible taste, and apparently they like it. If pressed, I will say that it tastes good to them, and bad to me, and that's all there is to it; there is no further question of whose taste is correct. A moral relativist must say the same about the protection of individual rights: it is morally important according to our moral outlook, unimportant according to others, and no further question of which standards are correct. Still, when we actually make moral judgments, we can quite properly make them from our own perspective. Riding roughshod over the interests of the minority is wrong, even over there, and Vegemite is still foul-tasting stuff.

The analogy with taste and aesthetics might suggest a way of improving the tolerance argument. When I despise Vegemite and you adore it, we can each shrug off the difference: to each his own. We can each recognize that our different tastes mean that we should eat different things. You go ahead and eat Vegemite, and I'll eat artichokes. Though our tastes differ, we can each see that the other is acting sensibly and appropriately. The to-each-his-own judgment we end up with doesn't clash with the first–order judgment of taste. Things are different with morals. Our (p. 256) moral standards count it wrong to disenfranchise a political minority for the sake of social stability, while the majoritarians' standards count it right. If morals are relative in the way that taste is, shouldn't we conclude that it is sensible and appropriate for us to protect minority voting rights over here and for them to eliminate them over there? If so, the tolerance argument has been fixed. The missing plausible premise would be something like: when evaluations are relative, let each follow her own.

There is a mistake in this line of reasoning, however. The relativity of morals and taste may be the same, but their subject matter is different. Morality is about what to do. Taste is not. Taste can, of course, be relevant to the question of what to do, but it is not directly relevant in the way that morality is. To judge that something is morally wrong is to judge that people ought not to do it. To judge that something tastes bad is not to judge that people ought not to eat it. When we are trying to make up our minds about what is morally right and wrong, we are trying to decide what people ought to do. We have no choice but to use some standards or other. And, naturally enough, we use our own. They are our standards! We accept them. We find them compelling. So when, upon reflection, we judge that it is morally wrong for the majoritarians to disenfranchise their political minority, we are already committed to the judgment that they ought not to do it. In this way, moral judgment is unlike the judgment that artichokes taste good, which does not commit me to the judgment that you ought to eat them.

When we make political judgments, especially judgments about other people's political systems, there are special complications that I ignored in my spare and simplistic example (of the majoritarians). For one thing, external judgments to the effect that another system is unjust always hint at the possibility or even advisability of intervention. Intervention, by force or economic or political pressure, might be ill advised, even to prevent injustice, for any number of reasons. It may have unintended but foreseeable consequences that we ought to avoid; it may set a precedent we ought not to set; or, more interesting, it may itself violate the rights of the unjust society (and its members). To take an intranational example, the Augusta country club has no women members, allegedly because of a traditional but unwritten policy. I think this policy is morally wrong. I also think Augusta should be permitted to follow it. The members and the board of the club have a right, I say, to engage in their repugnant behavior. That right is against the state; it means that the club shouldn't suffer legal sanctions as a result of their practice. International examples are trickier, partly because the association of citizens in a nation is not voluntary as the association of members in a club is. Still, we might think that although the oppressive practices of the majoritarians are unjust, their nation has a right of autonomy that forbids us from interfering. But that's not because of moral relativism. The idea of national autonomy is as much at home in absolutist conceptions of the nature of morality.

In sum, moral relativism as I have been understanding it does not seem to (p. 257) have any particularly unpalatable normative moral consequences. Indeed, it seems unlikely that moral relativism itself has normative moral consequences, any more than the metaaesthetic view that beauty is in the eye of the beholder has any particular implications about what is beautiful, or the view that taste is relative to the taster has any particular implications about what tastes good.[12]

6. The Internalist Argument to Nihilism or Relativism

The ‘queerness’ of moral facts, mentioned in Mackie's argument, has to do with what Mackie calls their intrinsic action-guidingness, their ‘to-be-doneness’, or what Stevenson (1937, pp. 14–31) called their ‘magnetism’. Roughly put, the idea is that moral goodness seems to have a queer kind of force built in, so that the mere apprehension of it by rational agents compels them toward it. Put in a more sober, less extravagant-sounding way, the internalist thesis is that it is part of our concept of a moral judgment that a person does not count as sincerely accepting it unless she recognizes it as having *some* reason-giving force. Motivation, or at least reason-giving force, is *internal* to moral judgment, according to Internalism (Darwall, 1997, pp. 305–312; Falk, 1948, pp. 111–138; Smith, 1994).

It is important to the plausibility of internalism that we not overstate it. It is commonplace, almost trite to observe that people, even good people, can recognize the right thing to do and fail to do it. But here is a thought experiment to give support to the weaker in-

ternalism that says that *some* motivating reason must be internal to genuine, sincere moral judgment.

Imagine that we were to uncover a long-lost culture of isolated speakers of English. The dialect they speak is almost like ours, but they do not use any of our moral language. Linguistic anthropologists tell us that these speakers have a handful of extra lexical items, and they want some advice about how to interpret them. The items can be separated into two classes. One class is centered on the terms ‘Gog’ and ‘Bab’, and it seems to match in extension our moral terms. The words don't find much use in the community, though. People aren't sure what the point of them is, although they have no trouble agreeing that, for instance, lying is Bab and giving special attention to friends and family is Gog. The other class of words center around the terms ‘Noog’ and ‘Nad’. These words have the extension of the utilitarian notions of good and bad: things are Noog insofar as they contribute impartially to the general happiness, and Nad insofar as they detract therefrom. This second class of words figures centrally in the lives of the (p. 258) long-lost culture. People are motivated, in a dutiful, serious way, to do and promote what they judge to be Noog, and they are ashamed when they do things they judge to be Nad. You and I, I will suppose, are not utilitarians. Our common-sense moral view is much less tidy, but it departs from utilitarianism in significant ways. What shall we tell the anthropologists? It is undeniable, I think, that there is at least a very strong reason to say that the second class of words are the moral words. Surely these people are utilitarians; surely they have utilitarian beliefs. There may be some intuition pulling us in the other direction, too: couldn't we say that the long-lost culture still does know and correctly judge right and wrong, but that they no longer care about it? We are torn, I think, because the extension of our moral judgments is semantically important, and not just its role in our practical deliberation. The point of the thought experiment is that the functional role of moral judgment is also tied to it conceptually, and not just as an interesting coincidence to be explained by empirical psychology (as, for example, the concept of being high above the ground might be tied psychologically to fear). Deciding what is morally right is, in part, deciding what to do, or what to favor.

We can rebuild Mackie's argument (for nihilism) so that its internalist premise is explicit.

> Mackie's Internalist Argument
>
> Moral goodness would have to be such that sincere judgment about *it* is intrinsically motivational.
>
> But, there is no property such that sincere judgment about it is intrinsically motivational.
>
> So, there is no such thing as moral goodness.

The first premise is the internalist one. The story of the long-lost culture supports something like this premise. Ethical internalists sometimes insist on a very strong version of the principle. They say that on each occasion of use, each competent speaker who says

that something is morally good must thereby be motivated to pursue, or bring about, or aim at, the thing she is calling good. The story I told does not support such a strong claim, nor, frankly, does the very strong claim seem to be true. What does seem (to me) to be true, and what the story does support, is that *on the whole*, or *for the most part*, it must turn out that *most* people who judge something good *generally* are thereby motivated. If that weaker claim were not true, then there would be no temptation in our story to translate 'Noog' as 'good.' It would seem obvious that 'Gog' meant 'good,' even though the members of the culture *by and large* and *for the most part* used the concept of 'Noog' in their practical deliberations in the same way that we use 'good'. Mackie seems to have subscribed to the stronger version of internalism. But the argument seems to work if we substitute the weaker. Making the substi (p. 259) tution completely explicit will make the ensuing discussion very cumbersome, so I will stick with the terse version, and hope it will not be misleading.

The second premise expresses a Humean conception of motivation, and it is not uncontroversial. How do we know that there aren't any properties the mere cognition of which carries with it some motivational, reason-giving force? After all, *moral* properties do seem to be like that! Why should this count against them? I cannot hope to settle this question with any finality here. But let us be clear, at least, about what is at stake. There certainly may be some properties that do, as a matter of fact, always give you and me some reason to act when we become aware of them. There may be lots of things that we simply find attractive. And there may even be some things, some properties, that all human beings find attractive, and even more, there may be deep psychological and evolutionary explanations for why we do. The Humean premise of Mackie's internalist argument need not deny any of this. The connection between properties and motivational reasons that the second premise denies is a very strong, logical connection. For the premise to be false, there would have to be a property whose apprehension would move any rational being as such. The apprehension itself would have already to be a motivational state. It is this internal connection that Humeans deny. They say: Representation of the world as being this way or that is one thing, and motivation is another. For a representation of the way the world is to make a difference in our deciding what to do, it must first be joined with some sort of desire, or valuing, or aim of ours. What seems so 'queer' about moral judgment is that it purports to be a representation of how things are, while at the same time embodying an aim. But these are two quite different functions of a state of mind, and although they may, of course, be joined in a complex state (as, for instance, when I believe and hope at once that I remembered to turn off the stove before I left home this morning), they will always be conceptually separable.

So much for (the internalist version of) Mackie's argument. Internalism can instead be employed in an argument for relativism.

Internalist Argument for Relativism

Moral goodness is such that sincere judgment about *it* intrinsically motivates.

But, which properties motivate depends on the psychology of the judging agent.

> So, which properties are the moral ones depends on the psychology of the agent.

The mystery of intrinsic motivation is eliminated, the relativist points out, if only we will understand that each person judges morally according to *her own* moral (p. 260) standards. And having moral standards is, at least in part, caring about things in a certain way. Thus, the long-lost culture of our thought experiment judges Nood and Nad according to the standards of utilitarianism, which its members accept; that is just to say that they care, in a serious and moral sort of way, about the happiness and suffering of all people. We make sense of their judgment by supposing that human happiness and suffering is what it is *about.* By contrast, people who judge from a more Kantian, or a more rights-based, moral perspective can be best understood as making judgments *about* what maxims could be endorsed as universal laws of nature, or about how to treat people as ends in themselves rather than solely as means to the ends of others.

Each of the two arguments takes internalism seriously. And, as I said, nihilism and relativism share an ontology. We might say that if internalism is true, then morality is either relative or unreal.[13] Suppose we are convinced by this argument to a disjunctive conclusion. How might we choose between the disjuncts?

7. Nihilism or Relativism?

Nihilism is a radical thesis, more radical, as I said, than relativism. On the other hand, the nihilist position that I have examined has a claim to be truer to common sense moral concepts than relativism is. Nihilism recognizes that common-sense moral concepts are absolutist concepts: our moral thoughts are ‘as of’ a single, independently existing moral order. When we judge that the actions of a terrorist cell are *wrong*, we are not, it seems, judging that those actions are wrong-relative-to-our-standards. If terrorists have different moral standards from ours, then they have incorrect, abhorrent moral standards! So much the nihilist grants ordinary moral thinking. But he then regrets to inform ordinary thought that it is based on a mistake. There is nothing in the world that answers to the ordinary language of morals.

This point, that nihilism may be truer to common-sense moral concepts than relativism, can be made sharper by means of the *disagreement argument.* [14] Suppose we have a report of the statements of a horrible terrorist, among which is this:

> (A) The intentional slaughter of millions of innocent noncombatants is morally justified as a means to promote my ends.

We may suppose that according to the horrible terrorist's own moral outlook, the slaughter of millions *is* in fact justified. Leaders of the allied antiterrorist forces issue a joint statement, including the following.

(p. 261)

(B) The intentional slaughter of millions of innocent noncombatants cannot be morally justified under any circumstances.

Here are two related, fairly obvious semantic and conceptual points about (A) and (B). First, (B) *disagrees* with (A); by issuing (B), the allied leaders are expressing their disagreement with (A). Second, (B) might be prefaced, without significant change in meaning, by the sentence "(A) is not true." These are rather obvious points about ordinary language; they are not the product of any theory. It is therefore a bit of an embarrassment to a relativist that he has to deny both of these rather obvious points.

In the first place, the relativist thinks of (A) and (B) as containing an implicit relativization to the speaker's moral outlook, much as statements about what is or is not law are implicitly relativized (when they are not explicitly so) to a legal system. If I am on the telephone to my uncle in Las Vegas, he might declare: "Prostitution is legally permitted." Suppose my son overhears the conversation (my uncle speaks very loudly on the telephone) and asks, "Is prostitution really legally permitted?" My wife, shocked, tells him, "No, prostitution is not legally permitted." My wife has not disagreed with my uncle. The implicit relativization removes whatever appearance of disagreement inheres in the surface structure of the statements. Furthermore, once she understood the situation, my wife would certainly not preface her own statement by the verdict "What your uncle says is not true." Both statements, my wife's and my uncle's, can be true, and so my wife and my uncle are not disagreeing. So much is plain and common-sensical for statements of law, but moral judgments appear to be quite different. It just seems wrong to say that (A) and (B) don't really disagree. And this suggests that the linguistic intentions of speakers is, often at least, absolutist rather than relativist.

Relativists may agree, to some extent. For pre-theoretic moral ideas to be all they aspire to be, a relativist might say, there would have to absolute standards for moral concepts to latch onto. But since there aren't any, relativism suggests, why not make do with the relative standards that we actually do have? There is no need to abandon moral judgment altogether, so long as we are willing to tone down its aspirations.

Compare common-sense judgments of mass, or length, or duration. For all but the more sophisticated folk of the last century or so, all such judgments have been absolute on their face. A policeman on the witness stand testifies that while staking out the apartment, he saw the defendant enter and then leave one hour later. The defense cross-examines: When you say it was one hour later, can you provide an inertial frame? "A duration of one hour must, officer, be relative to one inertial frame or another, you know." The policeman denies that he meant any such thing. "Just one hour, is all I meant, not relative to any of your fancy frames." In a very straightforward sense, the policeman's *intention* was to name an absolute duration, of the sort that is simply not recognized in relativistic phys (p. 262) ics. Is the policeman's testimony thereby impeached? Has he said something false? We would not ordinarily say so. To put it briefly: the policeman's judgment had a false presupposition behind it. His own conception of the world, adequate and accurate enough for his own purposes, is not really correct. But the false presupposition, the incor-

rect *theory* that the policeman himself would give if carefully questioned, does not seem to infect the integrity or veracity of his ordinary, first-order judgments. What the policeman said, we believe, is true; only his background absolutist theory of it is mistaken. So it is with ordinary moral judgment, a relativist may say. Most often it doesn't even occur to us to inquire into the metaphysics behind our ordinary moral judgments. Perhaps if we did, many of us would find a latent absolutism hidden there as a kind of presupposition. But that metatheory, even if it is incorrect, needn't infect first-order moral judgments. So long as the ordinary judgments are understood relative to whatever standards make most sense in the context, they can be perfectly correct, just as the policeman's judgments are perfectly correct if understood relative to the inertial frame of the courtroom. Nihilism is no more called for in ethics than it is in common-sense physics.

References

Brink, David. 1986. “Externalist Moral Realism.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, supp. 24: 23–42.

Darwall, Stephen. 1997. “Reasons, Motives, and the Demands of Morality: An Introduction.” In *Moral Discourse and Practice*, ed. Stephen Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, 305–312. New York: Oxford University Press.

Dreier, James. 1990. “Internalism and Speaker Relativism.” *Ethics* 101: 6–26.

Dreier, James. 1992. “The Supervenience Argument against Moral Realism.” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30: 13–38.

Dreier, James. 2002. “Meta-Ethics and Normative Commitment.” *Philosophical Issues* 12: 241–263.

Falk, W. D. 1948. “ ‘Ought’ and Motivation.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* n.s. 48 (1947–48): 111–138.

Field, Hartry. 1980. *Science without Numbers.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Foot, Philippa. 2001. *Natural Goodness.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Harman, Gilbert. 1977. *The Nature of Morality.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Horgan, Terry, and Mark Timmons. 1996. “From Moral Realism to Moral Relativism in One Easy Step.” *Critica* 28: 3–39.

Kaplan, David. 1989. “Demonstratives.” In *Themes from Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein, 481–614. New York: Oxford University Press.

Mackie, J. L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong.* London: Penguin.

Moore, G. E. 1912. *Ethics.* New York: Holt.

Pojman, Louis. 1989. “A Critique of Ethical Relativism.” In *Ethical Theory*,ed. Louis Pojman, 25–32. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

Smith, Michael. 1994. *The Moral Problem.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Stevenson, Charles. 1937. “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms.” *Mind* 46: 14–31.

Sturgeon, Nicholas. 1985. “Moral Explanations.”In *Morality, Reason and Truth*, ed. David Copp and David Zimmerman, 49–78. Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld.

Svavarsdóttir, Sigrun. 1999. “Moral Cognitivism and Motivation.” *Philosophical Review*, 108: 161–219.

Westermarck, Edward. 1932. *Ethical Relativity.* London: Kegan Paul.

Williams, Bernard. 1972. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics.* New York: Harper and Row.

Williams, Bernard. 1975. “The Truth in Relativism.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75: 215–228.

Williams, Bernard. 1985. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1965. “A Lecture on Ethics.” *Philosophical Review* 74: 3–12.

Notes:

(1.) I thank Laura Schroeter for making me see this point.

(2.) Philippa Foot thinks so. See Foot, 2001, esp. chap. 2. The idea, as I understand it, is that we have some conception of a species that includes what counts as a healthy, or normal, organism of that species, and this conception will include standards for how the organism is doing.

(3.) Indeed, proper difference of opinion is often taken to 5show that we are presupposing that there *is* a truth of the matter. “And differing judgments serve but to declare / that truth lies somewhere, if we knew but where.” (William Cowper, “Hope.”)

(4.) See Sturgeon, 1985, for discussion of the complexities of reduction.

(5.) Whether we really have reason to believe in numbers is, of course, a question much trickier and more difficult than I can even begin to discuss. For one thing, reference to numbers may be eliminable in mathematical reasoning, as in Field, 1980. Mackie himself says that he believes the queerness of mathematics can be removed by some kind of naturalistic reduction, but also that if he is wrong then we should be error theorists about numbers, too. See, Mackie, 1977, p. 39:

> Indeed, the best move for the moral objectivist is not to evade this issue, but to look for companions in guilt … [f]or example … our knowledge and even our ideas of essence, number, identity. … This is an important answer to the argument from queerness. The only adequate replay would be to show how, on empiricist foundations, we can construct an account of the ideas and beliefs and knowledge that we have of these matters. I cannot even begin to do that here, though I have undertaken some parts of the task elsewhere. I can only state my belief that satisfactory accounts of most of these can be given in empirical terms. If some supposed metaphysical necessities or essences resist such treatment, then they too should be included, along with objective values, among the targets of the argument from queerness.

(6.) Nor is the explanation utterly trivial. Sometimes the better team doesn't win, as Kordell Stewart noted after his team lost to the Patriots in the 2001–2 playoffs; luck is also involved.

(7.) I have defended a similar version in Dreier, 1990, 1992.

(8.) For example, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, 1996, argue against New Wave moral realism by *reductio ad relativism*.

(9.) Ruth Benedict and Melville Herskovitz are commonly cited as anthropologists guilty of the worst relativist fallacies. Since anthropologists do not write like philosophers, and are generally interested in somewhat different issues, it is difficult to say exactly what philosophical view real anthropologists of the mid–twentieth century held. My understanding is that their philosophical view was close to Edward Westermarck's. See Westermarck, 1932.

(10.) Williams later finds some coherent forms of moral relativism. See Williams, 1975, and 1985, esp. chap. 8.

(11.) Some of Michael Walzer's early work suggests this sort of relativism. See especially his *Spheres of Justice* for a version that tries to build plausible limits to toleration while respecting cultural autonomy. Walzer's book is probably best understood as an argument for valuing political autonomy, and not as resting on any particular conception of the nature of morality.

(12.) Whether moral relativism has *any* normative moral implications is a sticky question, largely because it is much murkier than it may appear exactly what it is for a theory to have normative moral implications. For one attempt to spell it out, and some suggestions about other metaethical views that may carry over to moral relativism, see Dreier, 2002.

(13.) There are other possibilities. One, which I will not explore in this essay, is that the Humean premise is wrong. That way lies Kantian rationalism. It says that although moral judgment is intrinsically motivational, motivation is not relative to contingent psychology but is built into rational agency. If Kantian rationalism is correct, then morality may be re-

al, intrinsically action-guiding, and still absolute. The second possibility is expressivism, which I do not have the space to discuss in this essay.

(14.) Many philosophers have discussed one or another version of the disagreement argument. One version is in Moore, 1912, pp. 42–43.

James Dreier

James Dreier is professor of philosophy at Brown University.