Can moral propositions be true or false? 'Yes' with an 'if' or 'No' with a 'but'

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Moral relativism is not exactly in philosophical (read: analytical) vogue these days. In fact, only two moral philosophers within the analytic tradition are usually mentioned as reliably relativist at all: Gilbert Harman and David Wong. Now, being philosophically fashionable is not the sole theoretical virtue, and being philosophically unfashionable not the sole theoretical vice. The argument raised against moral relativism that I will look into here claims that relativism, if laid out interestingly, is incoherent, and if it is not, it is not really relativism at all. Being relativist, be it in metaphysics, epistemology or ethics is to flirt with incoherence, or else it is just a version ("indexicalist" for instance) of realism (see for instance Sayre-McCord (1991)). Why, then, if it is either false or trivial, has it attracted so much attention? One of the reasons may be that relativism is among the first positions the philosophical inquiring mind entertain (itself with). While it is a disreputable position among philosophers of the trade, it is quite popular among philosophical undergraduates (there are some more or less unscientific surveys in support of this claim). Whether that circumstance points to relativism being a juvenile position that you tend to grow out of, or whether relativists just don't find it worthwhile to pursue a career in moral philosophy (or none of the above) is an open question, not to be pursued here. Let's for the time being be charitable and presuppose that well respected philosophers like Harman and Wong are not stuck in perpetual puberty. If they are wrong, they are at least interestingly wrong.

One worry often associated with moral relativism is the idea that, if true, it would undermine our moral convictions and thus the foundation of society. Where this worry may be an active reason not to believe in moral relativism, it is not a very good argument against moral relativism as a theory in meta-ethics. And in fact, few of the philosophical theories (as opposed to anthropological) on moral relativism around have this effect at all. Harman's version, for example, is positively conservative in its implications.
Another worry about moral relativism is that if it is true, everything is allowed. This does not follow from moral relativism as investigated here. What follows is that if moral relativism is true, it is conceptually *possible* for anything that it could be allowed[1]. And if we were worried about mere conceptual possibilities, relativism would be the least of our problems.

The version of relativism I will be most concerned with in this paper is the one defended by Gilbert Harman (in a series of articles, starting with Harman (1975)). I will do so because it is a very graspable account, easy to put up against the critique against moral relativism. The critiques will be familiar, namely the ones given by David Lyons (1976) and Nicholas Sturgeon (1994). I will then turn to two more recent suggestions of how to understand relativism, due to Max Kölbel (2004) and James Ryan (2003), which attempt to answer this critique.
With a little luck, I will surface from this undertaking with a plausible assessment of the state and content of moral relativism.

[1] Actually, depending on what type of moral relativism you defend, there might be conceptual restrictions on what could be allowed. In order to be a version of moral relativism, all that needs be conceptually conceded is that there is a relativity to moral standards, not that this relativity is, so to speak, *absolute*.

If Moral relativism is the solution, what is the problem?

The problem that moral relativism is set to solve, and the phenomenon the existence of which it is committed to accepting, is the occurrence of *faultless moral disagreement* (this phrase is borrowed from Max Kölbel). Faultless moral disagreements look a little bit like this:

A thinks that it is right to X
B thinks that it is not right to X
Neither A or B is at fault.

Now, it is not sufficient in order to be a moral relativist just to say that neither A nor B has *committed* any fault: you must also hold that neither A nor B *is* at fault, that neither entertain a false proposition. There is a possibility that neither of them is wrong. It is the existence, or actually just the *possibility*, of precisely this type of events occurring that constitutes the problem to which relativism aim to give the solution (or should we say "diagnosis"?). In other, non-moral cases, it might be that A believes that P and B believes that not-P and neither of them has committed any fault in reasoning (there may be valid reasons to believe each), but it is not the case that neither of them is at fault. With the possible exception of vague predicates, P excludes not-P and vice versa. Now, if you are a moral realist, you are committed to the view that moral propositions are true and false in the same way that non-moral propositions are. They are made true by moral facts. That is: contrary to appearance, there is no possibility of (genuine) faultless moral disagreements.
One possible way to explain the existence of faultless moral disagreement is to claim, as most non-cognitivists claim, that moral propositions lack truth-value (even though they may be justified or unjustified). This might be the case if moral judgments are used merely to *express* feelings or attitudes. Let's make a list of positions, simplifying matters somewhat[2]:

1. There are moral facts; moral propositions that correspond to those facts are true, and those that do not so correspond are false (moral realism).
2. There are no moral facts; since moral propositions say that there are moral facts, they are all false (error theory).
3. There are no moral facts; moral propositions merely express attitudes and thus may be warranted or unwarranted, but not true or false, or at least not in a correspondence sort of way (non-cognitivism).
4. There are moral facts; moral propositions merely express moral attitudes and thus may be warranted or unwarranted, but not true or false (a strange kind of non-cognitivism).

So, what does moral *relativism* say about the existence of moral facts and the truth or expressiveness of moral propositions? Relativism typically wants to say that the truth of moral propositions is relative. But what does this mean? Which of the following statements succeeds in characterizing the relativist position?

1) There are objective moral facts and moral propositions can be true or false, but the truth of moral propositions does not hold (only) in virtue of corresponding to the moral facts.
2) There are no objective moral facts, but moral propositions can nevertheless be true or false and the truth of those moral propositions is relative (to culture, to the assessor etc).

[2] For instance, it is controversial whether the content 3 and 4 should be understood as *propositional,* perhaps they should instead be said to be about *judgments*.

3) There are moral facts, but they are relative, and moral propositions can be true or false if they correspond to the moral facts in being sensitive to the relativity of those facts.

The first suggestion is obscure, but perhaps worthy of attention: it suggest that there are moral facts, and is thus a case of moral realism, but it is relativist about the epistemic status of moral judgments. I will not pursue this possibility separately here; the discussion about 3) will suffice for characterising this possibility as well, with the additional realistic element. The second suggestion seems to be a type of non-cognitivism in disguise, making use of the "true" predicate in a frivolous way. The third formulation is arguably the one with most promise. In this version the truth-conditions of moral statements are a matter of *relative*, not absolute, fact. Moral propositions should be analysed in a way that mirrors this relativity. This is still not very clear, but it's a step in the right direction. The most pressing question here is, of course: what *is* a relative fact?

The problem with characterizing moral relativism in these terms is obvious: it draws heavily on the analogy with non-moral beliefs, and relativists typically want to say that moral judgments are essentially *different* from non-moral beliefs. So relativists' wants to say that while moral propositions are "truth-apt", they are not exactly truth-bound the way non-moral propositions are. The difference is manifest in the fact that when it comes to moral propositions, faultless disagreement is possible, something regularly believed to be ruled out in matters of non-moral fact. The obscurity of this possibility is only that if we take natural beliefs as the point of comparison. Indeed, the relativist would charge moral *realists* with obscurity, since it is notoriously difficult to see what a moral fact consist in.
Let's now turn to an actual, as opposed to this speculative, formulation of the relativist position.

Harman's inner judgments

If X above is an action of A's, and A thinks it is right to do it and B that it is wrong to do it, and B can give reasons why he/she believes that X is wrong, but none of them is acceptable to A, it is not the case that A ought to refrain from doing X. This, in brief outline, is Harman's view. But, accepting that: is it then true that X is *right*? If you ask A it is and if you ask B it isn't. If you press them, they will give you their reasons for holding their views and that seems to be the end of the matter. There is, according to the relativist, no truth beyond the reasons A and B have for giving their judgment, and no non-relative moral fact the tracking of, or correspondence to which is the final arbiter in settling the disagreement (It is still possible to settle disagreements, but not by way of appealing to independently holding moral facts, but rather by appealing to the mutual benefits of agreements). The truth of moral statements is relative: but relative to what? And, more importantly: relative *how*? Let's turn to Harman's attempts to explain the relativity of moral judgments.

In "Moral relativism defended" (1974), Harman wrote that

> Just as the judgement that something is large is true or false only in relation to one or another comparison class, so too, I will argue, the judgment that it is wrong of someone to do something is true or false only in relation to an agreement or understanding. (p 3)

As far as analogies go, this is as obscure as they come. Largeness may be a relative notion, but it *is* a matter of *size*: when it comes to largeness, size is what matters, size is what is compared. But wrongness is not primarily a *comparative* notion. If it is relative, it is relative in another way completely. Being true relative to an agreement has nothing to do with being

true relative to a comparison class. An act is right compared to acts that are *worse* in the same sense that largeness is relative, but the dimension in the former case is *rightness*, and we need to show that rightness itself is a relative notion. The relativity of moral propositions has probably more in common with the relativity of matters of *taste* than with the relativity of size or movement. That relativity is better understood in terms of "according to", "in agreement with" etc.

The relativist thesis Harman is defending is, he claims, true about a particular class of moral judgments called *inner judgments*. Inner judgments are about the *reasons* people have.

> Those of us who have this 'relativistic' view make inner judgments about a person only if we suppose that he or she has reasons to be motivated by the relevant moral considerations. (p 4)

This emphasis on reasons is closely linked to the assumption of *internalism* about moral judgments. If I believe that I ought to x, I must accept some reasons to x, and be motivated to act accordingly. Harman makes a sharp (and weight-carrying) distinction between what an agent *ought to do*, which is what these inner judgments are about, and what *ought to be the case*. Consequentialists typically (if not unfailingly) want to say that people ought to do what it ought to be the case that they do, but Harman does not find this account convincing. If we could not get a person to accept that something that they fully understand in non-moral terms is a *reason* for them to do something, then it does not make sense to say that they ought to do it. Relativism is guided by internalism in this sense plus the (empirical) observation that there are no (moral) reasons that everybody has a reason to accept. Hence the possibility of moral disagreement without anybody's being at fault.

Harman distinguishes four ways to understand the 'ought' in the sentence "they ought not to go around killing people".

a) One would expect them not to do so (the 'ought' of expectation).
b) It is not in their interest to do so (the 'ought' of rationality).
c) It is a bad thing that they do so (the normative 'ought to be')
d) It is wrong of them to do so (the moral 'ought to do')

It is the last sense of 'ought' his relativism is primarily concerned with. In Harman's view, d) is about inner judgments. Now, this sort of relativism is not very interesting. What needs to be added is that sense *c* must be made intelligibly relativist too. If it isn't, moral relativism only concerns the acceptability conditions for *justifications* of moral judgments. It would then be relativism about the *having of moral reasons*. Moral relativism needs to supplement this claim with the claim that this is all there is to it. The natural way to interpret moral relativism is to understand c) as the status of an action given *my* perspective, what *I* have reasons to approve or disapprove of. To use the terms defined by Lyons (1976), c) is relative to the appraiser, d) to the agent. But it is not clear that Harman makes this kind of interpretation. Consider the following:

> Inner judgments have two important characteristics. First, they imply that the agent has reasons to do something. Second, the speaker in some sense endorses these reasons and supposes that the audience also endorses them. Other moral judgements about an agent, on the other hand, do not imply that the agent has reasons for acting that are endorsed by the speaker. (p 8)

There are three owners of reasons involved here: the agent, the speaker and the audience. It seems like Harman has in mind that inner judgments are judgments about the reasons that (the speaker thinks) all three owners *have*. But 'ought'-judgments could, I guess, be about *any*

combination of have and have-nots of reasons. Since we are in the business of making lists, here we go again:

We have an action x, an agent A, a speaker B and an audience C.
1) A has sufficient moral reason to x, endorsed by B and C.
2) A has sufficient moral reason to x, endorsed by B but not by C.
3) A has sufficient moral reason to x, not endorsed by B but endorsed by C.
4) A has sufficient moral reason to x, not endorsed by either B or C.
5) A has sufficient moral reason not to x, endorsed by B and C.
6) A has sufficient moral reason not to x, endorsed by B but not by C.
7) A has sufficient moral reason not to x, not endorsed by B but endorsed by C
8) A has sufficient moral reason not to x, not endorsed by B and C.
(The list could be made longer by adding cases where A *lack* moral reason to x or not to x, and the endorsement by B and C could similarly be differentiated, but for now that is, luckily, beside the point).

Now, in which of the above is "A ought to x" a true statement, and in which is "A ought not to x" a true statement? In the sense of d) above, the only clear-cut cases are 1) and 5), i.e. those cases that qualify as "inner judgments" as defined by Harman[3]. In other words, the condition that the agent, A, has reason to x is only a necessary, not a sufficient condition for it being true for B that A ought to X, in this sense. Does this mean that moral judgments can not be made across different reason-bases? No, it doesn't. It just means that *inner judgments* can not be made about people whose reasons (for that action) the speaker does not somehow endorse[4]. The *endorsement* here is not only the fact that the speaker accepts that A, as far as A is concerned, has reason to x. Endorsement requires a similar commitment of the speaker. On the appraiser view, the c) sense of 'ought to x' above makes claims 1), 2), 7) and 8) cases where A ought to x, and 3), 4), 5) and 6) cases where A ought not to x (assuming, for the sake of simplicity, that "not endorsing" is the same as "endorsing the opposite"). We can see why someone would have sufficient moral reason to x under certain circumstances and still not endorse those reasons. Maybe we might even accept that we ourselves in that same situation would have sufficient moral reason to x, but still not, now, endorse those reasons.

Harman bases his moral relativism on the proposed definition of 'inner judgments'. But is inner moral judgment of this sort really the central moral case? Harman says that the use of moral language he is concerned with is that of speakers who assume that possession of rationality is not sufficient to provide a source for relevant reasons: certain values, desires, goals, or intentions are necessary as well (p 8). Further

> I want to argue that, when a relevant speaker S makes the inner judgement that A ought to do D, S assumes that A intends to act in accordance with an agreement that S and S's audience also intend to observe. In other words, I want to argue that the source of the reasons for doing D that S ascribes to A consists in A's sincere intention to observe a certain agreement. (p 9)

The agreement need not be an explicit one, and not one between A and S or S's audience. A need not, I guess, even be aware that S and S's audience exists for inner judgments to be made.

[3] One might want to insert here the observation that the truth conditions for moral claims of the inner judgment variety looks very much like *assertability conditions* for B when addressing C about an action of A´s.
[4] People whose reasons differ *totally* from our own are not possible to judge according to our standards. They are, in Harman's phrase, "Beyond the pale". Harman (1974).

Even so, the source of reasons here is not the reasons *for* agreement, but stemming from that agreement itself. This seems to me a bit awkward. Why is the agreement the endpoint of justification here, rather then the reasons (prudential, if Harman is right) for participation? The justification for this is twofold: First: the reasons must be somehow *shared*, and the sharing begins with the (implicit) agreement, not with the reasons for entering the agreement (because there we might differ, as is the case for the "non-aggression pact" between rich and poor on Harman's view). The second reason is that Harman must distinguish moral reasons from prudential ones, i.e. 'ought' in sense b) from 'ought' in sense d) above.

Harman argues that moral judgments are made supposing that some shared motivational attitudes (M) are present. The moral 'ought' involves a four-place relation 'Ought (A, D, C, M)' where A is an agent, D a type of act, C considerations and M the motivating attitudes.

It is more or less trivial that what A ought to do is relative to the considerations that hold, but this is not the limits of the moral relativism that Harman argues for. He argues for the relativity of motivating attitudes. What this ultimately boils down to is that the content of M in most moral cases is the outcome of moral bargaining and/or agreement in intentions (p 14) (and of psychological predispositions), or at least of something that makes reference to such agreement.

The centerpiece of Harman's argument in favour of relativism is the reasons we have for accepting a moral claim as valid or obligation-making. If we realise the fact that these reasons vary between agents, we realise that there is no objective way to solve deep moral disagreements. This holds not only in particular moral cases, but on the level of accepting a general moral theory as such as well. The same type of "reason for accepting" is valid for both types of arguments. But does Harman deny that such moral reasoning holds objectively? No, actually, he doesn't. He does not say that moral obligations consist in what we already accept, and hence that everything, as far as it is endorsed, goes. Rather: moral obligation "follows from" things that we already do accept, attitudes that we already have, and we could be mistaken about what, exactly, follows from what we already accept. Why do we accept certain basic claims? Ultimately, presumably, we do so out of self-interest, but this does not mean that moral reasons are reduced to self-interest.

The central argument can be summarized like this: moral judgments are internally motivating; if you ought to do something, you have reason to do so. And there are considerations such that they provide reasons for some, but not others. Hence relativism is the true theory about the truth conditions for moral judgments. Now, let's turn to the critique against relativism and investigate how well Harman's version stands up against it.

Lyons, Sturgeon and the problem of incoherence

I have hinted at this problem above. Lyons calls it "the Problem of Incoherence". The problem is, in short, this: if moral disagreement is a proper disagreement, then faultlessness makes it incoherent. We would have to say that it is both true and not true that A ought to X. And if it is not a proper disagreement, well, then there is nothing to fuss about. A roughly similar argument is put forward by Sturgeon (1994), but Lyons' formulation will be the one used here.

Lyons writes that in order to escape logical incoherence in the claim from faultless disagreement, the relativist

> …must either show that he is not endorsing them both as true or else deny that the judgments are truly incompatible. The second approach is the standard maneuver, the first being rarely entertained in such a context. (p 113)

Of course the *relativist* need not endorse the two claims as true, indeed he could not, but he might claim that that is just a matter about the conditions for truth (see below) not being present in him in regard to (at least) one of them. The relativist can not *endorse* both propositions in an "inner judgment" type of way (faultless disagreements are *not dilemmas*). *That* would be incoherent. The relativist typically wants to say that while endorsing both claims would be incoherent, endorsing either one could be faultless. *That* is what relativism amounts to.

Some relativist are making a *meta-ethical claim*, and given that morality works the way they say it does, no incoherence is present here. Is this sufficient to counter Lyons charge? Well, actually, yes, I believe it is. This is precisely what the relativists want to say: moral truth requires a perspective, and from *within* a moral perspective, there is no such thing as faultless disagreement. There is a particularly nice exposition of this view in Kölbel (see below). Does this mean what Lyons argues is the case, namely that there is no *real* moral disagreement at stake?

Lyons writes against Harman that

> There is nothing especially "relativistic" about a theory which acknowledges the possibility that two individuals can be justified in making their respective judgments, even when the judgments themselves are (regarded as) logically incompatible. (p 115)

Well, there *is* something relativistic about such a theory, when supplemented by the claim that there is no further objective moral fact that could settle the dispute: if justification is all there is to it (in the sense described above). There is no such thing, the relativist wants to say, as an objective reason, even if considerations being reasons is a matter of objective fact. The weakness of Lyons argument is manifest in the following passage:

> One would be maintaining that Alice can be justified in judging that Claudia's proposed abortion would be wrong, but that the judgment itself – that Claudia's proposed abortion would be wrong – can be neither correct nor incorrect. The suggestion is dubious, partly because the very notion of "relative" justification has its home among items which can be appraised in objective terms (such as weather predictions). Indeed, we seem to get an understanding of what is meant by justifying one's judgments in that "relative" sense partly by contrasting it with objective appraisal of the judgment itself. It is unclear whether the idea of "relative" justification has any proper application, any reasonable interpretation, outside such a context. (p 117)

Surely Lyons ought to give the relativist a *chance*, at least, to give a reasonable interpretation of relative justification. What is so terribly unreasonable about Harman's interpretation, for instance? Where the notion of relative justification comes from says practically nothing about its subsequent applications. Presumably, it is possible to justify ones aesthetic taste, and still relativism about aesthetic taste is not a preposterous position.

Then follows a tricky argument: Lyons has an example of Alice and Barbara, who can be our A and B above, who hold conflicting judgments, due to them having, say, different basic principles. But let's say that Barbara makes a mistake and actually comes to hold the same opinion as Alice, hence making an invalid judgment. The actual judgments now made by Alice and Barbara, according to Lyons, *are identical in content, they have the same meaning*.

> Now, the theory appraises judgments in respect to their contents and by reference to personal principles. But since different persons' judgments can be identical in meaning, the standards that are invoked cannot, so to speak, tell the difference between one person's judgment and another's. So, whether the relativist likes it or not, Alice's principles can be used to appraise Barbara's judgments as well as her own and vice versa. (p118)

Hence, the same judgment (in respect of content) is valid and invalid. Valid with respect to Alice's principles, invalid with respect to Barbara's. The point is that if the contents of the judgments are identical to each other, we have incoherence, and if they differ, we have no disagreement. What Lyons claims is difficult to understand is the following: that judgments with identical content can be valid or invalid depending on the internal state of the one making it. How, I take it he is asking, could the truth of the judgment be relativised to the person giving it, where his internal state is not affecting the content of the judgment delivered? The problem is that the content of the judgment *makes no reference to who it is that is making it, or to the principles accepted by the one making the judgment*. If it did, the judgments would differ in content, since contextualised, and there would be no real disagreement between Alice and Barbara.
Max Kölbel's (2004) proposed solution to this particular problem is to say that even though the content of the judgments is the same (as he describes it), the truth value is relative to principles. This does not amount to indexicalism since the content of the moral judgment does not refer to the one making it, only settling the truth-value of moral judgments does. In short, his strategy in answering Lyons argument, that it is "hard to understand", is to make it a bit easier to understand. I will return to Kölbel's argument below.

The problem is that I could hold a true moral proposition, make a faultless statement, but still be at fault, because of being sensitive to the wrong relative fact. If there is such a thing as relatively true moral statements, I could be mistaken in giving such a statement by getting the relativity wrong. To make it explicit: though it is correct for A to believe that X is right, and for B to believe that X is not right, it would *not* be correct for B to believe that X is right and for A to believe that it is not right. The conflict is thus *not* (even analogous to) the conflict in a moral dilemma. Why is it that when judging the truth of my moral statement, the principles in accordance to which it should be judged is *my* moral principles? Is this a serious objection? Harman would counter it by pointing out that I have to have reasons to accept a moral claim for it to be correct for me to make it. Kölbel, as we will see, counter it by reference to perspective.

So how does Harman fare in this critique? Actually, I believe he accepts it, and that, if pressed, would go for the "not really disagreement" understanding of moral standoffs.

A new defence for moral relativism

Max Kölbel's intriguing paper "Faultless Disagreement" suggest a way to understand the claim made by moral relativists. Kölbel's paper does not deal with *moral* relativism particularly, but I will apply his argument on moral cases in this section. Relativism is a view applicable in areas where faultless disagreement is *possible*. This is not to be confused with the view that all disagreements within that field are faultless (p 54-5). Kölbel notes what we have already dealt with in the introduction: that some judgments are only partly belief-like. When it comes to objective beliefs, there are profoundly plausible theoretical commitments that rule out the possibility of faultless disagreement. Mainly, there are two such commitments: (ES) (equivalence schema) It is true that *p* iff *p*, and (T) It is a mistake to believe a proposition that is not true. If these two commitments are honoured, the following

holds: From (ES) it follows that if p, then not (not-p) and if (not-p), then not p. From (ES) and (T) it follows that if A believes p and B believes not-p and p is the case, B has made a mistake. And if p is not the case, A has made a mistake. So in all disagreements, if (ES) and (T) is true, involves some mistake.
If we want to rescue the possibility of faultless disagreement, Kölbel writes, we must reject one of the theoretical commitments that give rise to the incoherence charge in the Lyons/Sturgeon argument. So which one has to go? The solution for the relativist, Kölbel argues, is to relativise (T). If you choose to question (ES) you end up with some sort of *expressivism* instead, which, of course, is another way of defending faultless disagreement.
On the other side of Kölbel's schema, the side that denies the possibility of faultless disagreement, we find versions of realism (which denies the faultlessness of apparent cases) and indexical relativism (which denies their being proper disagreements).

Realism in its unmitigated form says that moral beliefs are just like ordinary beliefs, and the fact that we cannot judge whether one or the other in a moral disagreement is at fault does not show that no mistake have been made. Kölbel finds this version of realism implausible, mainly because it fails to distinguish between the cases where disagreement appear to be faultless and cases where they don't (as in judgments of taste on the one side and judgments about how many people there are in the room, on the other). The realists say that there is no such thing as faultless disagreement, so they must explain why there appear to be such a thing.
The realist might, of course, agree that *for practical purposes* we might have to settle for a draw in indeterminable cases, but would add that we should always feel reluctant to do so. Since moral matters are quite frequently *practical* matters, these things need to be settled, and some relativisation might be the way to solve it. Moral disagreements are often disagreements about *what to do*. Consider the case of what side of a coin comes up in a coin-toss. Let's say the coin disappears and we need to decide who the winner is. Here there is no moral ambiguity: the winner is the one who called the side that came up in the coin-toss, the problem lies in knowing which side this was. The point is that it is an even bet. We *know* that there *is* a truth of the matter; we just lack a way to decide what it is. It is similar, the realist might say, with moral truth in the "apparent cases" of faultless disagreement, and the solution might be to break it even, as we would in the coin-toss case (in lack of another coin, or a round of rock, paper, scissors, say). The practical result is *just as if* there were a faultless disagreement, and that is why there appears to be such a thing. This reply from the realist is not considered by Kölbel. He probably would say that it still doesn't catch the intuitively plausible difference between matters of taste and matters of counting. But the difference might lie in the fact that in matters of taste, this type of coin-disappearing-events are a lot more frequent than in matters of counting.
The other point is that the fields of interest that seems to allow for faultless disagreement typically are fields that suffer from a lack of decision procedures (other than bargaining), and this lack is taken, by the relativist, as an indication that there is no objective truth. The realist, of course, denies this. We do make a distinction in status between aesthetics and mathematics, but the realist and relativist disagree (and not faultlessly) about what this indicates. But Kölbel's point is still well taken: there is ample reason to investigate other ways of accounting for the apparent cases of faultless disagreement, and the case for realism must be put up against *those* theories.

Indexical Relativism is the view that apparent cases of faultless disagreements are in fact faultless, they are just not disagreements. The content of the judgements of the disagreeing parties, an indexical relativist claims, have been mis-described. Judgments of taste, for

instance, are analysable as judgments about one's own preferences. Indexicalism is a semantic thesis: saying "Matisse is better than Picasso" is like saying "I prefer Matisse to Picasso" (But it could be indexical in relation to my group or the group of experts or the standards for aesthetic excellence that I acknowledge, as well). Some one who disagreed would say "No, Picasso is better than Matisse" and thereby mean either one of the following three things

1) *I*, on the other hand, prefer Picasso to Matisse
2) No, you don't, you *actually* prefer Picasso to Matisse
3) What you prefer is quite irrelevant, the fact of the matter is that Picasso is better than Matisse and you really *should* prefer Picasso.

The indexical relativist holds that most "disagreements" are of the first kind, and therefore not really disagreements at all, although he/she of course allows for proper disagreements of the second kind. The third is a semantic possibility, of course, but a false one, according to the indexical relativist. *Or,* the third one is a possibility for the ego-centric moral indexical that determines the scope of the aesthetically good with reference to *her* preferences. In the case of this kind of analysis, disagreements of the first kind would be proper disagreements, and not faultless. Kölbel find indexical relativism unsatisfying for the following, by now familiar, reason: it does not capture what we believe is at stake in moral disagreements, and it does not capture the apparent difference between saying "A is better than B" and "I prefer A to B". How, then, are we to capture this difference without falling into unmitigated realism and thus denying the possibility of faultless disagreement?

Expressivism denies that matters about which we might disagree faultlessly are correctly characterized as true or false. These judgments are (expressions of) sentiments or attitudes, not beliefs; they are not really *truth-apt*. Does this mean that judgments of this sort cannot enter into logical relationships? If Ayer is correct, yes, it does but this is preposterous! Blackburn-type expressivism, on the other hand, allows for this kind of relation even though the judgments are not strictly speaking truth-evaluable. But any standard-type logic reconstructed to take care of judgments, of this type would rule faultless disagreements incoherent, Kölbel argues. This is so because the truth condition in (T) would here only be replaced by (T*): If not-p, then it is a mistake to believe that p. And the same argument follows.

Now let's turn to the other possibility: questioning (T). (T), remember, was the assumption that it is a mistake to believe something that is not true. This assumption promotes discussion about matters of all kinds and Kölbel "shares Price's view that discussion and argument is an essential and valuable aspect of linguistic communication. (…) It is because we assume that only one of two conflicting beliefs can be correct and that one of them must be mistaken that we think arguing about it makes sense." (p 67) But this does not show that this assumption is always the correct one to make about all types of disputes.
Kölbel's view on relativism starts out with a view on language. We learn how to acquire beliefs and to reason through learning language, through learning *concepts* that make up the content of beliefs. Kölbel points out that these two processes: learning how to acquire beliefs and learning the rules of language is a tandem process. The competent thinker/speaker knows the conditions under which one is justified or obliged to hold a given belief. Sometimes these rules are learned explicitly, by us being told, but mostly we pick them up through example, by trial and error (error could be detected by an already competent speaker, a teacher, or by an apparent failure of communication).

> Sometimes the *a priori* constraints governing beliefs involve the rule that different thinkers ought to agree, sometimes they don't. (…) With [some] contents, there is room for legitimate disagreement, and we learn that this is so when learning how to speak and think. For example, usually teachers will allow that learners believe that chocolate ice cream is delicious even if they themselves believe it isn't. This doesn't mean that belief in such *discretionary contents* is entirely unconstrained. (…) For example, if a learner claims to believe that chocolate ice cream is delicious, but nevertheless denies that he or she is motivated to eat chocolate ice cream (under certain normal conditions), then he or she will be criticised for not having mastered certain *a priori* rules governing the extension of deliciousness (…) (p 68-9)

Some of the constraints for beliefs are tied up with features of the possessor of that belief. If these features vary from person to person, the content of the concepts that is thus governed should be of the discretionary sort[5]. What is the aim of belief in discretionary propositions if it is not truth?

> Clearly each individual thinker aims to avoid incorrectly believing even discretionary propositions. But it may be correct for one person to believe a given discretionary proposition, while it is not correct for another person to believe the same discretionary proposition. Thus it seems wrong to say that truth is not a norm for belief in the discretionary area. (p 70)

Instead of saying, as (T) does, that it is a mistake to believe what is not true, we want to say that (T+) (my notation) It is a mistake to believe a discretionary proposition that is not true as evaluated from one's own perspective. As long as people have different perspectives, (T+) allows for faultless disagreement (and for faulty agreement as well). For the sake of uniformity, all belief could be interpreted as answering to (T+), but in most matters, the relevant perspective is universal.
Why is this not indexicalism? It is not indexicalism, Kölbel argues, because discretionary beliefs do not vary in content. "the same proposition (content of belief, assertion etc.) is true in some perspectives, and not in others. This form of relativity is not eliminated by placing a sentence in a context of utterance" (p 71)[6].

> The relativism I am considering does not claim that the content expressed varies with context of utterance, but rather that the truth-value of the content itself is relative. (p 72)

Kölbel here draws the analogy to the world relativity of truth proposed in possible world semantics: the same proposition (with identical content) can be evaluated differently in different possible worlds, and the same goes for perspectives: the same proposition can be evaluated differently in different perspectives. The substantial difference, of course, is that perspectives meet and argue in the *same* possible world (Compare with Ryan's argument below), hence the possibility of faultless disagreement. We don't *disagree* with people in other words over whether the watery stuff is H2O: their watery stuff might be XYZ, and still 'watery stuff' (etc.) means 'water', and refers to H2O here. We don't disagree because we don't meet with people from twin earth, and it is not an important issue. If there were different water perspectives in this world, it probably wouldn't matter much either. Moral issues, on the other hand, *do* matter, hence the difficulty. In other words (in other *worlds*): if moral propositions thus are indexical, ordinary natural propositions are indexical too, where the index is this world as a whole. The *content* does not vary with context and use, only the

[5] Arguably, the chief part of meta-ethical debate is about what types of concepts the normative concepts are, and perhaps also about what happens when we learn them. Perhaps different people learn the concepts differently. Kölbel focuses on matters of taste, but there is a similar argument to be made for normativity (even if the argument for discretionary content is more convincing in matters of taste).
[6] Kölbel here seems to presuppose that indexical expressions do vary in content in different occurrences.

referent truth-value does. Moral propositions are not indexical on Kölbel's view, but they are perspective bound: their truth or falsity is determined by perspective.

A problem for Kölbel's perspective-relativism is that, typically, moral judgers wants explicitly to say, not that an action is wrong from their perspective, but that it would be wrong for *anyone*: that it, while being right in the perspective of the one doing it, nevertheless it is wrong, perhaps from a *wider* perspective. Typically, moral claims are taken to apply universally, and not only in the perspective-relativistic sense that moral claims from a certain perspective has universal *scope*. Rather: while it might no doubt be the case that some particular action that I believe is wrong is wrong *given* my perspective, this just means that in this case, my perspective concurs with the universal moral perspective: in this case, I am *right*. Is there a moral universal perspective? Does it depend on attitudes, motivational states and principles in the same way as the rightness of actions in *my* perspective does? Or what? If there is such a thing as a universal human nature, perhaps some things does determine rightness that works for people universally. This is a possibility left open by Kölbel: he does not determine what is necessary or sufficient for there to be a moral perspective, and how it determines moral truth. (Again: Kölbel is not, in this paper, talking about morality in particular).

Ryan on creating societal standards

The question whether the judgment that A accepts and the judgment that B denies have the same meaning is central for how to get a grip on the relativist claim. Same meaning seems to be required for the disagreement to be a theoretical disagreement, but not for it to be a practical one.

Ryan takes on one of the problems for relativism noted by Sturgeon (1994). Sturgeon notes that if relativism is true, we seem to have no appealing way to settle disagreements with societies with whose values we deeply disagree. This is troubling, and Ryan sets out to solve it. The problem, as Ryan sees it, is that relativism goes against the intuitions of *univocality*. We do believe that we are arguing about something substantial when we enter into moral argument (even if we are familiar with the pointlessness of moral arguments with those with whom we deeply disagree). In most situations of moral disagreement, we have a strong intuition that there is a way to settle the matter *correctly*. Ryan considers a disagreement that is, not with another culture here and now, but with a culture in a distant time, say on a distant planet. Would we still say that there was a way to settle the matter correctly? Ryan thinks that this case weakens our intuitions (naturally, preposterous other world cases *always* weaken the strength of our intuitions).

> Any societies in more than minimal contact are not mutually distinct. Any society needs a common set of moral standards. Therefore, any societies in more than minimal contact need a common set of moral standards. People know this, and they know it is important. This is why they are keen to enter into dispute when confronting other societies' values. (p 379)

Hence the intuition of univocality (that we are right and they are wrong, or vice versa). All actual moral disagreements are intra-societal, when it comes down to it: when disagreement is at hand there is a society including the disputants, A and B, within which moral matters must be settled. Moral disagreements give rise to moral bargaining and thus a merging between the societies (Ryan believes that it is societies that matter) in conflict.

But, actually, this means that in (genuine) moral disagreement *both* disputants are wrong: there is no standard of correctness *yet*. (Even if they will settle for the position initially held

by A or B, this still does not mean that A or B was right from the start. Neither, presumably, does it mean that either was wrong. The one whose stance we end up with had the better *judgment*, say, or just the most influence. But this does not look very nice, does it? But it is not quite nihilism yet.) Ryan writes

> Both judgments are false in a sense, and both are true in a sense. The intuition of univocality is also true in a sense and false in a sense. This shows that the relativist can have it both ways (381)

The point Ryan is trying to make is that the alleged universality of moral claims is not a definitional feature, it is an empirical claim, and it is false (starting out, as it is, as indexical). (Is Ryan indexicalist? He seems to make the "in my society" reading and then adapting it to conflicts by expanding the scope of the index as we go). So A and B are not wrong about whether the action is right or wrong, they are merely mistaken about what the society is in relation to which the action under debate is right or wrong. But surely we would not say that moral disagreements are *about* what society one belongs to, or makes reference to in ones moral judgments? There is a possibility here, but I do not now how viable it is. "The disagreement between them is over what is right relative to both" (p 385). And here, the only arbiter is the reasons people have for accepting moral claims in their own society.

> Nothing stops us, in our keenness to settle dispute, from trying to find out whether we share with another society enough common ground to build a new, larger society. (p 383)

I do not see any necessity in accepting this claim as universally true. Presumably, we might strike a bargain with somebody whose morality we do not in any way accept. We might compromise on our own terms, settle a dispute, without thereby accept the morality of our adversary *or* entering into a new morality defining relationship. There might be nothing moral about it.

Even so, deep and unsettleable disagreements might still occur, of course, and the situation might be hopeless *and* faultless. In those cases, even on Ryan's account, Sturgeon's worries hold. Has Ryan explained away the central cases and therefore dodged the unreasonableness of relativism? His reason for *accepting* relativism is similar to Harman's, with the difference that where Harman appeals to the reasons persons have, Ryan appeals to standards that holds in a society, and to the difference in preferences among the members in different societies. I'd say there is reason to prefer Harman's version, for precisely the reasons that he mentions: it does not make sense to say that a person ought to do something he sees absolutely no reason to do.

Ryan's answer to the Lyons/Sturgeon challenge is more straightforwardly indexicalist than Kölbel's "perspective-relativism" and Harman's "reason-relativism". It can be indexicalist and still allow (partly) faultless disagreement because the index is (attempted to be) expanded in cases of moral disagreement where we actually meet and discuss. As we have seen, this is not straightforwardly faultless disagreement, but it is not straightforwardly faulty disagreement, either.

The originality of his view lies in the interpretation of the disagreement the existence of which relativism is committed to (whereas this does not rescue relativism as such): it is not just a standoff between differences; it is a bargaining situation between them. This is the important, and quite original, part of his defence for relativism.

Relativism answers the truth-question: 'Yes' with an 'if' or 'no' with a 'but'

It is clear from all this that moral relativism does not distribute truth-values to moral propositions in the same way as truth values are distributed in typical non-moral areas. If it did, allowing faultless disagreement would indeed be incoherent. At the same time, relativists do not want to abandon truth and falsehood when it comes to moral matters: they just want to say that the truth or falsehood of moral judgments is a matter of relative fact. So how should we answer the question whether moral propositions can be true or false according to relativism? I believe relativism is correctly characterized as saying that we should answer it 'Yes' with an 'if' or 'no' with a 'but'. Yes, if you with "true" and "false" mean a judgment that it could be right or wrong of me to make, when we ask if a certain action is right or wrong. But the relativist might want to say "no", as well. No, there is no truth in morality, *but* there are criteria, such that if *you* accept them, i.e. if you fulfil certain psychological conditions, you have a (moral) reason to do or not to do certain things. But this, you might want to claim, is a far cry from there being truth proper in matters of morality. The accounts by Harman, Kölbel and Ryan are attempts to capture the nature of morality in a way that *sort of* allows for truth in moral matters, but they also admit their difference from ordinary natural truths. Moral relativism accepts *local* truth conditions when it comes to (at least some) moral judgments.

When you ask a relativist who is correct, A or B, you will typically get two answers, depending on in what capacity you are asking the relativist. As a moral relativist, he/she will say that both are. As a moral agent he/she will say that A or B is, as the case may be.

Moral disagreements are of a variety of kinds. There are
1. *Practical disagreements*, i.e. disagreements about what to do. This is a real type of disagreement, even in the cases where A and B acknowledge that they have different moral reasons and no way of settling *that* disagreement. They still need to arrive at a decision, and this is what the disagreement is about. It doesn't help if both the disputants are relativists: they may still disagree about what to do, even if they fully accept the case the other relativist is making. They will see that the other has no reason to do what they themselves have reason to make sure is done, and hence they cannot claim their own case to be the overruling one. But *their* reasons for making sure it is done might *involve* the commitment that it is done no matter what the other person may think about it (this is the "ought to be done" –stance distinguished by Harman from "ought to be"). *It might be the case that I ought to make sure that you do something that it is not the case that I believe that you ought to do*. In this case I am not arguing with you about ethics, I am arguing with you about what to do. Faultless disagreement is possible: both are right according to themselves and both are wrong according to the other. It is not *pointless* for either to argue their point, partly because they might persuade the other, and partly because *some* decision must be made and both are committed to making their point across. We can not appeal to an impartial judger in these cases because there is no such thing as an impartial moral judge: in order to be competent to make moral judgment you must have moral commitments, you must have moral *reasons*. You might go to a relativist in order to get a perspective on your moral disagreement, but you won't necessarily get the best advice about what to do.
2. *Meta-ethical disagreement*: we may disagree about what theory about morality is the correct one. If moral relativism is correct, moral relativism is correct: moral relativism can allow for no faultless disagreement about meta-ethics. Moral relativism as investigated preys on the vagueness of the content of moral judgments. If moral claims had as part of their

content "and this is the objective, non-relative truth of the matter", they would be *false* according to moral relativism; they would be making a truth claim on a level above the one at which they have the potential of being true. Some moral theorists claim that this is precisely what moral claims involve, and the relativist would have to say that if this is so, all moral claims are false. But regularly, we do not say that moral judgments have meta-ethical implications as part of their content. Meta-ethical doctrines, on the other hand, *have* meta-ethical implications: usually they claim "morality is *this*, and nothing else", hence relativism could not allow for faultless disagreement in meta-ethics.
3. *Empirical disagreement*: we may disagree about the situation, while agreeing about what would make an action right or wrong. This is like the coin-toss example: there can be no faultless disagreement here, even if we have to settle for a solution *as if* there where.
4. *Normative disagreement*: we may disagree about what it is right for a person to do under the circumstances. It is this type of disagreement relativists are committed to accepting as potentially faultless.

What does a reason-centred relativism amount to? Reason-relativism is not realism; it denies the existence of moral facts that hold independently from our reasons to accept them. And it is not non-cognitivism, either: it does not say that moral statements 'express' anything. It is rather that if you are in a certain (psychological) state, certain considerations are, as a matter of objective fact, morally reason-giving for you. This is something that holds in virtue of your internal state, but the property of rightness is a property of the action, not of the internal state. And the ascription of rightness is not conditioned by the internal state, only the truth of it is. Consider yourself if put in an amoral state, let's say after an operation that has deprived you of your ability to judge morally: you can still say truthfully that there are things that your amoral self should do. But your amoral self, if realised, could not say truthfully that he/she should do those things. The property ascribed is not a property of your internal state, but of the action *given* your internal states *now*[7]. The conditions for something being a reason are not identical to the truth-conditions for a moral claim. This is what needs to be mirrored in a relativistic theory somehow. Indexicalism is not the way to do it, even if reference of a sort is necessary for moral claims to hold true they are not part of the conditions for the truth of those claims *when made*, the index is not part of the content of the moral judgment.

The "ought to be" – "ought to do" distinction in Harman is enlightening, but perhaps not exclusive. Many of our "ought" judgment are a mixture of the two kinds. "You ought to x" could mean "it ought to be the case that you have reason to x". This is part of what disagreeing moral agents are trying to do: convincing their adversaries that there are reasons they have yet not acknowledged, that they believe that it ought to be the case that the others accept. When moral discussion is not pointless, we believe that there are rudimentary conditions for getting the opponent to accept certain reasons. This does not mean that the opponent *has* these reasons already: only that they are within the scope of his cognitive capabilities. The reason I would not say that this person has the reason, though is not conscious of it, yet, is that human beings, presumably, could be convinced of profoundly contradictory reasons. Saying that this agent already has the reasons, then, would imply their having contradictory reasons (not just conflicting, but contradictory), and this would be awkward[8]. *Therefore* "ought to" cannot be confined to just the reasons the appraiser or just the agent has, "ought" comes with this type of meaning too.

[7] This is something that Harman, with his reason relativism about "inner judgments" would not agree with.
[8] There is, though, a possibility that a person instantiate a conflicting set of moral reasons. This situation would be like an internalised version of a deep moral disagreement and, as such, potentially faultless. I will not pursue this possibility further here, but only note that it poses a further problem for relativism.

Relative truth is not the same thing as *relational* truth as in truth about the holding of relations. Relative truth is more on the line of *conditional* truth. I.e. it is not that moral judgments are *about* these conditions, as analytical indexicalism would have it, but rather that moral judgments are true only for those who satisfy those conditions. The conditions for truth for a moral judgment are not truth conditions for the applicability of the judgment: the conditions are not part of the content of the statement the truth of which depends on these conditions.

The reasons appealed to by the judger are typically ordinary, natural, non-relative facts, on the one hand, and principles, often held to be "self-evident", on the other. What is at stake is the status of these facts, and principles when stated, as *reason-giving*. Relativists like Harman want to say that being a reason is a matter of the psychology of the person whose reason it is. Psychology determines the scope of reasons, and when it comes to the psychological conditions for moral judgments, we sometimes and to some extent, differ. Ryan's disagreement situations are also circumstances under which we try to psychologically influence each other, be it through the display of power or authority, or by way of empathy. One of the important parts of that psychology is, of course, the moral principles that one accepts. But that does not mean that the truth of moral statements is reducible to the holding of psychological facts, only that moral truth is (somehow) settled by psychology.

We are *moved* by certain considerations, but our being moved is not just a matter about those considerations, but of our being *sensitive* to those considerations, being disposed to react in a certain manner to them. The difference between moral considerations and other epistemic considerations is that moral considerations *essentially* move people in this way. Internalists claim that accepting a moral claim provides one with reason to act. Relativist notes that what motivates people to act differ with their psychological state, part of which consists of the moral claims that they accept. Since our psychological states and the moral claims that we accepts differs between people, our moral reasons, so the relativist argues, does as well[9]. Supplemented by the claim that there is nothing over and above these reasons that determine the truth of moral claims, this is all that is uniformly claimed by moral relativists. Whatever the virtues of this approach, it at least is not incoherent. As "obvious" as it is for moral realists that we consider our moral claims to hold true universally, as obvious does it seem for relativists that faultless disagreement is possible: the discussion boils down to which theory can account better for the favoured "obvious" feature appealed to by the other. Relativism might be false as a characterization of morality. It would be false as a matter of fact if realism is true. But it is still a contender in the debate about the nature of morality, and it is not ruled out conceptually.

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[9] But note that moral internalists that accept that people differs in what reasons they accept are not committed to relativism.

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