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BEING A REALIST ABOUT RELATIVISM
(IN ETHICS)¹

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"He that will carefully peruse the history of mankind . . .," wrote Locke, "will be able to satisfy himself, that there is scarce that principle of morality to be named, or rule of virtue to be thought on . . ., which is not, somewhere or other, slighted and condemned by the general fashion of whole societies of men . . ."²

Locke himself emphasized the striking diversity of moral opinion and practice to argue only that moral principles are not innate, not that they are in any sense relative.³ Yet many others have taken diversity as grounds for relativism as well.⁴

Through the years moral realists have seemed amazing in their willingness to slough off the evidence relativists marshal. Notoriously, some simply define relativism into incoherence, for example by representing it as saying both that there are no moral claims that apply to all people and that morality requires everyone to respect the practices and attitudes of others.⁵ Others maintain that, in principle, the only evidence we could have for thinking people disagree is evidence that presupposes a broad-based consensus.⁶ Alternatively, some dismiss relativism, as H. A. Prichard does, on the grounds that, as a matter of fact, even if not in principle, sufficiently developed moral beings all agree.⁷ While others recognize cultural differences but see them as explicable effects of a single set of moral principles applied either to differing circumstances or against the background of substantially different non-moral beliefs.⁸ And still others have acknowledged that reasonable people disagree, only to go on to argue that such disagreement is completely irrelevant to the issue of relativism (on the grounds that sociological facts can't establish normative theses).⁹

These are all, I think, unrealistic responses to the challenge posed by relativists — unrealistic because they are either unfair (in underestimating the resources of an opponent), or implausible (in over-estimat-

ing the reach of general philosophical arguments) or overly optimistic (in borrowing against the future the empirical data their argument needs). Nonetheless, these unrealistic responses do press an important question: How should a moral realist respond to the (seemingly) abundant evidence diversity provides for relativism? Many think there is only one reasonable response: abandon moral realism. Being realistic about relativism, they suggest, requires rejecting realism in ethics; for when we face the facts, we'll see that moral facts are not among those to be faced. Being a realist myself (about ethics), I am convinced they are wrong. But conviction alone is not enough. So in this paper I propose to bolster conviction with argument. It will be, though, a cautious and limited argument — one meant only to show that moral realists can stand their ground in the face of moral diversity without relying on excessively optimistic arguments or unrealistic assumptions.

The argument from diversity is, of course, not the only argument available for relativism, even though it is the most influential. And diversity (especially when it is widespread and apparently irreconcilable) may tell against realism, though not via relativism, if (for instance) truth is supposed to be present only when there is convergence of opinion (or if the best explanation of the diversity is that there is no fact of the matter). In this paper, though, I shall put to one side these other arguments and focus exclusively on the argument from diversity to relativism to anti-realism.

I will defend two theses: (i) that, far from being incompatible with moral realism, many plausible versions of relativism are *versions* of moral realism; and (ii) the best interpretation of the argument from diversity to relativism tells not at all against realist versions of relativism.

BEING A REALIST

My first thesis will strike many as outlandish from the start — if anything counts as anti-realism in ethics, they'll insist, it is relativism. Their reaction is, as I'll try to show, an explicable mistake; a mistake because the best account of what is involved in being a realist counts some versions of relativism as realism, an explicable one because most versions of relativism that have been advanced are best seen as having anti-realist motivations.

What's it take to be a real realist? A realist (as I'll use the term) is one who holds of the disputed claims (whether they are claims about morality, modalities, mathematics, etc.) that some of them, when literally construed, are straightforwardly true.¹⁰ So there are two ways to be an anti-realist (with respect to a given domain): deny that the disputed claims are ever either straightforwardly true or false (that is, embrace non-cognitivism); or grant that they may be true or false, but hold that none of them is true (that is, embrace an error theory).

People will of course differ about whether some proposed construal of the disputed claims is a literal one. This is especially true because giving a literal construal is primarily a matter of giving an account of what it is we are doing or reporting when we make the disputed claims and not a matter of describing what we have consciously in mind. Within reasonable bounds, a successful literal construal can come as a surprise to those who make the claims in question. In any case, because people can disagree about whether a proposed construal is successful, they can disagree as well about whether a view establishes realism with respect to the disputed area, even if they agree it establishes the truth of the disputed claims *as interpreted*.¹¹

This explains why, for instance, one person might see himself as establishing the existence of God by arguing there must be a first cause, though another will willingly acknowledge there must be a first cause while seeing that as an inadequate defense of the existence of God — their difference turns on how each interprets the claim that God exists.¹² Similarly, one person might defend as a realist position in ethics a utilitarian view of rightness combined with a naturalized conception of goodness (perhaps in terms of preference satisfaction) while another will treat the view as not a realist one on the grounds that moral claims, when construed literally, involve a commitment (for instance) to non-natural, objectively prescriptive, properties.

In these cases, the people disagree not about whether the claims, given the construal at issue, are straightforwardly true, but about whether the construal is the right one for the disputed claims. This sort of disagreement permeates debates about realism. And recognizing it is central to understanding why relativism in ethics is so rarely seen as a realist position — it is because the standard relativist positions (e.g. that an action is right if approved of by the agent's culture) are radically implausible as literal construals of moral claims. In most cases, the

charitable interpretation of those who defend relativism in ethics is that they are offering the account not as a defense of realism but as a replacement vocabulary of evaluation — one whose motivation lies in trying to avoid the (supposedly) indefensible commitments of moral language taken literally.

People may disagree not only about whether some proposed construal is a literal one, but also about what is involved in a claim being straightforwardly true (or false). So it is worth noting that the requirement that a realist defend the straightforward truth of the disputed claims works essentially as a consistency requirement: A person won't count as having even tried to defend realism about a certain domain unless the sort of truth she ascribes to the claims (given her construal of them) is the same as the truth she ascribes to other claims not under dispute. If the 'truth' had by the disputed claims is not the same sort of truth as that had by unproblematic ones, then defending them as 'true' (in the special localized sense) won't constitute defending them as straightforwardly true — and so won't be a part of a defense of realism with respect to them. A realist must be relying on a 'seamless semantics', when it comes to truth, if her defense is to be a defense of realism with respect to the claims at issue. Thus, if a non-cognitivist defends her right to speak of moral claims as true or false *in a sense*, even if not true or false in the ordinary sense, her position still counts as an anti-realist one.¹³ Likewise, a 'quasi-realist' is steering clear of realism about the disputed claims when she tries to make sense of, and defend talking of, the truth of disputed claims without being committed to their being true in the way non-controversial claims are.¹⁴

Even if someone respects the requirement of a seamless semantics and does defend the straightforward truth of some disputed claims, room remains to wonder (a level up) whether her conception of truth is a realist one. Here again the available positions sort themselves out as the general picture would suggest. The realist about truth holds that truth claims, when literally construed, are some of them straightforwardly true. Anti-realists about truth, in contrast, either deny that truth claims are themselves to be interpreted as cognitively packed; or that, when literally construed, truth claims are all false (say because a truth claim literally construed could itself be true only if it had recognition-transcendent truth conditions and no claims have that¹⁵). Needless to

say, since being a realist in any area involves defending the truth of the disputed claims, one's view of truth will greatly affect what all one takes to be involved in being a realist. Even so, when the debate in question concerns not realism about *truth* but about morals, modals, mathematics, or whatever else, the various local positions and arguments are largely insensitive to different views of truth — as long as the views in play distinguish cognitive from non-cognitive discourse and error theories from (what might be called) success theories. (However, just which view of truth one adopts may greatly affect the difficulty or ease of showing that various disputed claims are true; certain conceptions of truth make being a realist in other areas not especially difficult or interesting.)

I purposely eschew in this general account a number of notions that figure prominently in specific debates about realism. Just to mention a few: nothing is said in the general account about objectivity, independence from the mental, or existence, nor do the more explicitly semantical notions of correspondence, transcendence of recognitional capacities, or bivalence make an appearance. Each of these notions plays an important role in certain debates about realism (the first are crucial when it comes to realism about macro-physical objects, for instance, while the second have their place when it comes to realism about truth). Yet none of these disputed notions will always have a place in distinguishing a position as a realist one. Independence from the mental may be a plausible requirement for realism when it comes to trees and oceans, planets and stars, but it is not a distinguishing feature when it comes to realism about the mental; bivalence might go hand-in-hand with realism in mathematics, but realism about (for instance) color or size seems perfectly compatible with acknowledging that some of our predicates are vague and have indeterminate extensions; and existence may be crucial to realism about scientific entities, but not to realism about scientific laws (that make no existence claims).

Presumably, the *truth* ascribed to the disputed claims, if it is to count as straightforward truth, must be objective and itself independent of the mental states of those who might make the claims — so that we're talking about claims that are really true, not 'true-for-me' or 'true-for-you'. No doubt, too, a realist will have to hold that the truths at issue are not merely constituted by beliefs about them. One has not defended

moral realism if one holds that the truth of moral claims is dependent on beliefs that have those claims as their content. However, this is not because realism *per se*, or moral realism in particular, requires either independence from the mental or even independence from belief, but because the sort of dependence at issue leaves no non-circular way to make sense out of the content of the beliefs in question.

Against the background of this general account of realism, a moral realist emerges as one who holds of moral claims that some of them, when literally construed, are straightforwardly true; while an anti-realist will either defend non-cognitivism or an error theory. A successful defense of moral realism turns, then, both on defending a specific construal of moral claims and on establishing that the claims so construed are (some of them) straightforwardly true.

Depending on which, if any, cognitivist interpretation one advances, more detailed specifications of what is involved in moral realism come into play. Of course, since non-cognitivists hold that a proper understanding of moral claims shows that moral claims can never be either straightforwardly true or false, they'll maintain that realism is doomed from the start and that there is no interesting question to be asked about what would have to be the case for moral claims to be straightforwardly true. Yet for cognitivists, error as well as success theorists, the question of what would have to be the case for moral claims to be true is pivotal.

Not surprisingly, the answers that have been proposed (and defended) span a broad range — according to some, moral claims involve a commitment to objectively prescriptive features of the world (objective features awareness of which necessarily motivate agents regardless of their preferences); according to others, they involve a commitment to objective but not intrinsically motivating features of the world; according to still others, they involve a commitment only to intersubjective features of the world that depend for their presence on either the 'human constitution' or peoples' conventions or practices. (Even on an intersubjectivist construal of moral claims, I should point out, the realist's position will be that such claims are straightforwardly, objectively, true — it is just that they are true in virtue of people or practices being what they are.)

Obviously, the burdens a moral realist must bear depend crucially on which account offers the best literal construal of moral claims.¹⁶

Correspondingly, whether relativism is ever compatible with realism depends on whether relativism offers the best literal construal of moral claims, on whether that construal is a cognitivist one, and on whether, so construed, the claims are ever true.

BEING A RELATIVIST

Regardless of their metaethical views, virtually everyone accepts an uninteresting sense of relativism. To be a relativist in this sense is to hold that in many cases what's right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden, good or bad, depends in some way on the circumstances — on what expectations people have legitimately acquired, on what the available options are, on who will be affected, etc. If that is all that is involved relativism remains fairly uncontentious.¹⁷

Yet contentious and interesting relativisms are close at hand. They fall neatly into two categories according to whether they advance a non-cognitivist or a cognitivist interpretation of moral claims.

Non-cognitivist relativists start with the assumption that moral claims are subject to appraisal, say in terms of correctness or appropriateness or acceptability, even though not in terms of truth or falsity, and then argue that how moral claims should be appraised depends on — that is, is relative to — something else, for instance, who is doing the appraising of the claims or who's claims are being appraised. One common (though perhaps misleading) way to express this view is to say that moral claims are either 'true-for-me' or 'false-for-me', or 'true-for-us' or 'false-for-us', etc., despite the fact that they are not straightforwardly true or false. The heart of this view is that the terms of appraisal appropriate to moral claims fall short of regular straightforward truth in that one and the same moral claim can count as both correct and incorrect (or whatever) depending on who is appraising it or who is making it.¹⁸

Traditional non-cognitivism, with its emphasis on the intimate connection between moral terms and the (often variable) attitudes of those who use them appropriately, lends itself to a defense of anti-realist relativism that is both disconcerting and plausible. Even so, non-cognitivists need not be relativists. A non-cognitivist may hold, to take one case, that there are sufficiently elaborate constraints on when moral

claims are to count as correct (or appropriate, or acceptable) that one and the same judgments will necessarily be correct (or whatever) for everyone.¹⁹ Thus a non-cognitivist is not committed to saying that the appropriate standards for evaluating moral claims are standards that will evaluate them as correct or incorrect only relative to some set of conventions or attitudes.

Cognitivist relativists differ fundamentally from their non-cognitivist counterparts in their willingness to treat moral claims as straightforwardly true or false, even if only true or false relative to something or other, and not just true-for-me or false-for-me (or whatever). They locate relativity not in the terms of appraisal appropriate to evaluating moral claims (which are straightforward truth and falsity) but rather in the content of the claims themselves.²⁰

Those who defend cognitivist relativism characteristically treat the surface grammar of moral claims as misleading on the grounds that moral terms leave inexplicit some parameter or other that is essential to understanding moral claims.²¹ According to this sort of relativism, the truth of moral claims depends on certain appropriate relations holding (say, between the action being judged and the standards in force in the culture of the person performing the action).

To take a non-moral (and I hope non-problematic) case first, cognitivist relativists about legal claims will interpret "driving on the left-hand side of the road is illegal" as straightforwardly true or false — but only once a relevant legal system is specified (either contextually or explicitly). In effect, they interpret the claim as elliptical for "driving on the left-hand side of the road is illegal in ___" (where the blank is to be filled in so as to identify the relevant legal system).

Analogously, cognitivist relativists about moral claims will interpret "intentionally killing one's parents is wrong" as straightforwardly true or false — but only once a relevant moral community, or system of rules and practices, is specified (either contextually or explicitly). In effect, they interpret the claim as elliptical for "intentionally killing one's parents is wrong for ___" (where the blank is to be filled in so as to identify the relevant moral community or system of rules and practices).²² In a similar way, someone might hold, and people have, that claims of the form "x is good" are more perspicuously represented by "x is good-for-y" so that the claim is seen to have a truth value only

once the argument place indicated by 'y' is filled in. The goodness of x is then taken as relative to some 'y' or other; as a result it may be true both that "x is good" and that "x is not good" — if disambiguating the predicate 'good' reveals the first to mean, say, "x is good-for-Peter" and the second to mean "x is not good-for-Paul."

Cognitivist relativists about morality differ among themselves, of course, as to what the truth of moral claims depends on or is relative to — some hold the truth of the claims to be relative to the person doing the judging, while others hold that their truth is relative to the person being judged; and they differ as well as to whether it is the relevant person's attitudes and commitments that matter, or the conventions and practices of the culture to which that person belongs. Some even hold that the truth of moral claims is relative not to particular people or groups of people, but to moral traditions or conceptual frameworks. They agree, though, that moral claims properly understood are straightforwardly true or false, albeit only relative to some parameter or other. So, unlike non-cognitivist relativism, cognitivist relativism — *if it can be defended as giving the proper literal construal of moral claims* — can form part of a defense of moral realism (as long as some of the claims so construed come out true).²³

WHY BE A RELATIVIST?

With all this distinction mongering behind us, let me turn to two questions: "Why and how do the differences relativists identify lend support to relativism?" and "Suppose they do recommend relativism, how do they bear on moral realism?"

To the second question a schematic answer is now available: assuming the argument from moral diversity to relativism goes through, it will undermine realism in ethics if but only if either (i) the relativism diversity recommends is a non-cognitivist relativism or (ii) if, recommending a cognitivist relativism, it recommends one for which a success theory is indefensible.

But, to go back to the first question, why think diversity recommends relativism of any sort? The relativist's answer, at least in its most compelling guise, is an inference to the best explanation. To make the argument, the relativist first emphasizes the sort of diversity moral opinion

exhibits. People don't just have differing moral attitudes, all of which are compatible. We are not presented simply with a collage of moral practices and convictions that harmonize. Sometimes, the relativist points out, the differing moral practices, convictions, etc., are best seen not merely as different but as (in some important sense) incompatible.

Exactly what sort of incompatibility is at issue, though, is itself controversial. Non-cognitivist and cognitivist relativists alike will resist seeing the relevant cases as cases of people holding beliefs that are logically incompatible. Non-cognitivists will resist this characterization because they deny that the differing practices and convictions represent differences in moral *belief*. Cognitivists will resist it because they rely on cases of incompatibility to show that the truth of the beliefs involved depends on some variable parameter in a way that allows the apparently contradictory beliefs both to be true (even though incompatible along some other dimension). That said, and risking a bit of distortion, I'll refer to the relevant cases of diversity, those that involve some sort of incompatibility, as cases of disagreement. The first step in the relativists' argument, then, is to point out that among the differences we discover, and can imagine, are cases not simply of difference but of disagreement.

Mere disagreement alone, of course, can't establish either that what fact of the matter there is is relative or that there is no fact of the matter in the relevant area. This is because for any given subject, not just ethics, it's easy to find individual people as well as whole cultures that disagree with one another. Virtually no area is immune to disagreement, though presumably, at least in some areas — even if not in ethics — there are non-relative facts about which the people in question disagree. It is a mere parody of the relativist, however, to suggest that she *simply* infers relativism from disagreement — yet another unrealistic response realists are prone to offer. What recommends relativism about morality is not the mere fact of disagreement, but rather something distinctive about the nature of moral disagreement. And the second step in the relativists' argument involves identifying some feature (or set of features) of moral disagreement that sets it apart from other sorts of disagreements.

With this in mind, relativists often point out that widespread disagreement on particular moral issues and even more general moral principles and practices is complemented by widespread agreement

among people on two things: that some ethical disputes are destined never to be resolved even among those all of whom are reasonable, and that, to a dramatic extent, the moral beliefs a person holds depend crucially upon her training, temperament, and environment. Experience, they emphasize, testifies not just to the diversity of moral opinions and practices, but also to both the permanence of moral disagreement and to the dependence of moral opinion and practices (our own as well as everyone else's) on socialization, etc. Non-cognitivist and cognitivist relativists, of course, take this diversity, permanence, and dependence as evidence for very different views; they nonetheless rely equally on the evidence. And they mobilize the evidence in essentially the same way; by arguing that relativism (of some sort) offers the best explanation of one or more of these features of moral experience.

Unlike disputes having to do with whether the earth is round or with whether there are sub-atomic particles, or with whether evil spirits cause diseases, some moral disagreements appear both perpetual and unresolvable. Yet even relativists acknowledge that moral disagreements between people are sometimes resolved, at least when there is a background of shared principles to which those disagreeing can appeal.

In fact, many relativists (though by no means all) appeal to the role of shared principles in resolving moral disagreements as support for relativism, arguing that relativism explains when and why some moral disagreements are resolvable and others not. They maintain that a careful look at moral reasoning will reveal that disagreements are always resolved, when they are resolved, by appeal to shared standards.

They advance the following picture of moral decision and moral reasoning: to make a moral decision, what one does is begin with one's moral principles, survey one's circumstances to see which principle is relevant, and then apply the principle to the case at hand. In simple situations, that's the end of the story. In more complex situations, where more than one principle applies, one must either appeal to some higher principle one already accepts that resolves the conflict or one must, if one has run out of principles, simply choose between the two conflicting ones. Moral argumentation among people reflects basically the same structure: so long as people agree on the circumstances and embrace the same principles, they will reach the same moral conclusions. And if they differ, in the first instance, as to which principles

apply, their disagreement can be resolved as long as there is a higher level principle they share which decides between the two conflicting principles. But, these relativists insist, once they run out of shared principles each must simply choose, and each will lack any moral ground whatsoever for criticizing the other's choice if it differs.²⁴

On this familiar picture, moral decision and moral argumentation must proceed from shared or recognized standards to particular decisions or arguments. The only way to argue for some moral conclusion is to appeal to some already accepted moral principle. This contrasts sharply, some relativists say, with the sort of arguments one finds in nonmoral contexts where people appeal not to already shared or recognized principles but instead to bits of evidence used to support the principles.

If we stay in the grip of these pictures of moral and nonmoral argumentation respectively, relativism about morality will seem inevitable. For if we can argue legitimately only by appeal to already accepted or recognized moral standards then on the one hand the availability of arguments will depend on which standards happen to be accepted or recognized, and on the other hand moral argument will have to end when the supply of recognized and accepted standards is exhausted.

Yet neither moral nor nonmoral reasoning is fairly represented by either of these models taken alone. Rather, what a reasonable person does is move back and forth between plausible theoretical principles and more particular, apparently acceptable, specific judgments, in search of a fit between them that leaves the theoretical claims supported by the specific evidence and the evidence, in turn, explained by the theoretical claims. Sometimes what's initially accepted in some area is abstract and general, while at other times what is initially accepted is specific and particular; yet regardless of what is initially accepted, defensible reasoning involves subjecting each piece to the test of coherence with the whole. Sometimes, in order to get a better fit between theoretical claims and particular judgments we must adjust our principles; other times, again in the service of a fit between a principle and particular judgment, we must amend or reject our judgments. Either way, the reasons for the changes we make, if the changes are reasonable, will be found in the other principles and considered judgments we embrace.

Even if we reject the over-simple model of moral reasoning, relativism might still be part of the best explanation of our moral experience. Whether it is depends on whether, and how well, it takes account of not just diversity but of the other central features of our moral life — it must make sense of moral phenomenology, argumentation, and language, and of the connection between morality and action. At the same time, there need be nothing conceptually parochial about the various considerations that get balanced-in when evaluating the relativists' explanations; metaphysical and epistemological, social and psychological, no less than moral, considerations properly come into play.

In bolstering the case for relativism — by expanding its explanatory sights beyond cases of moral disagreement — relativists often appeal to the apparent dependence of moral attitudes on one's society and circumstances. This fact seems to undercut any claim one might make for the superiority of one's own moral attitudes as over against someone else's — they are all equally the product of socialization. As Herodotus argues (over-stating the case):

... if anyone, no matter who were given the opportunity of choosing amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.²⁵

To whatever extent moral convictions do depend on our socialization and environment, one must wonder whether it's to an extent greater than, or different from, that to which any of our non-moral beliefs depend on our socialization and environment. Unless it is, no argument resting on the dependence of moral convictions will support relativism with respect to morals any more than it does with respect to any and all of our other beliefs — including beliefs about the dependence of moral opinion. One's non-moral beliefs, however, no less than one's moral convictions, evidently find their source largely in one's education, and in the views of those with whom one interacts; we are usually in a position to offer at least the sketch of a sociological/psychological explanation of why the people in question hold the views (moral or not) that they do. To have any special application to morality, the dependence argument needs to be supplemented in a way that

shows that moral convictions differ from non-problematic beliefs by being either more dependent, or dependent in a different way, on socialization, etc.

By way of supplementation, relativists standardly offer one or both of the following arguments. Sometimes they appeal back to the nature of moral differences, arguing that the patterns of difference reveal that moral claims, if they report facts at all, must report facts that vary systematically either from individual to individual or from culture to culture. Other times they appeal to the intimate connection between peoples' moral convictions and their motivations, arguing that the convictions vary, in a way beliefs without a relativized content do not, on peoples' affective states. In each case the argument will be that moral claims reflect *a particular sort of systematic variation* that is best explained by relativism.

In coming to grips with this sort of argument, it is important to keep in mind that relativism, of both the cognitivist and the non-cognitivist varieties, involves first drawing a distinction among moral claims, counting some as true (in the cognitivist case) or correct (in the non-cognitivist case) and others not; and second holding that which category a claim belongs to can be decided only once some parameter is fixed. This is important because neither of the above arguments will contribute to the relativist's cause unless the systematic variation it points to is of a distinctive kind: what varies systematically with the appropriate features (of individuals or cultures, depending on the sort of relativism being advanced) must not be *all* moral claims people using the language might make but only those counted by those people as true or correct.²⁶ Otherwise, relativism's distinctive thesis — that the truth or correctness of the moral claims is actually relative to those features — will have nothing to contribute to the explanation of the variation.²⁷

Suppose the right sort of pattern is found, so that the moral claims people take to be true or correct (but not the other claims) are strongly correlated with the parameter picked-out as crucial by the version of relativism being defended. Then the relativist is in a good position to offer an explanation: people standardly *take* the claims to be true or correct when but only when the appropriate feature is present because the claims *are* true or correct then and only then. But if, on the other

hand, no such pattern is exhibited — if either there's no discernable pattern to the diversity, or if the pattern to be found is a correlation between all moral claims (and not just the true or correct ones) and the privileged parameter — then whatever explanation there is of the diversity won't rely on appeal to relativism.

Whether moral disagreements are as regular and well-patterned as the relativist supposes, though, is reasonably open to question. The correlations that would have to hold between the moral claims identified by people as true or correct, on the one hand, and features either of individuals or cultures, on the other hand, are much harder to establish and much less clear than is commonly assumed. Regardless, any argument, to the extent the variation it identifies exhibits an appropriate pattern, will support nicely some version of relativism (either cognitivist or not). For if the correlations do hold, it might well be that relativism forms part of the best explanation of the patterns of diversity our use of moral claims exhibits (depending on what other explanations are available).

From the realist's point of view, the crucial thing to notice is that if the patterns of variation are as supposed, a realist can accommodate them as easily as a non-cognitivist can — as long as it is plausible to offer as a literal construal of moral claims one that makes their truth in some sense relative to whatever it is with which the relevant moral convictions vary.

Certainly, not all literal construals are equally plausible. And their plausibility may seem to turn on exactly what sort of pattern of variation is discovered. With this in mind, an anti-realist might maintain that the particular pattern of variation that recommends relativism thwarts a realist's attempt to offer a cognitivist literal construal of moral language. If, for example, the appropriate moral claims (the ones picked out by people as true or correct) tracked in some direct way the preferences of the person making the claims, a cognitivist relativist could accommodate the pattern only by holding that the claims are true when the person making the claim has those preferences. Just such a pattern is assumed by those who defend the view that "x is good" simply means "I like x." According to them, the claim that something is good is true if and only if the person making the claim likes the thing in question. Although this is a cognitivist position, one might reasonably think it

extremely implausible as a literal construal of moral claims and so take the pattern as undermining the realist's attempt to defend the truth of moral claims *literally construed*. Thus we seem to get a nice, neat, argument from diversity for an anti-realist relativism.

Importantly, though, the grounds we would have for rejecting as implausible the cognitivist's proposal are at the same time grounds for doubting that the supposed pattern of variation is there to be discovered. After all, what makes the cognitivist proposal so implausible is that it would commit us to treating as true claims we think false (when a person prefers something we think not good) and *vice versa*. So while it is quite reasonable to reject as radically implausible the suggestion that "x is good" simply means "I like x," it is just as reasonable to reject as radically implausible the view that the appropriate moral claims — that is, the ones we take to be true or correct — co-vary in an appropriate way with the preferences of the person making the claim.

More plausible cognitivist-relativist literal construals of moral claims are available, needless to say; and along with them will come more plausible suggestions as to what patterns of variation we might discover as support for relativism. Actually, since the plausibility of the evidence for some supposed pattern of variation is so closely tied to the plausibility of the cognitivist literal construals it would require, a relativist does well to search out the pattern by identifying reasonable literal construals of the claims in question. Looking first to what literal construals of moral claims are plausible is, in fact, probably the best way to narrow down what pattern of variation (if any) we might discover. Among those presumably not in the running are all the various versions of subjectivism that represent the truth of moral claims as depending solely on the attitudes of either the person making the claim or the person about whom the claim is being made; to the extent subjectivism is offered as a literal construal of moral language, it fails miserably.²⁸ This fact tells against the suggestion that we might discover a pattern of variation that supports any version of subjective relativism (non-cognitivist as well as cognitivist). Whatever pattern there is to discover is, evidently, a pattern that washes out individual differences. Even so, exactly which construals, and corresponding patterns of variation, are most plausible is not at all clear.

What is significant, when it comes to realism, is that the plausibility

of a cognitivist's proposal will normally be directly proportional to the evidence available for the supposed pattern of variation — because it is the same evidence. This means the realist can advance a cognitivist relativism that is just as plausible (as a literal construal of the claims in question) as is the evidence that recommends relativism in the first place. And as long as some of the claims, so construed, are straightforwardly true, realism remains unthreatened. Thus, if we do discover evidence for a pattern of variation that supports relativism, we will have found evidence for a relativism realists can embrace.

Under special circumstances, however, the plausibility of a proposed literal construal might come apart from the plausibility of a supposed pattern of variation.²⁹ If, for example, we could get independent evidence for thinking that moral claims had built into their meaning a claim to objectivity, no matter how much evidence we might marshal for there being a correlation between the moral claims that are taken to be true, and the attitudes of the judges, it would still leave as implausible the proposal that the truth of claims depends on the attitudes of the judge (because such a proposal would conflict with the claim to objectivity). What sort of independent evidence we might have for the claim to objectivity (maybe phenomenological evidence?), and whether that evidence would withstand the evidence for the correlation, is not clear. But there seems to be no reason to rule out the possibility that there might be sufficiently strong evidence of the appropriate kind. If there were such evidence, though, it would short-circuit the relativist's argument — since the independent evidence for objectivism would be evidence against the relativist's thesis and so the relativist's explanation of the pattern of variation.

Needless to say, none of this shows that the cognitivist interpretation is the right one. It shows only that those arguments for relativism that appeal to patterns of diversity and disagreement leave *completely untouched* the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists, and tell not at all against realism.

How the debate between cognitivists and non-cognitivists should be settled turns on which position contributes to the best explanation of other features of moral discourse. The strongest argument against cognitivism, I believe, is to be found in the intimate connection between making a moral judgment and being motivated to act appropriately. A

non-cognitivist might argue that no purely cognitive state may bear the sort of relation to motivation that moral judgments bear. Clearly, the force of this argument depends greatly on just what sort of connection is supposed to hold between making moral judgments and motivation. The tighter the connection, the harder it will be for the cognitivist to account for it. Yet, because the connection invoked is not a connection between making (only) true or correct moral judgments and motivation, but between making *any* moral judgment and motivation, this argument will be of no help to the non-cognitivist *relativist*. No matter how tight the connection, it will not help to establish the pattern of variation required by the argument for relativism.

In any case, I am inclined to think that cognitivism will win out, that a cognitive account of moral discourse will be part of the best explanation not only of the grammatical form of moral language, but also of the patterns of inference, standards of argumentation, and responses of evidence, that characterize moral reasoning. Any reasonable grounds we might have for distinguishing cognitive from non-cognitive discourse, I suspect, will leave moral claims on the cognitive side of the divide. But I won't defend here these inclinations and suspicions.³⁰

NOTES

¹ Originally given at the 1989 Oberlin Philosophy Colloquium on Realism and Relativism, this paper has since been given at Syracuse University, the University of St. Andrews, Dalhousie University, California State University/Northridge, the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of North Carolina/Chapel Hill. On all seven occasions, I benefitted greatly from the discussions that followed. Special thanks are due to Joan McCord, David Wong, Richard Boyd, Earl Conee, Brad Hooker, and Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.

² *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Bk I, Ch II, 10 (New York: Dover, 1959), p. 74.

³ In fact, Locke explicitly cautions against taking the diversity of moral opinion as evidence that either truth or certainty is unavailable in moral matters. *op. cit.*, Bk I. Ch II, 1, p. 64.

⁴ See, for instance, E. A. Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (London, 1932); Melville Herskovits, *Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1947); J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977); Francis Snare, "The Diversity of Morals," *Mind* 89 (1980), pp. 353-69; David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

⁵ For an example of this, see Bernard Williams' *Morality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), pp. 22-26.

⁶ See David Cooper's "Moral Relativism," *Midwest Studies* III (1978), pp. 97-108;

and S. L. Hurley's "Objectivity and Disagreement," in Ted Honderich (ed.) *Morality and Objectivity*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), pp. 54-97. There are at least three reasons to think moral realists would be unrealistic to think an argument from the nature of interpretation (that relies on the principle of charity) will secure a defense against the possibility of widespread and deep moral disagreement. First, the mutual dependence of beliefs and other attitudes means that even an unrestricted application of the principle of charity may only get us agreement in attitude, not belief - which won't be enough for realism. Second, even if respecting the principle of charity does require attributing widespread agreement between those we're interpreting and ourselves, and even if it turns out that we end up attributing moral beliefs (and not just attitudes) to others and ourselves, the widespread agreement must, to be plausible, leave room for localized disagreement. And there's no reason to assume the moral beliefs - even the whole of our moral beliefs - won't be one such locale. Third, suppose we can't successfully interpret others' moral beliefs without seeing them as having a content relevantly similar to our own, we might still know enough about their other beliefs and behavior to recognize that there are significant differences even if we can't successfully interpret their moral beliefs.

⁷ See "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?", footnote 1, pp. 5-6, in *Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968). In a similar vein, Kolnai maintains that "Moral Consensus is a constant - absolute and immutable." It is a consensus, he thinks, that runs consistently through "the variety and the richness in change of human types, endeavours, objects of pursuit, practices and customs as a whole." See Aurel Kolnai's "Moral Consensus," in *Ethics, Value and Reality* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978) p. 160. Kolnai does go on to say, I should note, that the consensus, while absolute and (in a certain sense) immutable, does reflect human nature, p. 161.

⁸ Clyde Kluckhohn, for instance, observed that "Every culture has a concept of murder, distinguishing this from execution, killing in war, and other 'justifiable homicides.' The notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behavior, of prohibitions upon untruth under defined circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity, of mutual obligations between parents and children - these and many other moral concepts are altogether universal." "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," *Journal of Philosophy*, 52 (1955), pp. 663-77. A similar view is defended by William Lecky in *History of European Morals* (quoted in Cooper's "Moral Relativism," *op. cit.*).

⁹ Paul Taylor defends this view in "Social Science and Ethical Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy* 55 (1958), pp. 32-44.

¹⁰ The account I offer here finds more elaborate expression in my "The Many Moral Realisms," *Spindel Conference Proceedings, The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24 Supplement (1986), pp. 1-22; reprinted in *Essays on Moral Realism*, G. Sayre-McCord (ed.), (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

¹¹ Berkeley comes to mind here. He offered his version of idealism as a literal construal of material object statements and so saw himself as defending realism - yet his construal is so implausible that his position is almost universally regarded (rightly) as an anti-realist position, despite his protestations to the contrary. To embrace idealism with respect to material object statements is to abandon the realist's burden of defending the truth of material object statements *literally construed*.

¹² One can easily imagine the second person saying "If that's all you mean when you say 'God exists' then sure He does - I was denying the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent being."

¹³ Very few people deny that it is appropriate to use the words 'true' and 'false' in describing moral claims. The common non-cognitivist position involves distinguishing between the ways in which non-moral and moral claims must relate to the world in

order to count as true. Whether this distinction is put in terms of there being different senses of 'true' or in terms of a difference between factual claims (that must fit the world to be true) and value claims (that must express affect to be true) doesn't significantly effect matters. Stevenson defends the second approach in "Retrospective Comments," in *Facts and Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963) and in "Ethical Fallibility," in Richard DeGeorge (ed.), *Ethics and Society* (New York: Doubleday, 1966), pp. 197–217. See also J. J. C. Smart's *Ethics, Persuasion, and Truth* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

¹⁴ See Simon Blackburn's *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984).

¹⁵ This seems to be one line of argument to be found in Dummett's defense of anti-realism regarding truth. Another line to be extracted from Dummett runs like this. Despite what self-proclaimed realists about truth say, the only notion of truth we could have (and so the one we do have) is bound by our recognitional capacities, so the truth conditions of our claims (including truth claims themselves) are to be identified with their assertibility conditions. In this form, the argument is best seen as anti-realist about 'supposed realist truth' (on the grounds that 'supposed realist truth' is nonsense) and realist about our ordinary conception of truth (which, it is argued, is just the Dummettian notion). See Michael Dummett's *Truth and Other Enigmas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978) as well as, for the second line of argument, Hilary Putnam's *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), esp. Lecture II.

¹⁶ Construing moral claims as free of problematic metaphysical commitments removes an important obstacle to defending moral realism but hardly insures the success of such a defense. Many claims that purport to refer to natural properties or entities fail — to take a stock example, consider claims about phlogiston.

¹⁷ It would of course be very contentious if the claim were that the truth of *all* claims about what's right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden, good or bad, depends in some way on the circumstances — on what expectations people have legitimately acquired, on what the available options are, on who will be affected, etc. Kantians and utilitarians alike will reject this claim on the grounds that the fundamental principle each endorses is itself true regardless of the circumstances — even though the respective principles have as consequences that other claims about what is right or wrong depend for their truth on the circumstances. But even some of those who might embrace this more controversial claim, e.g. particularists, are not in any interesting sense relativists. See, for instance, Jonathan Dancy's "Ethical Particularism and Morally Relevant Properties," *Mind* 92 (1983), pp. 530–547 and David McNaughton's *Moral Vision* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1988).

¹⁸ This sort of view has been defended by Bernard Williams in "The Truth In Relativism," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 75 (1974–75), pp. 215–228; and by Jonathan Lear in "Ethics, Mathematics, and Relativism," *Mind* (1983), pp. 38–60.

¹⁹ A non-relativist non-cognitivist might alternatively hold that, while there is no particular identifiable substantive position that moral reasoning commits one to, the structure of such reasoning does nonetheless commit one to thinking there is only one correct set of moral attitudes. Simon Blackburn suggests this position in *Spreading the Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 198–202. C. L. Stevenson takes a similar line in "Relativism and Nonrelativism in the Theory of Value," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Association* (1961–62), reprinted in *Facts and Values*, *op. cit.*, pp. 71–93.

²⁰ Gilbert Harman, in defending this sort of relativism, describes himself as offering a 'soberly logical thesis' — the upshot of which is that the 'ought' in "Oliver North ought to confess" is, despite appearances, "a four-place predicate (or 'operator'), 'Ought (A,D,C,M),' which relates an agent A, a type of act D, considerations C, and motivating

attitudes M." See "Moral Relativism Defended," in *Philosophical Review* 84 (1975), pp. 3–22.

²¹ On some versions of relativism, recognizing the suppressed parameter is important to understanding the *grammatical form* of moral predicates; on others, recognizing the suppressed parameter leaves intact the apparent grammatical form of moral predicates and plays a role only when it comes to giving a proper philosophical account of what must be the case for the claims to be true. The latter differs from the former in begging off of offering a revisionist interpretation of the grammatical form of moral predicates. It simply involves the view that whatever the form of the predicates, they apply only when a certain relation holds. Both David Wiggins and Colin McGinn emphasize the difference between (what might be called) grammatical relativism and simple relational relativism. See Wiggins' "Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life," *Proceedings of the British Academy* LXII (1976), pp. 331–378; and McGinn's *The Subjective View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

²² Similar accounts are commonly given for 'good', 'ought', etc. — each one treating the terms as elliptical for others that are explicitly relational.

²³ Even if one embraces a version of cognitivist relativism, a realist must defend a success theory — which won't necessarily be easy. If, for example, one thought the proper literal construal of moral claims reveals their truth to depend on God's will, a defense of a success theory would require establishing the existence of God.

²⁴ This, anyway, is the picture of interpersonal argumentation according to those who give priority to an individual's standards. Those versions of relativism that give priority to the standards of a culture see in moral reasoning basically the same structure but argue that it is the culture's standards, not the individual's that must be appealed to, and that it is when the culture's standards run out, not when the individual's standards run out, that reasoning must come to an end and all that's left is arbitrary.

²⁵ *The Histories* Aubrey de Selincourt (trans.) revised by E. R. Burn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), pp. 220.

²⁶ Which claims will count as true or correct will clearly depend on which account of moral claims is used to explain the variations.

²⁷ I take it that Williams recognizes the need for such a pattern when he identifies relativism with the view that the appropriate application of terms of appraisal is limited to judgments that stand in (what he calls) real confrontation with our own; terms of appraisal are only appropriately applied when the options in question bear a sufficient relation to our concerns. See "The Truth In Relativism," *op. cit.*

²⁸ Arguments against this proposal as a literal construal of claims about goodness are commonplace. See G. E. Moore's *Ethics* and C. L. Stevenson's "The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms," *Mind* 46 (1937), pp. 14–31.

²⁹ Richard Boyd and William Alston have each emphasized this in discussion.

³⁰ In "Moral Kind Terms" (manuscript) I articulate and defend a non-relativist realist account of moral language that is compatible with widespread disagreement — one that, on analogy with natural kinds, introduces the notion of moral kinds. Moral terms (I argue) operate much like natural kind terms, especially in their role as putatively referring terms and in their resistance to analytical definitions. Yet they differ in one crucial respect. In contrast with natural kind terms, we don't, and don't believe we should, defer solely to scientific theory in fixing the true nature of what we are referring to in using moral terms. Instead, we adjust our views of what is good, or right, just, or obligatory, as we change our justificatory theory. Discovering the referent of our moral terms is a process of discovering what justificatorily significant kinds (and not just explanatorily significant kinds) regulate our moral beliefs. Among other things, since (on this account) the extensions of moral terms are not fixed by the particular beliefs people happen to hold, the moral kinds approach helps to make sense of how people

with wildly divergent moral conceptions can still be disagreeing with (rather than talking past) on another.

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