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What is Relativism?

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INTRODUCTION

Few philosophers have been tempted to be relativists about absolutely everything—although, we are told, there have been some notable exceptions (Protagoras).

Many philosophers, however, have been tempted to be relativists about *specific* domains of discourse, especially about those domains that have a normative character. Gilbert Harman, for example, has defended a relativistic view of morality, Richard Rorty a relativistic view of epistemic justification, and Crispin Wright a relativistic view of judgments of taste.¹ But what exactly is it to be a relativist about a given domain of discourse?

The term “relativism” has, of course, been used in a bewildering variety of senses and it is not my aim to discuss each and every one of those senses here. Rather, what interests me is the notion that is characterized by the following core idea: the relativist about a given domain, D, purports to have discovered that the *truths* of D involve an *unexpected* relation to a parameter.

This idea lies at the heart of the most important and successful relativistic theses ever proposed. Thus, Galileo discovered that the truths about motion are unexpectedly relational in that the motion of an object is always relative to a variable frame of reference. And Einstein discovered that the truths about mass are unexpectedly relational in that the mass of an object is always relative to a variable frame of reference.

In this paper, I will develop a model for how such discoveries should be understood. And I will then consider to what extent that model gives us a purchase on the sorts of relativistic theses—about morality, for example, or epistemic justification—which have most interested philosophers.

For comments on an earlier draft, I am grateful to Kit Fine, Paul Horwich, Stephen Schiffer, Crispin Wright and the participants in the Summer School in Analytic Philosophy in Florence 2004.

¹ See Gilbert Harman and J. J. Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996); Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Crispin Wright, ‘Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb,’ this volume, Ch. 2.

RELATIONAL MEANINGS

Galileo, we may suppose, discovered that truths about motion are unexpectedly relative to a frame of reference. What does that mean?

A natural first thought is that the unexpected relationality is to be found in the *propositions* expressed by ordinary motion sentences. On this view, whereas we might have been tempted to construe a sentence like:

(1) “The Earth moves”

as expressing a proposition involving the monadic concept of *moving*, after Galileo we know that it really expresses a proposition involving the relational concept of *moving relative to a frame of reference*, with the variable frame of reference being contextually supplied.

On this view, then, what Galileo discovered is that a form of contextualism is true for motion sentences: the proposition expressed by a given motion sentence varies as a function of the context in which it is used.

Let us consider a case for which such a contextualist proposal is tailor-made, the case of the spatial relation expressed by the phrase ‘... to the left of ...’ How does this work?

Here is a first stab. Whenever someone utters a sentence of the form:

(2) “A is to the left of B”

he doesn’t express the proposition:

(3) *A is to the left of B*

but rather the proposition:

(4) *A is to the left of B relative to reference point F,*

where F is some contextually supplied frame of reference.

Delicacy is called for in stating this view. We can’t just say that whenever someone uses the sentence:

“S”

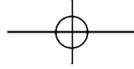
he ends up expressing not the proposition:

S

but rather the proposition:

S relative to F

for, then, any utterance of “S” will end up expressing the hopelessly infinitary proposition:



... ((S relative to F) relative to F) relative to F) ...

The correct way to formulate the view we are after is to say, rather, that anyone uttering the sentence “A is to the left of B” *intends* that utterance to be *elliptical* for the sentence:

(5) “A is to the left of B relative to reference point F.”

With that qualification, we then get the contextualism we were after.

Now, such a view is fine for the predicate ‘... to the left of ...’ because it is plausible that *any* competent user of that predicate *knows* that it is in fact a three-place and not a two-place predicate. It is, therefore, not implausible to say that any competent user of (2) would intend it to be elliptical for (5).

But it is not similarly plausible to claim that any competent user of the predicate “moves” knows that it expresses the concept of a relation rather than the concept of a monadic property. As Harman correctly notes, it would be wrong to claim that when people said:

“The Earth moves”

they intended their remark to be elliptical for:

“The Earth moves relative to a frame of reference F.”

Some perfectly competent possessors of the concept of motion were unaware that the only truths there are about motion are relational ones and so had no reason to mean only the relational judgment.

And if that doesn’t seem obvious in the case of motion, it should certainly seem obvious in the cases of mass and simultaneity. It is simply not psychologically plausible to claim that, before Einstein, ordinary users of such sentences as:

(6) “x has mass M”

and:

(7) “e1 is simultaneous with e2”

intended their utterances to be elliptical for, respectively:

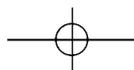
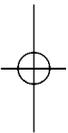
(8) “x has mass M relative to reference frame F”

and

(9) “e1 is simultaneous with e2 relative to reference frame F”.

No one before Einstein knew that there are no absolute facts about mass and simultaneity but only relational facts and so no one would have intended their utterances to be elliptical for the corresponding relational statements.

Intuitively, then, it would be wrong to construe the discovery of relativism about a given domain as the discovery that the characteristic sentences of that



domain express unexpectedly relational propositions. That construal wouldn't fit the classic cases drawn from physics.

Nor, intuitively, would it fit the cases that most interest philosophers, namely, the ones concerning morality or epistemic justification. The relativist about morality, too, claims to have discovered some sort of unsuspected relationism in the moral domain. But it would be utterly implausible to construe that as the claim that when ordinary speakers assert such sentences as:

(10) "It is morally wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car."

they *intend* their remarks to be elliptical for some relational sentence like:

(11) "In relation to moral code M, it is morally wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car."

Relativism about morality, if true, is not vouchsafed by the relativistic intentions of the makers of moral judgments.

HARMAN: RELATIONAL TRUTH CONDITIONS

If the discovery of relativism about a given domain is not a discovery about the kinds of propositions that are expressed by the characteristic sentences of that domain, what sort of discovery is it, then?

Gilbert Harman has proposed an alternative answer: his idea is that we should take Einstein to have discovered something not about the *propositions* expressed by the characteristic sentences of that domain but about their *truth-conditions*. He says:

Einstein's relativistic conception of mass involves the following claim about the truth conditions of judgments of mass:

For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *the mass of X is M* has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to spatio-temporal framework F the mass of X is M*.

Switching back to the example of motion, Harman's idea seems to be, then, that to be a relativist about motion is to claim that, although the *proposition* expressed by (1) is just the disquoted non-relational proposition:

(12) *The Earth moves*

the truth-condition of that sentence is not just the disquoted truth-condition:

(13) The Earth moves

which attributes to the Earth the monadic property of moving, but is rather the relational truth-condition,



(14) The Earth moves relative to the frame of reference F,

which attributes to the Earth the relational property of moving relative to a frame of reference F.

Put in somewhat other terms, Harman’s view seems to be that although our *concept* of motion may just be the concept of a non-relational property, the *property* denoted by that concept is the relational property of moving relative to a reference frame.

On the way I am reading Harman, then, to discover that relativism is true about a given domain is to discover not that the sentences of that domain express *propositions* that contain a reference to a hidden parameter, but to discover that their *truth-conditions* do.

But can we really discover that although the sentence:

“p”

expresses:

p,

its truth-condition is not just the disquoted condition:

p,

but, rather, the relational condition:

p relative to F?

Do we really understand what it would be to abandon the platitude that:

The proposition that *p* is true if and only if *p*?

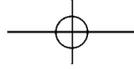
And whether or not we are able ultimately to make sense of this, is that really a plausible description of what Einstein discovered about mass or Galileo about motion?

Harman’s main argument for his view is that while it would be implausible to attribute to our ancestors a relational *meaning*, it would be “mean-spirited” not to attribute to them the relational truth-condition. For if we didn’t attribute that relational truth-condition to them, we would end up accusing them of massive and systematic untruth—since nothing has the monadic property of moving that they keep attributing to things—and that, apparently, would not be very nice.

While I don’t much like being called mean-spirited, I’ve never been sure how much weight to assign its avoidance in philosophical theorizing. I mean: if I *am* willing to be mean-spirited, does that mean that I get to *reject* a relativism about motion?

At any rate, I don’t think the charge is fair: I think we can be perfectly nice to our ancestors even while we accuse them of systematic error in certain domains.





Notice, to begin with, that even Harman's account will have to attribute a serious error to our ancestors, for he is going to have to say that they didn't know what the truth-conditions of their own thoughts were, that when they stated those truth-conditions simply by disquoting, they said something false.

So there's no avoiding the imputation of some error and the only question is: which is the more plausible imputation?

To think that it must be better to impute to them false beliefs about the truth-conditions of their thoughts, rather than just false beliefs about the world, is to endorse a peculiar version of the Principle of Charity as a constitutive constraint on the attribution of truth-conditions, though not on the attribution of meaning.

Now, I have never been a big fan of the Principle of Charity; but certainly not when it is understood—as it has to be here—to apply only to the truth-conditions and not to the meaning.

Even in its original version, as a constraint on the attribution of meaning, I never saw any justification for Charity over the Principle of Humanity, according to which we are allowed to impute error in our interpretations of other people provided those errors are *rationally explicable*. And, surely, Humanity is all that is needed for the purposes of being nice, for it's consistent with our ancestors' having false views that those views were justified and even ingenious.

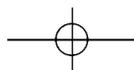
But Humanity would certainly not give one any grounds for reconstruing the truth-conditions in the motion case: the error involved—of not realizing the need for frames of reference—is certainly rationally explicable.

And, in any event, I certainly don't see the justification for applying Charity selectively, only to the truth-conditions but not to the meaning. Think of what a peculiar result that would yield in a host of other cases. For example, our ancestors also spoke of the soul departing the body. What they *meant* is that there is a non-physical substance which leaves the body at the moment of bodily death. But, of course, we could, if we wanted, assign those remarks such truth-conditions—involving the loss of consciousness and so forth—as would make them come out true. But that would, of course, be absurd. Why should matters stand differently with motion or mass?

FACTUAL RELATIVISM

If the preceding considerations are correct, it is implausible to construe relativism about a given domain either as the claim that the propositions of that domain are unexpectedly relational in character or as the claim that, while its propositions aren't, its truth-conditions are.

In a sense, a difficulty with such construals of relativism should have been evident from the start, prior to a detailed investigation of their prospects. The point is that it is hard to see how an adequate formulation of relativism about a given domain could, in the first instance, be a claim about the *contents* of the





sentences of that domain. Any such formulation, it seems to me, would leave open a possibility that any real relativism should foreclose upon. I shall illustrate this point using the propositional construal, but similar remarks apply to Harman's truth-conditional suggestion.

On the propositional construal, to say that moral relativism is true is to say that typical moral sentences like (10) do not express such absolute propositions as:

(15) *It is morally wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car*

but, rather, such unexpectedly relational propositions as:

(16) *In relation to moral code M, it is morally wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car.*

Now, the trouble is that, on such a view, moral relativism is merely a view about what typical moral sentences mean. It is merely a claim about the nature of the discourse as we have come to develop it. And that claim would appear to leave it wide open that—out there—there are perfectly objective absolute facts about what ought and ought not to be done, facts that our discourse, as we have come to develop it, fails to talk about, but which some other possible discourse, that we have not yet developed, could talk about. In other words, this propositionalist construal of moral relativism seems consistent with something that one would have expected any real relativism to foreclose upon, namely, that there are objective moral facts out there waiting to be represented by our language and which we have up to now somehow managed to overlook.²

A correct construal of relativism about a given domain, D, cannot locate the unexpected relationality in the *contents* of D's sentences. It must locate it, rather, in the *facts*. Relativism cannot properly be seen as correcting our view of what our sentences mean; it must rather be seen as correcting our view of what the facts are.

In other words, the relativist's project must be seen to be a reforming project, designed to convince us that we should abandon the absolutist discourse we currently have in favor of a discourse which accommodates his conviction that the only facts in the vicinity of that discourse are certain kinds of relational fact. Thus, in the case of motion, the relativist must be seen as urging us to abandon talk of something's merely moving in favor of talk about its moving relative to a variable frame of reference. And in the case of mass, he must be seen as urging us to abandon talk of something's having mass in favor of talk about its having mass relative to a frame of reference. And so forth.

If we collect our various observations together, we get the following picture of a relativistic view of motion:

² I heard Kit Fine make a similar point in an oral presentation on John MacFarlane's rather different formulation of relativism. There will be a problem, of course, about how we are to express those missing facts, given the relativist's thesis about the meanings of ordinary moral terms, but there are obvious strategies for getting around this difficulty.



- (a) The sentence “The Earth moves” expresses the proposition *The Earth moves* which is true if and only if the Earth has the monadic property of moving.
- (b) Because nothing has—or can have—such a property, all such utterances are strictly speaking untrue.
- (c) The closest truths in the vicinity are relational truths of the form:

x moves relative to frame of reference F.

Therefore,

- (d) If our motion utterances are to have any prospect of being true, we should not make judgments of the form:

x moves

but only judgments of the form:

x moves relative to F.

Finally,

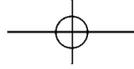
- (e) No one of these frames is more correct for the purposes of determining the facts about motion than any of the others.

This last clause, emphasizing that there is nothing that privileges one of these frames over any of the others, as far as determining the facts about motion is concerned, is important because without it, it would be possible to satisfy clauses (a) through (d) by supposing that the relativist is insisting on relativizing facts about motion to some particular privileged frame of reference, say, the center of Earth.

So understood, then, a relativism about motion consists of three central ingredients: a metaphysical insight—that there are no absolute facts of a certain kind but only certain kinds of related relational fact; a recommendation—that we stop asserting the absolute propositions that report on those absolute facts but assert only the appropriate relational propositions; and a constraint—on the values that the relativization parameter is allowed to assume (in the case of the motion, there are no constraints).

Generalizing this picture, we can say that a relativism about a monadic property P is the view that:

- (A) “x is P” expresses the proposition *x is P* which is true if and only if x has the monadic property expressed by “P.”
- (B) Because nothing has (or can have) the property P, all such utterances are condemned to untruth.
- (C) The closest truths in the vicinity are related relational truths of the form:



x is P relative to F

where “F” names some appropriate parameter.

(D) If our P-utterances are to have any prospect of being true, we should not make judgments of the form:

x is P

but only those of the form:

x is P relative to F.

(E) There are the following constraints on the values that F may assume: . . .

The fewer constraints there are on F, the more extreme the relativism.

In light of its reforming nature, we may dub a relativism based on such a template “Replacement Relativism.”

MORAL RELATIVISM

Let me now turn to examining what sorts of theses Replacement Relativism leads to when it is applied to the sorts of domains—morality for example, or epistemic justification—which have most interested philosophers. I will concentrate on the moral case, but everything I say could easily be adapted to the epistemic case.

Applying the template just developed, we get the following Replacement view of moral relativism.

- i. An ordinary assertion of “It is wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car” expresses the proposition that *It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car*, a proposition which is true if and only if Paul’s stealing Mark’s car has the monadic property of being wrong.
- ii. Because nothing has or can have the monadic property of being wrong, all such assertions are condemned to untruth.
- iii. The closest truths in the vicinity are related relational truths of the form:

It is wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car relative to F,

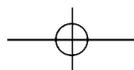
where “F” names some appropriate parameter.

(iv) If our moral assertions are to have any prospect of being true, we should not make judgments of the form:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car.

but only those of the form:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car relative to F.



(v) There are the following constraints on the values that F may assume: . . .

In outline, anyway, this seems to capture fairly well what most moral relativists have intuitively wanted to hold. An important question is: what should we take F to be? To what does the moral relativist propose to relativize ordinary moral judgments?

The almost universal answer, given by friend and foe alike, is that the moral relativist proposes to relativize moral judgments to *moral codes* or *frameworks*. As Harman puts it:

For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D*. Similarly for other moral judgments.³

Adapted to my terminology, the idea is that we are to see the moral relativist as recommending that we give up as untrue all propositions of the form:

It would be wrong of P to D

and replace them instead with propositions of the form:

In relation to moral framework M, it would be wrong of P to D

where “M” names some appropriately salient moral framework, typically the speaker’s own.⁴

Why is it so natural to construe the relativist as urging us to relativize moral judgments to moral codes or frameworks?

The answer is that it is a natural elaboration of the central thought behind moral relativism—namely, that different people bring different *moral standards* to bear on the morality of a given act and that there is no objectively choosing between these different standards. A ‘moral code’ is just what codifies these standards. That is why it is the relativization parameter of choice.

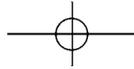
MORAL CODES AS PROPOSITIONS

So far, so good. Now, however, we face the question: what could moral codes be such that they could perform the function that the moral relativist expects of them? Let us split this question into two:

- A. What is a moral code or framework?
- B. What is it for P’s doing D, to be “prohibited relative to a particular moral code M?”

³ Harman and Thomson, p. 4.

⁴ An analogous view, with epistemic systems in place of moral frameworks—systems that specify how different kinds of information bear on the epistemic justification of different kinds of belief—captures what many have wanted to call a relativism about justification.



Starting with the first question, there are two possible conceptions of moral codes: as sets of general propositions or as sets of imperatives. I will begin by discussing the propositional construal deferring until later in the paper an examination of the imperativist construal.

When most people think of moral codes, they think of them as sets of *general propositions* which encode particular conceptions of right and wrong, of moral prohibition and permission, with different societies accepting different sets of such propositions and so adhering to different moral codes.

Thus, Harman, in describing the moral diversity which he finds in the world at large, says:

Members of different cultures often have very different beliefs about right and wrong and often act quite differently on their beliefs Some societies allow slavery, some have caste systems, which they take to be morally satisfactory, others reject both slavery and caste systems as grossly unjust.⁵

Or consider the following characterization, picked more or less at random from the web, due to an organization called “ReligiousTolerance.org”:

The purpose of this essay is to show the wide diversity of moral codes that exist today and in the past. . . . The result of this diversity is that one group of people may consider an action moral, while another group will regard it as morally neutral, and a third group may decide that it is profoundly immoral. Each will be following their own moral code.

Of course, it may take a certain amount of reflection for a person to be able to formulate the beliefs which constitute his moral code. In that sense, moral codes might exist more as tacit beliefs than as explicit ones. But that is no reason not to take them to be *at bottom* propositional attitudes.

Not only is it in general very natural to take moral codes to be sets of propositions; there are special reasons for the relativist to insist on this construal and this brings us to the second question.

Recall that the relativist urges us not to assert that:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

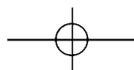
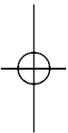
but only that:

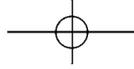
In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car.

But what could “in relation to moral code M” mean if not “is entailed by moral code M?” How else are we to think of a moral code ruling on the correctness of a potential infinity of particular moral judgments except either by entailing them or by failing to entail them?

If there is, indeed, no alternative to this picture, then the propositionalist picture of moral codes is forced, for that is the only way in which we can make sense of moral codes as standing in entailment relations to particular moral judgments.

⁵ Harman and Thomson, p. 8.





The answer to our two questions, then, is this: moral codes are sets of general propositions specifying alternative conceptions of moral right and wrong. These codes entail particular moral judgments about specific acts. According to moral relativism, then, we should speak not of what is and is not morally prohibited *simpliciter*, but only of what is and is not prohibited by particular codes.

I will call any relativistic view that is characterized by this pair of features—the relativization parameter consists of a set of general propositions and these propositions stand in entailment relations to the target proposition—a *Fictionalist* brand of Replacement Relativism. (Compare truths about fictional characters: there are no truths of the form *Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street*, but only ones of the form *According to the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street.*)

PROBLEMS FOR FICTIONALIST MORAL RELATIVISM

I believe that this Fictionalist view of morality captures well what many have wanted to mean by the phrase “relativism about morality.” However, no sooner is it stated than it begins to come apart.

One problem seems immediate. The judgment:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car

seems appropriately normative; but the judgment:

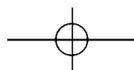
In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car

seems just to be a logical remark about the relation between two sets of propositions. It seems to have no normative impact whatsoever: even someone who was in no way motivated to avoid stealing Mark’s car could agree with the claim that, in relation to a given moral code, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car. So, right away, there is a difficulty seeing how we could adopt the relativist’s recommendation in this case without this being tantamount to our giving up on moral judgments altogether, rather than merely relativizing them.⁶

It might be thought that the relativist has an easy fix to this objection. After all, it’s part of his story that although there are many possible moral codes, a particular person will *accept* a particular one of these while rejecting all the others. It also seems plausible that when someone makes one of the relativist’s relational judgments involving a code that he accepts, that judgment will have a special normative pull on him. Thus, the relativist would appear well-advised to revise his view to bring this acceptance of particular moral codes into the picture. He should recommend that the replacing proposition be not:

In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car

⁶ J. J. Thomson makes a similar point in her response to Harman.



but, rather,

(17) *In relation to moral code M, which I, the speaker, accept, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car.*

How effective is this modification in dealing with the bruted objection? It's not clear. Whereas:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

is clearly normative,

I believe that it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

which is, in effect, what (17) states, looks to be just a description of one's own mental states.

But whatever one thinks of the effectiveness of this patch, the deeper question is whether we are able to make sense of a thinker's *endorsing* a particular moral code, once he has accepted the guiding thought behind moral relativism. To see the problem here, let us turn our attention to the particular moral judgment:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

that we are supposed to relativize to moral codes. There are no absolute facts about moral prohibition or permission, we have said, so all statements of this form are condemned to untruth. If we are to hang on to moral discourse, we must reform it so that we talk not about these nonexistent absolute facts but only about the code-related relational facts.

Now, there are, of course, two ways for a statement to be untrue. On the one hand, a statement may be untrue because it is false; and, on the other, it may be untrue because the proposition it expresses is somehow incomplete, so that it doesn't specify a fully evaluable truth-condition. Let us call the first option an *Error Theory* about the target utterance and the second an *Incompleteness Claim* about it.

Now, it should be fairly clear that our Fictionalist relativism about morality will work best on an Error Theory of moral utterances and not so well with an Incompleteness Claim about them. For if we are recommending that we stop judging "x is morally prohibited" but only make judgments of the form:

M entails that x is morally prohibited

we cannot very well be thinking of:

"x is morally prohibited"

as expressing an incomplete, non-truth-evaluable proposition: it is not possible, I take it, for an incomplete proposition like:

Tom is taller than . . .

to be entailed by a set of propositions.

In and of itself, though, I do not regard the commitment to an Error Theory to be a problem. As I have already indicated, I don't regard Error Theories as intrinsically implausible. And, given a choice between an Error Theory and a Non-Factualism about a particular sentence, there is, I believe, strong reason to prefer the Error Theory, all other things being equal. The view that speakers who have been trying to make absolutist claims about motion, mass or morality, and who have developed an internally disciplined discourse about these subject matters, have nevertheless not succeeded in so much as making a complete claim is not particularly plausible. It would be far more plausible to say that they had succeeded in making such claims, but that those claims have turned out to be false in certain systematic ways.

Unfortunately, though, an Error Theory of moral discourse turns out to be a problematic commitment for Fictionalist relativism in a variety of different ways.

To begin with, if we say that the target judgments, like:

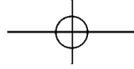
It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

are false, we will have to say that *the propositions which make up the code to which this judgment is to be relativized are also false*, for these are very general propositions of much the same type. Whereas an ordinary moral judgment will speak about the permissibility of stealing some particular person's particular item of personal property, a code will speak much more generally about the permissibility of damaging anyone's possessions. But if there are no absolute facts with which to confirm particular moral judgments, there won't be any general moral facts with which to confirm these more general moral judgments.

Now, however, a serious puzzle emerges for the moral relativist. Our only idea, you may recall, about how to preserve the normative character of moral judgments, on a relativist view of them, involves giving a central place to our *acceptance* of moral codes. But how could we be expected both to accept the relativist's claim that the target judgments are false, which clearly implies that the propositions constituting the code are also false, and to continue *accepting* those codes in the way required to make sense of the relativist's picture?

Moral codes, we have said, are composed of general moral propositions. To accept such propositions is, presumably, to believe them and act on their basis. However, once we have come to agree with the relativist that there are no absolute moral facts, we seem committed to concluding that the propositions that make up the codes are false as well. How, at that point, are we supposed to continue believing them? How does one continue to believe a proposition that one believes to be false?

Some may be tempted at this point to invoke a distinction advocated by constructive empiricists, between acceptance and belief. To believe a proposition,



they may say, is to hold it to be true. But to accept it need not require that. One can accept a proposition in the sense of being willing to use it as a premiss in one's reasoning without taking it to be true.⁷ Perhaps the relativist can help himself to this distinction, insisting that we can go on accepting codes even while we disbelieve what they say.

I, myself, am quite suspicious of the cogency of this distinction. But whatever its general merits, it seems to me that a puzzle would remain even if we were allowed full use of it. The puzzle would be to explain how any particular code could continue to have any special normative authority over us, once we have come to think of all the codes as uniformly false. How could we be motivated to follow one set of precepts as opposed to another, when we have come to think of all of them as uniformly false?

Of course, one remedy would be to allow that some propositions in the codes can be true. But that would not help rescue moral relativism because it would involve acknowledging the existence of some absolute moral truths and that is precisely what the relativist needs to deny.

But even if we were to put this powerful point to one side, the relativist faces a further difficulty avoiding commitment to the existence of some absolute moral truths, on a Fictionalist picture.

Recall that we are operating with the assumption that ordinary moral judgments express complete truth-evaluable propositions that are false, and that, as a result, so too are the propositions which make up the moral codes.

But how could all codes be equally false? Suppose we have one code, M1, which says:

M1: Slavery is prohibited.

And another moral code, M2, which says:

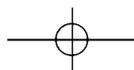
M2: Slavery is permitted.

If we take the view that M1 is false, doesn't that require us to say that M2 is true?

At least the way the matter is usually taught, it is an *analytic* truth about moral prohibitions that if it is false to say that x is morally prohibited then it must be true to say that not-x is morally permitted. But the relativist about morality no more wishes to say that there are absolute facts about moral permission than he wishes to say that there are absolute facts about moral prohibitions. And so, once again, a commitment to the falsity of one absolute moral proposition seems to commit us to the truth of some other absolute moral proposition.

Now, I suppose that there have been philosophers who have denied that prohibition and permission are duals of each other in this sense. But it would be odd to think that whether a relativistic view of morality is so much as available turns on whether this widely believed conceptual claim is rejected. It would be better if

⁷ See Bastian C. van Fraassen, *The Scientific Image* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).



we could find a conception of relativism which did not depend on something so tendentious.

COMPLETION RELATIVISM

All of these problems for a Fictionalist relativism about morality trace back to the assumption that our target utterance:

“It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car”

expresses a complete truth-evaluable proposition. Once that assumption is in place, there is no alternative but to embrace an Error Theory of that utterance, and, given a propositional construal of moral codes, no alternative but to take a relativistic conception of it as involving its entailment by a set of similar, though more general, false propositions.

The question, therefore, quickly suggests itself: is that assumption optional?

To get away from absolute facts about morality, all we really need is for judgments of the form:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car

to be untrue; we don’t have to think of them as false. An obvious alternative, then, is to think of the relativist as having discovered that the target judgments suffer not from Error but from Incompleteness, and so as calling for their completion by reference to moral codes. Call this *Completion Relativism*.

Couldn’t we use Completion Relativism to generate a more plausible model for moral relativism?

In contrast with the view I earlier attributed to him, Judith Jarvis Thomson reads Harman as endorsing precisely such a Completion view. She describes him as claiming that:

Moral sentences (such as “It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car”) are in a certain way incomplete; indeed, it is because [such] sentences are incomplete in that way that they lack truth values. . . . Non-moral sentences such as [“In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong to steal Mark’s car”] are completions of moral sentences.⁸

So perhaps we simply got off on the wrong track, using the case of motion to motivate a Fictionalist Relativism about morality rather than a Completion Relativism about it.

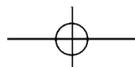
Well, suppose we say that a proposition of the form:

It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car

is an incomplete proposition, in much the way that:

Tom is taller than . . .

⁸ Harman and Thomson, p. 190.



is clearly incomplete. And suppose we try to complete it with:

In relation to moral code M, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car.

Once again, though, it is hard to see how to make sense of this.

First, we are still operating under the assumption that moral codes are sets of propositions which encode a particular conception of moral prohibition and requirement. That means that a moral code must be seen as consisting in propositions of the form:

x is morally wrong.

But since we have just finished saying that particular propositions of the form:

x is morally wrong

are semantically incomplete, we would have to say the same thing about the more general propositions which are supposed to constitute the moral code, for they are basically propositions of the same general type.

But just as it was hard to see how anyone could believe a set of propositions that they knew to be false, so it is hard to see how anyone could believe a set of propositions they knew to be incomplete.

Second, if the propositions that constitute the code are incomplete, it is very hard to see how they could constitute a conception of anything, let alone a conception of right and wrong. Before they could be said to amount to a conception of anything, they would have to be completed. But our only idea about how to complete them is by reference to moral codes! And now we would seem to have embarked on a vicious regress in which we never succeed in specifying the conception of permission and prohibition which is supposed to constitute a particular community's moral code.

Third, how are we to understand the phrase "relative to moral code M"? Since we have said both that the propositions which constitute a moral code as well as the target propositions are incomplete, that relation cannot be the relation of logical entailment. "Relative to moral code M," then, must be understood as expressing some non-logical relation that obtains between x's being morally prohibited and some moral code. But what could such a non-logical relation possibly be?

For all of these reasons, then, it looks as though Completion Relativism is not a cogent option either.

WHAT HAS GONE WRONG?

The preceding argument establishes, I believe, that if moral relativism consists in the claim that ordinary moral judgments are to be relativized to moral codes, where moral codes consist in general propositions of much the same ilk as the judgments that are to be relativized to them, then there is nothing very coherent



for moral relativism to be. Yet this is, of course, a very familiar conception of moral relativism. What has gone wrong? Why would moral relativism turn out to be not even coherently assertible when the relativisms on which it is based—those concerning mass, motion and simultaneity—are not only coherent but true?

The first thing to say in response to this question is that the sense in which a Fictionalist Relativism about morality is similar to the successful relativisms drawn from physics is very superficial. The two cases look alike but in fact have very different logical properties. Thus, in the motion case, we say that we have discovered that:

“x moves”

is untrue, and needs to be replaced by:

“x moves relative to F.”

And in the moral case we say that we have discovered that:

“x is wrong”

is untrue and needs to be replaced by:

“x is wrong relative to moral code M.”

However, this similarity in surface grammar masks a deep difference in the underlying logical forms.

In the moral case, we are moving from a judgment of the form:

$x \text{ is } P$

to a judgment of the form:

$(x \text{ is } P) \text{ bears } R \text{ to } S.$

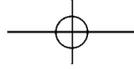
In other words, in the moral case, the replacing proposition is built up out of the old proposition in a quite literal sense: the replacing proposition consists in the claim that the old proposition stands in some sort of contentual relation to a set of propositions that constitute a code. This feature is crucial to the thought that lies at the core of standard conceptions of moral relativism that although we can no longer assert moral judgments in some unqualified way, we can truthfully talk about which of those judgments are permitted by different moral codes.

In the physics cases, by contrast, while the proposition expressed by “The Earth moves” is of the form:

$x \text{ is } P$

the proposition expressed by the replacing sentence “The Earth moves relative to F” is of the form:

$x R y;$



the concept of a monadic property *moves* has been replaced by the concept of a relational property *moves-relative-to*, a concept which no more contains *moves* as a proper part than the concept *alternative* contains the concept *native* as a proper part. There is no way to understand the replacing proposition in this case as built up out of the old proposition in the manner that is presupposed by a Fictionalist view of morality.

This difference at the level of logical form leads to the problems that attend Fictionalist Relativism. Because, in such a view, the old proposition is retained intact in the new proposition, it carries with it the charge of untruth that launches a relativistic conception. Because the new proposition places the old absolute proposition into a contentual relation to a set of propositions of a very similar nature, that charge carries over to the parameter to which the truth of moral propositions is being relativized. The result becomes something barely intelligible.

The moral relativist's best shot is to say that the original absolute propositions are complete but false. On this option, however, he faces the difficulty of explaining how we are able to accept a set of propositions that we know to be false; and the difficulty of explaining how he avoids commitment to there being some absolute moral facts somewhere after all, because the falsity of moral prohibitions seems to entail the existence of moral permissions.

If he now attempts to retreat to the view that the target propositions are incomplete, his problems get even worse: for now he faces the difficulty of saying how alternative moral codes could be alternative *conceptions* of the moral facts and how proposition fragments could complete, in the required way, the incomplete character of the target propositions.

None of these problems arise in the physics cases because in those cases the old proposition is discarded and is simply replaced with a new relational proposition, which, it turns out, is the only truth that there is in the vicinity of the old judgments.

CODES AS IMPERATIVES

Well, why isn't the lesson of these considerations that we should hew to the physics model far more closely? Why couldn't we formulate a satisfactory moral relativism by saying that in the moral case,

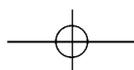
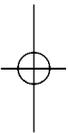
It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car

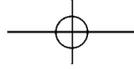
is discovered to be untrue and is to be replaced not by:

[It would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark's car] is entailed by moral code M

but rather by:

Paul stealing Mark's car is wrong-relative-to M,





where the hyphenation makes clear that we are now talking about a replacement proposition of the form “xRy”?

We will turn to looking at what this might mean in a moment, but before we do so, we should pause to remark on a small puzzle that attends the cases that are drawn from physics.

The puzzle can be put as follows. If my account of the physics cases is correct, classical motion judgments are untrue. If anything in their vicinity is true, it is not those original motion judgments but some *other* judgments, with a different logical form and involving distinct concepts. But how could the truth of these *other* judgments, which do not themselves involve the concept of motion, amount to the discovery that a relativism about *motion* is true? If I *replace* talk of phlogiston with talk of oxygen, that is not a way of discovering the atomic nature of phlogiston. Why do we take ourselves to have discovered that *motion* is *relative*?

In the usual account of things, there is supposed to be a distinction between eliminativism and relativism. In the case of the former, we respond to the discovery that a domain of discourse is systematically untrue by rejecting that discourse and, possibly, substituting some other discourse in its place. In the case of the latter, we respond by declaring that we have discovered the truths in that domain to be relative in nature. But how are we to make out this distinction between eliminativism and relativism if, even in the classic cases of alleged relativism, what we get is the wholesale replacement of one set of judgments by another? Why aren't all cases, including the famous ones from physics, just cases of eliminativism?

This puzzle would be solved if, say in the case of motion, there were a more general concept, MOTION, itself neither absolutist nor relativist, such that both the absolutist and the relativistic notions could be seen to be subspecies of it. I think it is likely that there is such a concept, but I won't attempt to define one now.

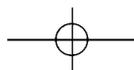
It will suffice for present purposes to point out that, given that a relativist view of a given domain always involves the *replacement* of the original absolute judgments by certain relational judgments, we need to be shown that these two sets of judgments are sufficiently *intimately* related to each other, in the sense just gestured at, to justify our saying that what we have on our hands is relativism and not eliminativism. Let us call this the requirement of intimacy.

Let us turn, now, to the question of what moral relativism would look like if it assumed a non-Fictionalist form of Replacement Relativism.

The two central questions we face are: what relation could “is-wrong-relative-to” be? And what parameter could “M” designate such that specific acts of stealing might or might not bear that relation to it?

It is already clear from the foregoing considerations, that whatever a moral code is going to be, it cannot consist of a set of propositions.

A natural alternative conception, as I've already noted, is to think of it as a set of imperatives, rather than propositions. So let us see how far we can take that idea, which, in any event, might be thought to have independent appeal.





If moral code M consists of a set of imperatives of the form:

Don't do x!

how should we think of the relation "is-wrong-relative-to"? A natural suggestion would be that it means "is one of the acts prohibited by."

If we put all this together, and we remind ourselves of the importance of including a reference to the speaker's endorsement of a particular code, we get the following account:

"Paul's stealing Mark's car is wrong-relative-to M" means: *Paul's stealing Mark's car is one of the acts prohibited by the set of imperatives, M, which I, the speaker, accept.*

How well does this proposal fare?

PROBLEMS FOR IMPERATIVAL MORAL RELATIVISM

One immediate question concerns the requirement of *intimacy*. How are we going to show that the replacing and replaced propositions are sufficiently intimately related to justify our saying that we have shown moral truths to be relative? How are we to ward off the suggestion that what we have here instead is just moral nihilism, with moral discourse discarded in favor of some replacement where we talk not of what is good and bad but only of what is and is not permitted according to imperatives that we accept and choose to live our lives by?

This story would be easier to fill in, if we could explain what makes a given set of imperatives *moral* imperatives.

The relativist's idea is that moral judgments need to be relativized to moral codes. On the propositional construal, it was quite clear what made the relevant codes moral: they were constituted by propositions which encoded particular conceptions of moral right and wrong. That conception of moral codes, however, proved unworkable for the purposes of relativism. On the imperatival construal, however, we simply have a set of imperatives without any distinctive moral content. What makes these imperatives moral imperatives as opposed to some other sort of injunction?

Clearly, we would have to look not to the imperatives themselves, but to their *acceptance* by agents to see what might distinguish them from imperatives of another variety—prudential imperatives, for example, or aesthetic ones. There had better be something distinctive about the acceptance of moral imperatives for otherwise we would not have pinned down that we are relativizing to a specifically *moral* code. But it is far from clear that there is such a distinctive state of mind.⁹

⁹ For a particularly sophisticated account see Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).



A further problem that attends the imperatival construal concerns its ability to capture norms of permission. Let me explain.

As we have already had occasion to note, moral norms might be either norms of permission or norms of requirement. We may be required to do something, A, under particular conditions, C, or simply permitted to do it.

Imperatives, however, are, by definition, of the form:

If C, do A.

It is this logical form that marks them out as non-propositional—incapable of assessment as true or false.

However, it is not clear how something of imperatival form is going to capture a norm of permission, a norm that merely allows doing A if C but does not require it. If I issue the imperative:

“If that car doesn’t belong to you, don’t scratch it”

I am requiring you not to scratch it, not merely permitting it.

For that reason, it is very hard to see how imperatives alone could constitute a fully satisfactory construal of what moral codes are.

A further problem for the imperatival construal will be familiar from our discussion of the propositional construal. In that discussion, we saw that the relativist had difficulty accommodating the normative character of moral judgments, even after the thinker’s endorsement of a particular moral code is brought into the picture.

(17) *In relation to (propositional) moral code M, which I, the speaker, accept, it would be wrong of Paul to steal Mark’s car.*

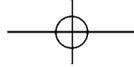
As I pointed out, this still seems to be a descriptive remark about which beliefs one has, rather than a genuinely normative remark about what ought and ought not to be done. This problem, it seems to me, only intensifies on the imperatival construal whose counterpart of (17) is:

In relation to the set of imperatives, M, which, I, the speaker, accept, it is prohibited for Paul to steal Mark’s car.

The final and probably most important objection to the imperatival construal derives from an observation we had occasion to make earlier—namely, that moral codes are normally expressed through the use of indicative sentences that are themselves just more general versions of the sentences by which particular moral judgments are expressed. Thus, it would be natural to say that our moral code, which contains a prohibition against stealing, would be expressed by the sentence:

(17) “Stealing is wrong.”

And this sentence is itself just a general version of the various particular sentences by which we express ordinary moral judgments such as:



(18) “Paul’s stealing Mark’s car is wrong.”

Now, though, if (17) is taken to express an imperatival content roughly given by:

Don’t Steal!

it’s very hard to see how (18) could have any other sort of content because they are both sentences of exactly the same type, the only difference being that (17) is a generalization of (18). In other words, if the imperatival construal of moral codes is correct, we would appear to have no choice but to take (18) to express the content:

(19) *Don’t steal Mark’s car, Paul!*

(18), though, is just the sort of ordinary, unqualified, absolutist sentence that the relativist is going to seek to replace by relational sentences of the form:

(20) “Paul stealing Mark’s car is wrong-relative-to M.”

on the grounds that there are no absolute facts about morality with which to confirm the absolutist sentences.

However, if it is really true that (18) expresses an imperatival content of the kind specified by (19), then it is very hard to see what motive there could be to replace it, or how the discovery that there are no absolute moral facts could be relevant to it in any way. Since it just expresses the imperatival content:

Don’t Steal Mark’s car, Paul!

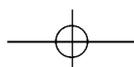
it has not made any claim; and since it has not made any claim it can hardly be true that it is condemned to having made a false claim; and since it is not condemned to having made a false claim, it can hardly be true that it needs to be replaced on the grounds that it is so condemned.

The imperatival construal of moral codes, then, far from showing us how coherently to implement a relativistic view of morality seems rather to make relativism irrelevant and inapplicable.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have attempted to explain how a relativistic conception of a given domain should be understood. And I have then tried to outline the obstacles that stand in the way of extending such a conception to the domains that have most interested philosophers—those of morality and epistemic justification.¹⁰

¹⁰ In this paper, I have confined myself to talking about the moral case; the epistemic case is treated explicitly in my book *Fear of Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), chs 5–7.



It is natural to wonder whether there is an alternative conception of relativism that would serve some of these traditional philosophical preoccupations better. The main alternative to the account I have been exploring is provided by the idea that a relativistic conception of a given domain consists in the claim that there can be faultless disagreement in that domain. Here is Crispin Wright:

Imagine that Tim Williamson thinks that stewed rhubarb is delicious and that I beg to differ, finding its dry acidity highly disagreeable. There is, on the face of it, no reason to deny that this is a genuine disagreement—each holding to a view that the other rejects. But it is a disagreement about which, at least at first pass, the Latin proverb—*de gustibus non est disputandum*—seems apt. It is, we feel—or is likely to be—a disagreement which there is no point in trying to settle, because it concerns no real matter of fact but is merely an expression of different, permissibly idiosyncratic tastes. Nobody’s wrong. Tim and I should just agree to disagree.

Call such a disagreement a dispute of inclination. The view of such disputes just gestured at . . . combines three elements:

That they involve genuinely incompatible attitudes (Contradiction);

That nobody need be mistaken or otherwise at fault (Faultlessness), and

That the antagonists may, perfectly rationally, stick to their respective views even after the disagreement comes to light and impresses as intractable (Sustainability).

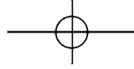
According to this characterization, then, relativism about a given domain is the view that there may be faultless disagreement in that domain. One person may assert *p* and the other *not-p*, yet it needn’t be the case that either of them is at fault, not merely in the sense that both might be equally rational, but in the far more demanding sense that both might have said something *true*.

But how could any domain pull off such a trick? How could it turn out that a proposition and its negation might both come out true? Remarkably enough, a number of writers have recently proposed answers to this question.

Wright proposes to make sense of the combination of Contradiction and Faultlessness by invoking his view of truth as super-assertibility. Kit Fine has suggested that we could make sense of it by regarding the opposed judgments as targeting “different realities” (though Fine proposes his solution only in connection with issues about the passage of time and not necessarily in connection with other subject matters). And John MacFarlane has explored the idea that we can make sense of it by regarding the truth of a proposition as settled not just by a world and a time but also by a “context of assessment.”¹¹

I am doubtful that we can ultimately make sense of the notion of a proposition that can sustain faultless disagreement. I don’t see how any such proposition

¹¹ Crispin Wright, ‘Intuitionism, Realism, Relativism and Rhubarb,’ this volume (Ch. 2); Kit Fine, ‘Tense and Reality,’ in his *Papers on Tense and Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); John MacFarlane, ‘Making Sense of Relative Truth,’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 2003.



could serve as the plausible object of belief, the very thing for which the notion of a proposition is needed. I also believe that many of the arguments developed in this paper, about the difficulty of coming up with a satisfactory characterization of the “standards” to which moral or epistemic judgments are to be relativized, will carry over to the conceptions of relativism characterized by faultless disagreement.

However, many important questions remain unexplored and there is much interesting work that remains to be done.

