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Metaethical Relativism

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Although relativism may be said to be one of the oldest doctrines in philosophy, dating back to the teachings of Protagoras in the fifth century B.C., when it comes to contemporary philosophy, there is no consensus on what makes a view qualify as "relativist." The problem is particularly accute in metaethics, since most of the views that up to a decade ago were described as "relativist" would be more accurately described as "contextualist" or even "expressivist" in light of the distinctions currently drawn in the philosophy of language and semantics. In this chapter, we distinguish two construals of relativism, This is very cumbersome. Please replace it with: "developed in the second and third section", or else remove it altogether: the "metaphysical" construal, based on the idea that there is no single, absolute, universal morality, and the "semantic" construal, based on the idea that the truth value of moral claims is relative to a set of moral standards, or moral practices, or some other suitable parameter. The first section introduces the core relativist ideas in an informal way, and warns against possible misinterpretations.

GETTING A GRIP ON METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

If relativism were to be captured by a slogan, it would be the idea that what is (morally) good or bad is relative. Of course, as any slogan, it leaves many questions open. To *what* is it that moral goodness or badness is relative? Is *every* moral truth relative in this sense, or are only *some* moral truths relative? Assuming that moral truths are relative, say, to moral codes, are all of these on a par, or could it be that some moral codes are better than others? And so on. Different answers to these questions pave the way to often very different views, some of which may be less plausible than others. As a consequence, the term 'relativism' as used in metaethics covers a variety of positions, making it sometimes difficult to see which positions are supported by which motivations, or which problems they face.

This chapter aims to help clarify the confusion by shifting the focus from the wide range of putative relativist views from the last century, discussed in numerous survey articles on moral and metaethical relativism, to a much narrower family of theoretical positions that have taken shape in this century, influenced by developments from formal philosophy of language, such as Kölbel (2002); Brogaard (2008, 2012); Beebe (2010); Schafer (2012); Egan (2012); or MacFarlane (2014).

I will distinguish two construals of metaethical relativism, discussed in the following two sections. On the *metaphysical* construal, relativism amounts to the idea that there is no single, absolute, universally valid morality, or set of moral values, or codes, or norms. The *semantic* construal relies on the idea that the truth value of a moral claim is relative to a special parameter, the nature of which may vary from one framework to another. Note that, on either construal, an important issue remains open, namely, *what* it is that moral questions are relative to. Possible answers include moral codes, norms, systems of values, sets of (possibly shared) beliefs and desires, and so on. In addition, *which* moral codes/ norms/values/beliefs etc. are relevant to assessing the truth of a moral claim also allows for different answers. They could be those endorsed by some specific agent, or shared by a group of agents, or endorsed by a whole society, or they could be those of an "assessor" evaluating a given moral claim for its truth value.

While this important issue does ultimately require an answer (and the answer is far from obvious; see Shafer-Landau 2004), it is specific ethical theories that must provide the answer. The more general and abstract relativist frameworks discussed in metaethics need not commit to any definite answer, leaving the parameter under consideration open.

Turning back to the distinction between metaphysical vs. semantic relativism, even if the two often go hand in hand, the distinction remains important because many prominent relativist figures, including Gilbert Harman, David Wong, Carol Rovane, or David Velleman, have defended metaphysical relativism without committing themselves to any specific *semantics* for moral discourse. As regards the semantic construal, we will see that the idea that the truth of moral claims depends on some suitable parameter applies equally well to contextualist as to (genuinely) relativist views, the difference coming from how this dependence is further analyzed. Thus contextualists such as Dreier (1990) or Silk (2016) take it to be merely an instance of the more general phenomenon of context-dependence in language: a sentence containing a moral expression, such as "This action is (morally) good," can only be interpreted if one points to some specific set of moral norms, roughly in the same way in which the complex demonstrative "this action" requires pointing to some specific action for the sentence to be interpreted. For a contextualist, then, the parameter at stake not only affects the truth value, but also the *content* that the moral sentence expresses in a given context. For a relativist, on the other hand, a given moral sentence (once its context-sensitive expressions have been resolved) always expresses the same content, regardless of the context in which it is uttered; however, it may still receive different truth values, provided that it is evaluated with respect to different sets of moral norms. Thus in a relativist semantics, the way in which the truth value of a moral claim depends on this special parameter is quite unlike the more familiar forms of context-dependence in language.

Now that the general structure of the chapter has been laid out, it will help to get some intuitive grip on the motivations that may push us toward relativism in the first place.

Consider a person—call her Saskia—who is facing a difficult moral dilemma. Saskia is in her fifth month of pregnancy, and has just found out that the foetus suffers from a serious deformation, and that if she carries the pregnancy, her child will be a severely damaged human being bound to suffer in horrible ways through their life. Saskia must choose between terminating the pregnancy or carrying on with it.

This is a fairly realistic case in which, for many people, neither horn of Saskia's dilemma will appear as the obviously right choice. At the same time, many other people will consider, without hesitation, that Saskia ought to keep the fetus (e.g., people who endorse certain Christian values and who think that abortion is not permissible under any circumstances). And conversely, many people will have no hesitation in claiming that Saskia ought to terminate the pregnancy (e.g., those who consider it to be morally wrong to give birth to an individual who is bound to suffer horribly). The aim of this example is to illustrate a situation such that from one perspective, the moral question whether Saskia ought to carry the pregnancy or not does not seem to have an objective, universally valid answer; from yet another perspective, in which a certain kind of moral value is taken for granted, the obvious answer is that she ought to keep the child; and from yet a third perspective, an equally obvious answer is that she ought to terminate pregnancy.

We have presented the example as a case of moral *deliberation*, regarding what Saskia (morally) ought to do. But the case may also be presented as one of moral *evaluation*. Thus, someone coming from a contra-abortion perspective will judge that if Saskia terminates the pregnancy, that will be morally worse than if she doesn't, while someone else coming from a pro-abortion perspective will judge that her terminating the pregnancy is a morally better choice. The two individuals, who evaluate Saskia's action from such different moral backgrounds, are in a disagreement that does not seem to be resolvable on any objective, factual grounds. This kind of persistent and irresolvable moral disagreement suggests that there are moral issues whose answers crucially depend on the set of moral values and norms against which they are evaluated.

To be sure, those who believe in objective and absolute moral values will likely see this kind of case as merely a difficult and complex ethical case, one in which various considerations and norms pulling in different directions are at play, yet one for which at the end, there must be one and only one right answer. By contrast, a relativist has an elegant explanation of why it is so difficult to say what the right answer is: it is because, for them, there is no such thing as "the right answer" independently of some underlying set of moral values or norms. In sum, what emerges is the idea that there are moral issues that cannot be resolved unless we specify some set of moral norms or some other suitable factor that serves the same purpose, such as culture, educational background, the practices of a community, or what not. We have started with an example from everyday life, concerning an individual and the decision she faces, but the range of cases can be expanded to more general issues, such as the question whether abortion is morally permissible *tout court*, whether euthanasia, decapitation, torture, and the like, are permissible (and under which conditions), and similar ethical issues that different societies and cultures approach in different ways.

The fact that different cultures may endorse very different moral principles has often been seen as a strong motivation for relativism (Wong 1984, 2006; Prinz 2007; Velleman 2013; Rovane 2013). However, we must be cautious in what theoretical consequences we might want to draw from such cross-cultural divergences in morality, as

they may easily lead to misinterpreting the view. Consider the case of female genital mutilation, a.k.a. female circumcision, a painful ritual practiced in certain countries that often brings about extremely harmful consequences to the women who undergo it. The fact that an entire society endorses a set of norms and practices that not only make genital mutilation acceptable but even required does not imply that such a set of norms constitutes indeed an admissible set of *moral* norms. In other words, the step from the claim that genital mutilation is accepted by a given society to the claim that there is a set of genuinely moral norms relative to which genital mutilation is permissible is a step that requires further argument. For instance, Kopelman (2011) takes genital mutilation as a case study to argue that certain relativist views are implausible. However, her argument targets only those relativist views that accept the abovementioned step.

We have stressed that it is unclear how precisely to define relativism and how to characterize the main tenets that the various relativist approaches have in common. But there are ideas that are often thought of as "relativist" such that it *is* clear that relativism is not committed to them. Such misconceptions are unfortunately widespread, in and outside philosophy, hence it is important to dispel them at the outset. For ease of exposition, let us provisorily take relativism to be the view that the truth of moral claims is relative to a set of moral norms, perhaps paired with the view that there isn't a single, absolute such set of moral norms. Then the view had better entail that *there are* moral claims that are true relative to one such set of norms and false relative to another. Unfortunately, moral relativism is often taken to entail something stronger, namely that for *every* moral claim, there is some set of norms relative to which the claim is true and some other set relative to which the claim is false. This view is then (and rightly so) dismissed as implausible, on the grounds that it is implausible to accept that, for example, there should be a set of moral norms with respect to which genocide is morally acceptable, or with respect to which slavery is right while altruism is wrong. Indeed, for most of us, it is even impossible to *imagine* what the world should be like for it to be the case that genocide is good, a phenomenon known as *imaginative resistance* (Gendler 2000).

However, relativism, as characterized above, only entails the weaker, not the stronger, view. This is not to say, though, there are no relativists who endorse the stronger view. Thus Brogaard notes "In a full-blown relativist framework, the sentence 'It is morally permissible to murder people' comes out true when uttered by the serial killer. To many people, this is highly unintuitive" (2012: 547), and then goes on to defend such a "full-blown" framework against the burden of intuitions. However, the important point is that moral relativism *is* compatible with the idea that there can be higher-order constraints on moralities, or on acceptable sets on moral norms, or moral codes. For instance, one such higher-order constraint may be that no set of moral norms should dictate incompatible actions: no set of norms should be such that, for some F, both "You ought to F" and "You ought not to F" are true relative to that set. Just as there may be higher order constraints that rule out sets of norms that licence incompatible deontic claims, there may be constraints that rule out sets of norms that licence, for example, the claim that genocide is good, or that female circumcision is permissible. Of course, it remains an important question, perhaps ever the most pressing question for metaethical relativism, to say whether such constraints are absolute or are also relative (and if so, to what), and what it is that they ultimately rest upon.

RELATIVISM AS A PLURALITY OF MORALITIES:
THE METAPHYSICAL CONSTRUAL

On the metaphysical construal, metaethical relativism is, roughly, the view that there is no single, absolute, universal morality. This contrasts with the semantic construal, on which it is the view that the truth value of a moral claim is relative to some suitable parameter: a morality, or a set of moral norms, standards, or whatever; to which parameters exactly is a debatable question, answered differently by different theories. To make the distinction more intuitive, compare it with relativism about motion. The question of whether the Eiffel Tower is moving can only be answered if we specify *relative to what.* Disregarding possible tectonic movements, the Eiffel Tower is not moving relative, say, to Palais Chaillot, and at the same time, it is moving relative to the Sun. On the metaphysical construal, relativism about motion is the (uncontroversial) thesis that there is no absolute motion, there is only motion relative to a frame of reference. On the semantic construal, it is the (equally uncontroversial) thesis that the truth value of a sentence such as "The Eiffel Tower is moving" depends on a hidden parameter, which specifies the frame of reference of the movement. Returning to the example of Saskia's dilemma, relativism, metaphysically understood, would say that there is no single, absolute, universally valid scale of comparison that makes one choice morally better than the other—and this would still hold even in the absence of a language that can express such things as "This choice is (morally) better than the other." Semantic relativism, on the other hand, would say that in order to ascribe a truth value to a statement such as "It would be morally better if Saskia terminated the pregnancy," or "She ought to terminate the pregnancy," we need to evaluate it with respect to a set of moral values (or some analogous parameter). Although the two construals are intimately linked, they are theoretically independent, as will be made clear in the next section. The remainder of this section aims to illustrate the metaphysical construal with two views: Gilbert Harman's view, considered a classic example of metaethical relativism, and a fairly different, dispositionalist view defended in Egan (2012), which builds on Lewis (1989). We see Harman as proposing a metaphysical rather than semantic version of relativism because his focus is on what morality and moral values are, rather than on how moral language works; in his own words, "Moral relativism is the theory that there is not a single true morality. It is not a theory of what people mean by their moral judgements" (2012: 13). Egan's proposal, on the other hand, lends itself equally well to a metaphysical as to a semantic interpretation. We have chosen to classify it under the metaphysical construal—even if that need not be what Egan himself would prefer—in order to demonstrate how relativism may encompass substantively different views.

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Through a series of influential articles, united in Harman (2000), Harman became a key figure in the defence of metaethical relativism. There are two main motivations to his view. One is the observation that, in order to make a moral judgment, such as whether someone ought to act in a certain way, it is necessary to take into account the moral considerations and reasons to which this person is responsive. Harman further observes that when *we* are asked to make such moral judgments, we normally only do so if we take it for granted that the person whose moral deliberation we are judging is responsive to the same sort of reasons and considerations that we ourselves are responsive to. The sec-

ond motivation relies on the idea that an agent's actions are normally motivated by their attitudes, and in particular, beliefs about what they ought to do. This motivation is tied to issues about cognitivism (see David Faraci and Tristram McPherson's chapter "Ethical Judgment and Motivation") and internalism (see Darwall 1997), but for our purposes, we may simply retain the idea that the answer to the question whether an agent ought to act in a certain way or not depends on their motivating attitudes.

Harman's proposal, in a nutshell, combines the following two ideas. First, morality arises from a set of implicit, not necessarily conscious, agreements to which a group commits, and since the agreements reached by different groups may be different and evolve over time, there will be no single, absolute morality. Second, whether an agent ought to do something is relative to their considerations and, especially, their motivating attitudes, where these are shaped by the moral agreements that the agent has undertaken with respect to others. Finally, note that Harman's relativism is only a "first-order relativism," compatible with the possibility of objective higher-order constraints on moralities. He stresses: "I am not denying (nor am I asserting) that some moralities are 'objectively' better than others or that there are objective standards for assessing moralities" (1975: p. 4).

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A very different kind of relativist proposal has recently emerged from the work of Andy Egan. His point of departure is the dispositionalist theory of value from Lewis (1989), to which he gives a relativist twist, relying once more on Lewis' ideas regarding attitude self-ascription (Lewis 1981). The general gist of dispositionalist theories may be captured by the following schema:

(Disp) x is (an instance of value) F iff
          x is disposed to elicit response R in subject(s) S in conditions C

As can be easily anticipated, there are many ways of defending dispositionalism, depending on what one does with the different variables in the schema: F, R, S, C. In particular, different ways of approaching the subject parameter S will differentiate between possible *invariantist* versions, *contextualist* versions, and *relativist* versions (one of which is Egan's). Egan's (2012) proposal concerns values in general, while Egan (2013) applies it to the case of personal taste, and a similar account (though not necessarily "relativist") is defended in Björnsson (ms.). But before we see how (Disp) may be developed into a form relativism, let us illustrate the dispositionalist idea with an example of moral value. Let's take F to stand for "morally wrong" (hence a *negative* moral value). One way of instantiating (Disp) would be to say that Saskia's choosing to give birth to a severely damaged child who is bound to suffer horribly is morally wrong if, in normal conditions, it is likely to elicit strong moral disapproval from people. The conditions parameter C is important because it allows for different moral assessments about individuals who fully and knowingly control their actions vs. individuals who act under hypnosis, drug influence, or are forced to act as they do.

We have spoken in terms of "disapproval from people," but one might ask, *which people*? A view that says "people *in general*" would qualify as an invariantist version of dispositionalism. On the other hand, if we allow for a greater variability regarding who the relevant subjects might be, we get various forms of contextualism and relativism. One

option is to say that the people at stake are *us* (which is Lewis' own take). This already leads to a form of relativity. For *we* may judge Saskia's action to be morally wrong (because it elicits strong disapproval in us) while others may judge her action *not* to be morally wrong (because it actually elicits approval in them). Whether a view along these lines is contextualist or genuinely relativist will depend on further assumptions. Anticipating a distinction introduced in the next section, let us say that a view is "contextualist" if the *content* of assertions and beliefs involving the moral value at stake depends on who S is, and "relativist" if only the *truth* of such assertions or beliefs, but not their content, depends on S. Thus on a possible contextualist interpretation of our example, when different people say "Saskia did something morally bad," they say different things: if Inma utters the sentence, she expresses the proposition that Saskia's action elicits disapproval in her kin; if Tarek utters it, he expresses the proposition that it elicits disapproval in *his* kin. On a possible relativist interpretation, Inma and Tarek say the same thing; however, what they say is not a classical proposition, since in order to deliver a truth value, it needs to be evaluated at a subject or a group of subjects. On Egan's interpretation (following Lewis), the content shared by Tarek and Inma's assertions—and beliefs—is the property of being a subject such that Saskia's action is disposed to elicit disapproval in you. Adapting the proposal from Lewis (1981), Egan suggests that to believe this kind of content is to self-ascribe the property at stake.

RELATIVISM AS A VARIABILITY IN TRUTH VALUE: THE SEMANTIC CONSTRUAL

On its semantic construal, metaethical relativism builds on the idea that the truth value of moral claims is relative to a special parameter, which, depending on the theory, may be a set of moral norms, codes, standards or considerations, proper to an agent or shared by a group, society, culture, or what not. For simplicity, let us call it the morality parameter. Because there are many ways in which truth value may depend on such a parameter, there will be many ways in which metaethical relativism may be developed into a semantic theory of moral language. One line of development leads to what is nowadays more accurately called "methaetical contextualism", a view defended, e.g., in Dreier (1990) and discussed at length in Alex Silk's chapter "Metaethical Contextualism." Other, more recent lines of development are cast within novel semantic frameworks and constitute a field of research in bloom. What exactly are the fine-grained differences between the various views, and which of them deserve to be called "relativist", are issues that are not peculiar to metaethics, but have received some interest in philosophy of language (Kölbel 2004; Stojanovic 2008; López de Sa 2011), metaphysics (Einheuser 2008), and epistemology (Kompa 2012). Although the question is to a certain extent terminological, there is a substantive aspect to it. For to pin down the respects in which relativism departs from rival views is to identify some of the important issues in metaethics, and to be able to clearly formulate those issues is to make progress in addressing them.

In discussing Egan's view in the previous section, we anticipated one way of marking the distinction between contextualism and relativism, namely, in terms of what gets contributed to the content. Another way to mark the distinction is in terms of what determines which morality is relevant to the truth value of a given moral claim. Views that insist that

the context of utterance determines this would qualify as "contextualist," while those that deny it (a possible alternative being that the so-called context of assessment does it) would qualify as "relativist." In this section, we will look more closely at the two distinctions and will discuss the ways in which the truth value of a moral claim may be sensitive to various parameters. But before we do that, it may help to say a few words about the relationship between the metaphysical and the semantic characterization of relativism.

Understood as a claim that there is not a single, universally valid morality, relativism is a view that says nothing about moral language—indeed, it is a view that would make perfect sense even if we spoke a language that had no vocabulary and no other linguistic devices to describe actions as right or wrong, or to express moral imperatives such as "Thou shalt not kill." On this metaphysical construal, relativism is even compatible with views according to which moral claims are not even truth-value apt. Conversely, though less obviously, the semantic construal of relativism does not entail commitment to the metaphysical construal either. There may be reasons to develop a semantics for terms such as "good," "wrong," or "ought" in which the truth value of any claim involving such a term is sensitive to the morality parameter, and at the same time accept the idea that for any given moral claim, there *is* one and only one correct value for this parameter, or a "single, true morality." To be sure, most of those who are inclined to defend semantic relativism will be inclined to endorse metaphysical relativism as well. However, theoretically, the two are independent. To make this clear, it may help to draw an analogy with time. It is customary to relativize truth value to times (Prior 1957; Kaplan 1977, Higginbotham 1993). For instance, "There has been life on Mars" may be seen as semantically expressing a temporal proposition that is true if evaluated at a time t_1 such that there was an earlier time t_1' at which it was true that there is life on Mars, and false when evaluated at a time t_2 such that there was no such corresponding t_2'. Yet, it is plausible to accept that, at any given time, there is one and only one time value at which it is correct to evaluate such a temporal proposition for its truth value; namely, now. Thus even if a thousand years from now it will be true that there has been life on Mars, this does not make the year 3016 an eligible time at which we could *now* evaluate the proposition that there has been life on Mars for its truth value.

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Let us now turn to some preliminaries that will help us understand what a relativist semantics for a moral language might look like.

(i) Deontic vs. Evaluative. The moral vocabulary of English and most Indo-European languages typically includes, on the one hand, modal auxiliaries such as "ought," "must," and "may," which, among others, allow for a *deontic* reading, and, on the other hand, *evaluative* adjectives such as "good," "bad," "evil," and so on. This is only a rough classification, since there are adjectives, such as "permissible," which are taken to belong to the deontic category (Tappolet 2013). What distinguishes evaluative terms from the rest remains an open issue. Thus, for example, it can be debated whether "thick terms" such as "courageous" belong among evaluative adjectives (see Debbie Roberts' chapter "Thick Concepts"). For the sake of simplicity, we will focus on basic evaluative terms and will leave aside the possible relativist proposals for deontic modals and for 'ought' (covered in Jennifer Carr's chapter "Deontic Modals"). For a relativist

semantics applied to "ought," see Kolodny & MacFarlane (2010) and MacFarlane (2014: 285–298) (although they do not explicitly distinguish the practical reading of "ought" from a properly deontic reading).

(ii) <u>Dimensions of goodness</u>. The adjective "good" in English (and its equivalent in other languages) is an all-purpose evaluative adjective. We speak of good weather, good cars, good meals, good books, none of which has anything to do with morality. What happens when we say that a person is good? Out of the context, it might mean almost anything: that she is a good carpenter, a good company, a good mother, a good person (Geach 1956; Thomson 2008). Some of these interpretations may imply moral goodness, other not. Even when we restrict the interpretation to "a (morally) good person," there can still be implicit dimensions that, depending on the context, may be required for the attribution of goodness to hold. Thus a person may be (morally) good as regards treating others with respect, but not be so as regards helping out those who are in need. Similarly for actions. Which dimensions are required for being considered as good *tout court* is a context-sensitive matter. This form of variability in the truth value of statements involving "good," even when narrowed down to its moral interpretation, is not yet a hallmark of truth relativity. Thus deciding which dimensions need to hold for the predicate "good" to be correctly applied may be even seen as a metalinguistic issue, as in Plunkett and Sundell (2013).

(iii) <u>Threshold sensitivity</u>. Evaluative adjectives are typically gradable: some person may be better than some other; some actions may be very bad; others, scarcely bad. Gradability means that a property comes in degrees. When a statement contains a gradable adjective, to evaluate it for a truth value, first, we need to fix a scale, and second, a threshold on the scale (Kennedy & McNally 2005). Thus consider a case in which Lei makes a $5 donation to a charity, and suppose that we have determined the relevant scale of goodness. Then "Lei's action is good" may still have different truth values in different contexts. In a context in which hardly anyone made any donation at all, the threshold for a donation counting as a good action will be low, and the statement will be true. But in a context in which everyone made a $500 donation, and Lei is rich enough to do the same, the threshold will be higher and the statement false. Again, this variability in truth value does not yet commit to relativism.

An interesting feature about threshold sensitivity is that people may agree on how things stand with respect to each other on the scale, say, of moral goodness, but disagree on whether either of them is bad. Thus Tarek and Inma may agree that, in Saskia's case, carrying a pregnancy is a morally worse choice than terminating it. But while Tarek considers that if Saskia carried the pregnancy, she would do something morally bad, Inma, who is less stringent, may consider that Saskia's action would not yet reach the threshold for it to be considered morally bad.

(iv) As a last preliminary, let us briefly introduce some notions from the framework put forward in Kaplan (1977/1989) and widely adopted nowadays, which serves as a starting point for both ways of distinguishing relativism from contextualism that we will discuss below. The Kaplanian framework aims to handle context-dependence, in particular as it arises with indexicals—words such as 'I', 'here', 'now', and demonstratives 'this' and 'that'. A sentence such as "I live here" can be ascribed two kinds of meaning. One kind is that which does not vary from one context to another, and can be roughly paraphrased as "The speaker lives at the location where the utterance

is taking place." The other kind of meaning—what Kaplan calls *content*—depends on who utters the sentence and where. Thus if Inma utters it in Paris, the content expressed by the utterance is that Inma lives in Paris, whereas if Tarek utters it in Tbilisi, the content will be that Tarek lives in Tbilisi. Furthermore, in order to determine whether the utterance is true or false, what we need is to *evaluate* this content at what Kaplan calls a circumstance of evaluation, which includes a possible world parameter and a time parameter. Thus suppose that Inma lived in Paris until 2009 and in Tbilisi from then on; however, had she gotten a job in Paris that year, she would still be living there. Then the content that she expresses by saying, in 2016 in Paris, "I live here," is false as evaluated with respect to that context, making her utterance false. Yet the same content, as evaluated at the actual world but, say, in the year 2008, is true; and so it will be if evaluated in the year 2016 and at the counterfactual world in which in 2009, Inma got a job in Paris.

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With (ii) and (iii), we have seen how the truth value of a moral claim may depend on parameters such as scales and thresholds. This kind of variability in truth value is a widespread feature of natural language, hence hardly controversial at all. More controversial is truth value dependence on the morality parameter. The disagreement between contextualism and relativism is not about the nature of the morality parameter, but rather on the question of where it figures in semantics and how it gets to be assigned a value. What emerges from the recent literature on the contextualism-relativism debate is that there are (at least) two important lines of divide to be made, resulting in (at least) three views. Since both lines of divide were originally aimed at distinguishing "contextualism" from "relativism," the view that falls on the "relativist" side by one divide but on the "contextualist" side by the other is, somewhat confusingly, at times referred to as "moderate relativism" and at others, "nonindexical contextualism." The other two main views are "indexical contextualism" and "assessment relativism." Recall that the views under consideration all share the assumption that the truth value of a moral claim depends on the morality parameter. Here is, then, how this class of views may be partitioned:

(a)　<u>Does the value assigned to the morality parameter figure in the content?</u> The views that answer "yes" typically take moral terms to behave like covert indexicals, hence the label *indexical contextualism*. The views that answer "no" hold that the morality parameter is merely needed to evaluate the content for a truth value. Let us appeal once again to the analogy with time. Consider the sentence "A man has landed on the Moon." On a contextualist approach to time-sensitivity, if uttered on the first of January 2016, the sentence expresses the content equivalent to "Prior to 01/01/2016, a man landed on the Moon." On a relativist approach, it expresses a content that does not specify the time prior to which a man is said to have landed on the Moon. Thus the content is true if evaluated at the present time, but false if evaluated, say, in the year 1926. Similarly, on a contextualist view, "Euthanasia is morally wrong" will express different contents if uttered in contexts that differ with respect to morality. On a relativist view, on the other hand, it will express the same content regardless of who utters it or in which context, but the content that it expresses comes out true when

evaluated at a morality that bans euthanasia, but false when evaluated at a morality that approves of euthanasia.

(b) <u>Does the context of utterance supply the value for the morality parameter?</u> First of all, let us note that indexical contextualism answers 'yes'. As Alex Silk's chapter "Metaethical Contextualism" puts it, "the distinctive claim of contextualism is that a specific body of norms *from the context of utterance* figures in the conventional content of normative uses of language" (my italics). But it is possible to answer 'yes' to this question while answering "no" to (a). The resulting view, "moderate relativism," corresponds to Kaplan's view regarding the time and world parameters, as applied to the morality parameter. In metaethics, possible defenders of this view are Kölbel (2002) and Brogaard (2008, 2012), but given that neither of them addresses the question explicitly, their views could be interpreted either way.

To answer 'no' to the question is, again, compatible with several views. The most popular one, assessment relativism, comes from the work of John MacFarlane, which extends over several papers and culminates in MacFarlane (2014). Although MacFarlane himself has never laid out the view for evaluative moral terms, other authors have outlined it (Beebe 2010, Schafer 2012). MacFarlane makes a non-trivial amendment to the Kaplanian framework. He posits two context parameters: in addition to the context of utterance (CU), he introduces a context of assessment (CA). Applying MacFarlane"s framework to the moral case, we get the following picture. Just as in a Kaplanian framework, CU has two roles: first, to provide values for the interpretation of indexicals (which then figure in the content), and second, to provide values for the parameters of world and time, which do not figure in the content but for which the content is evaluated for a truth value. CA, on the other hand, provides values for various other parameters, such as standards of taste, standards of knowledge, and, crucially, moral standards.

One driving motivation for introducing a context of assessment, in addition to the context of utterance, is that one and the same sentence, as uttered in one and the same context, may still have different truth values, if assessed from morally divergent points of view. Thus even if "Euthanasia is wrong" is uttered in a society whose moral norms prohibit euthanasia, a person from a euthanasia-approving society may still assess that very utterance, and (arguably) rationally so, as being false.

Assessment relativism is not the only alternative to the idea that the context of utterance supplies the value to the morality parameter. A reason for answering "no" to the question in (b) is that we may want to reject the assumption that this value is supplied is some unique way, fully specified by principles built into the semantic theory. Stojanovic (2012) argues that there are no good theoretical or empirical motivations for positing such rigid principles, not only regarding the morality parameter (or other novel parameters, such as standards of taste) but even regarding the traditional parameters of world and time. The resulting view is what we might call *flexible* relativism. From the point of view of compositional semantics, flexible relativism shares the features of the framework that moderate relativism and assessment relativism share.[1] The difference is that when it comes to deciding what truth value a given sentence, as uttered on a given occasion, has, the decision will depend on a variety of pragmatic and possibly other factors (2012: 631–33). Although flexible relativism may be argued to give empirically more accurate predic-

tions, the question of how to choose between moderate relativism, assessment relativism, and flexible relativism ultimately depends on certain general assumptions about the relationship between semantics and truth value assignment.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

By way of conclusion, in the past four decades, relativism has gained some ground. From being a position all too easily discarded as implausible, it has developed into a family of views that deserve to be taken seriously. It is important to remember that relativism does not entail that, for every moral claim, there is some set of admissible moral norms that makes the claim true. It only entails the that *there are* moral claims whose truth value cannot be decided once for all, irrespective of some set of moral norms, or codes, or some other suitable morality parameter on which the truth value depends. Moral relativism is thus compatible with the idea that there can be higher-order constraints on the values that this morality parameter may take. Not any old set of norms may constitute a genuine set of moral norms, and some moralities may be better than others. How such higher-order questions are to be dealt with, whether they allow for objective answers, or whether moralities may be ranked with respect to each other only relative to something else, remain important issues for contemporary metaethical relativism. Equally important and controversial is the issue of what precisely the nature of the morality parameter is: Is it a set of norms? A set of (possibly shared) beliefs? An agreement to which we implicitly commit? A set of dispositions? Fortunately, it is not necessary to settle that delicate issue in order to approach relativism from a more general metaethical perspective.

Parallel to its developments in metaethics, relativism has also made its way into the study of natural language, leading to more and more sophisticated semantic frameworks that are meant to model a wide range of constructions: epistemic modals, knowledge ascriptions, predicates of personal taste, and so on. Those recent developments in philosophy of language and semantics have a double impact on metaethical relativism. One is that some fine-grained distinctions regarding the different ways in which the truth value of moral claims may depend on moral norms and similar factors have led to a myriad of related but distinct positions, many of which are now preferably called "contextualist" rather than "relativist." Secondly, there is a certain pressure to look more carefully at the linguistic behaviour of the expressions that form our moral vocabulary; these do not constitute a unified lexical category, but include modal auxiliaries ("may," "ought"), both gradable and non-gradable adjectives ("good," "evil"; "wrong," "permissible"), but also certain adverbs, verbs, or nouns, which have hardly been studied in linguistics. There is also some pressure, when it comes to analyzing moral discourse and moral intuitions, to gather the empirical data with respect to which the predictions of a semantic theory may be tested. A growing interest in experimental research (see Daniel Nolan's chapter "Methodological Naturalism in Metaethics") offers good prospects of providing such data. Nevertheless, despite being one of the oldest philosophical doctrines, metaethical relativism has barely begun to mark milestones on its semantic agenda.

NOTE

1. Note that the context of assessment only intervenes at a stage at which a sentence is evaluated for a truth value, which comes after the compositional derivation of its truth conditions. MacFarlane, after laying

out the formal semantics of his relativist framework, observes: "up to this point, we have not needed to mention contexts of assessment. That is because, in this semantics, contexts of assessment are not locally relevant. Contexts of assessment are needed only in the next phase, the definition of truth relative to a context of use and context of assessment in terms of truth at a context of use and index. To distinguish this phase from the definition of truth at a context of use and index, we call it the postsemantics" (2014: 151). In this respect, Schafer's claim that "[someone who endorses Moral Assessor Relativism] must be understood to be making a claim about (…) the sense of 'truth' with which one works when doing compositional semantics" (2012: 607) may be somewhat misleading.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

RELATED TOPICS

Chapter 5 "Expressivism"; Chapter 6, "Metaethical Contextualism"; Chapter 12, "Deontic Modals"; Chapter 13, "Thick Concepts"; Chapter 15, "Hybrid Accounts of Ethical Thought and Talk"; Chapter 17, "The Significance of Ethical Disagreement for Theories of Ethical Thought and Talk"; Chapter 18, "Cognitivism and Non-Cognitivism"; Chapter 33, "Metasemantics and Metaethics"; Chapter 39, "Experimental Philosophy and Moral Theory."

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