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Relativism about Morality

Abstract: Many philosophers and non-philosophers are attracted to the view that moral truths are relative to moral framework or culture. I distinguish between two versions of such a view. I argue that one version is coherent but not plausible, and I argue that the second one can't be made sense of. The upshot is that we have to make sense of at least some objective moral truths.

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1 Introduction

Many people, philosophers and non-philosophers alike, think of themselves as moral *relativists*: they deny that there are absolute truths about morality, and insist that moral truth, when it obtains, is relative to a cultural (or possibly even individual) perspective.

Others reject moral relativism and assert the existence of at least some absolute truths about morality.¹

Both parties to this dispute assume the *coherence* of moral relativism. They merely disagree about its correctness. My own view, by contrast, is that there is no coherent position that deserves the label 'moral relativism.' Or, to put the matter a bit more precisely since anything can be called by any name one likes, there is no position that coherently expresses the *motivations* that moral relativists typically say drive them to their relativism.

The worry that relativism might not be a coherent view is a familiar one. But it is familiar largely in application to the idea that *all* facts are relative – *global relativism*. Here the worry is a familiar one about self-refutation. If all truths are relative to perspectives, what about the truth of global relativism itself? Either it is itself only true relative to the perspective of relativists, in which case we non-relativists may ignore it; or it is itself true absolutely, in which case at least one truth is absolute and global relativism stands refuted.

Powerful as this familiar worry is, it doesn't apply in any obvious way to *local* relativisms – relativistic views about particular domains, such as that of

¹ See, for example, (Benedict 2009), although it is by no means only theists who are attracted to at least some moral absolutism.

morality. Since those views don't commit themselves to *all* facts being relative, but only those in a specified domain, the familiar threat of self-refutation does not apply, at least not obviously.

Perhaps not obviously, but I believe that, in the end, there is a substantial worry about how relativistic views of *normative* domains, such as that of morality, could be coherent. I will illustrate with the especially important case of morality, but my argument is more general.

2 Motivations for Moral Relativism

Let me first start by asking about the *motivations* for moral relativism. Why would someone recoil from moral absolutism and be attracted to moral relativism?²

The view I aim to discuss stems from the conviction that it is hopelessly mystifying to suppose that an act could be *simply* right or wrong: that all you need to do is say what act is in question, and then the world takes over and pronounces on its moral status as either right or wrong. Why would such absolute facts about moral right and wrong be mystifying?

The crucial feature of moral judgments is that they are *normative* or *evaluative*. Moral judgments do not say how things *are*, but, rather, how they *ought* to be, or how there is *reason* for them to be or how it would be *good* for them to be.

And it can seem pretty mysterious – especially to a naturalist, but not only to a naturalist – how there could be normative, prescriptive or evaluative facts just sitting out there. Where would they come from? Where do they reside?

Furthermore, there seems to be a difficulty explaining how we might come to *know* what such facts are, assuming they exist. By what sensory means might we access facts about oughts and value? Can we just see that something is right or wrong, in the way that we can see whether it is flat or spherical? And why, if these facts are just sitting out there, is there so much disagreement about them?

One way of responding to these sorts of puzzle about absolute facts about morality is to think of moral truths as not merely sitting out there, but somehow or other grounded in the dictates of an almighty being: the facts don't just sit out there; they are God's commands. However, few philosophers would be willing to resort to theism these days in order to defend moral realism. Moreover, if some-

² As I said above, it's important to attend to the underlying philosophical motivations, because 'relativism' is a technical term that has been applied to a wide variety of positions. Without a specification of the work it's supposed to do, the goals it's supposed to fulfill, one can get bogged down in pointless terminological squabbles.

one were so tempted we could fairly quickly show that it would not be a very good defense.

Another way of responding to the puzzles is to think of moral truths as delivered not by the judgments of an almighty being, but rather by the judgments of a certain sorts of idealized *human* judge. David Hume has a famous theory of aesthetic truths that assumes this form (see Hume 1757/1987). But this sort of ‘ideal observer’ view, as applied to morality, has turned out to be very difficult to spell out in a non-vacuous manner. (It is only slightly less problematic in the case of aesthetic truth.)

Against the background of these failed attempts to make sense of absolute moral truths, a relativistic view of morality can come to seem quite appealing. By relativizing moral facts it seems to enable us to hang onto moral discourse, while avoiding a commitment to mysterious absolute normative truths.

3 Relativizing the Facts of a Given Domain

How, exactly, does a relativistic view of morality do this? We need to formulate the view more precisely and then show that, so formulated, it indeed does have the advantages that are claimed for it.

Let us start with the question of formulation. What does it mean to ‘relativize’ the facts of a given domain? Well, science has provided us with some prominent examples in which a rejection of an absolute conception of a given domain in favor of a relativized conception of that domain has led to important advances in our understanding.

For example: Before Galileo, we used to think that there was such a thing as *absolute motion*: either an object was moving or it wasn’t. Galileo taught us, however, that there is no such thing as absolute motion, but only motion relative to a specified frame of reference; and that none of these frames is more privileged than any of the others.

To take another example: Before Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, we believed that there was such a thing as absolute *simultaneity*: either two events were simultaneous, or they weren’t. Einstein taught us that we should not think that there is any such thing as the absolute simultaneity of two events separated in space, but only simultaneity relative to a (variable) spatio-temporal frame of reference; and that none of these spatio-temporal frames of reference was any more privileged than any of the others.

To illustrate with Einstein’s famous thought experiment: suppose you are standing on the platform of a train station, and another observer is on a boxcar on a train moving past you, facing you. At the moment when you and the

observer on the train are lined up, he releases a light beam both to his left and to his right. To him, the light beams will seem to hit the front and back walls of his boxcar simultaneously; but to you, the light will seem to hit the back of the box car, which is moving towards the beam, earlier than it hits the front of the box car which is moving away from it. On Einstein's theory, no one of these spatio-temporal frames is more privileged than the other. So we have to say that simultaneity is *relative* to your frame of reference. Judgments of simultaneity are relative to variable frames of reference and no particular frame of reference is more privileged or correct than any of the others.

In both of these famous cases, we start out with an absolute predicate – 'moves' or 'is simultaneous with' – which we believe we can truly apply to the world. We become convinced, however, for good reason, that nothing in the world answers to that absolute predicate, and that the most we can claim is that a close *higher-degree cousin* of the predicate applies – "moves relative to F" or "is simultaneous relative to F". So we recommend that people stop talking in terms of the absolute predicate and start talking only in terms of its higher-degree relativistic cousin.

"Moves" gives way to: "Moves relative to F"

"Is simultaneous with" gives way to: "Is simultaneous relative to F"

And we add: None of these F's is more privileged than any of the others.³

4 Formulating Moral Relativism

Now, these cases seem to provide us with a template that we can apply to the moral case in order to generate a coherent moral relativism. Thus, to formulate a relativism about morality we take the predicate

"is morally right (wrong)"

and we replace it with:

"is morally right (wrong) relative to F."

³ This "no privilege clause" is important for otherwise it would not have been secured that there are no absolute facts of the type at issue.

For example, instead of simply saying

- (1) It is right to educate girls

we would have to say

- (2) It is right to educate girls relative to F.

What is “F” going to be in the moral case? We know what we were relativizing to in the case of motion and simultaneity. But what are we relativizing to in the case of morality? Here there are two importantly different options and they determine two very different types of view.

On the first, we relativize to some *moral code* or other – that is, to some person’s, or some community’s, background set of moral values; and we add: and none of these moral codes is more privileged than any of the others. On this view, which I will call, for reasons that will emerge, a

- (3) *Thoroughgoing Relativism* about morality, we replace talk of
 x is morally right
 with
 x is morally right relative to moral code M.

This is the most common formulation of a relativistic view of morality. And I think there is a deep reason why it is the most common formulation, a reason that I will explain in a moment.

On the second option, which I will call, for reasons that will emerge, an *Absolutist Relativism*, we relativize not to background moral codes, but to the *circumstances*, broadly conceived, in which the act is performed. On this

- (4) *Absolutist Relativist* view, we replace
 x is morally right
 with
 x is morally right relative to its circumstances C

These circumstances are to be conceived very broadly: any fact that might be relevant to the moral status of the act can be included in them, including facts about what moral codes the various agents involved endorse.

When people talk about moral relativism, they sometimes mean the one view and sometimes the other, often not distinguishing between them. But they are very different views.

5 Absolutist Relativism

Let's look first at the case where we relativize to *circumstances*. Given what I said at the start, you may be surprised to learn that I think that there is *nothing* incoherent about this view. More than that: I believe that, sometimes, moral claims that are relativized to circumstances in this way are actually *true*. For example if we ask:

(5) Should I stop to help a motorist who has broken down on the side of the road? – The answer is not a straight “yes” or a straight “no”. The correct answer is: It depends on the circumstances.

For example: If it's the middle of night and there is no one else around and you don't yourself have a medical emergency, then you ought to stop; but if you yourself need to be somewhere else urgently and there are lots of other friendly people around, etc., then you are permitted not to stop.⁴ There are lots of other examples.

Should I leave someone who has served me a tip? – It depends on the local customs.
Should I eat noisily or quietly? – It depends on the cultural setting you are in.

We can also cite examples of such relativized claims that, while coherent, seem *false*:

May I abuse children for fun? – It depends on whether you will get caught.
May I kill an innocent person in order to harvest their organs and save a larger number of people? – It depends on how important the person in question is.

Finally, there are examples of circumstance-relative claims that are *controversial* – people argue about them:

May I torture someone to obtain information? – It depends on how large a calamity is at stake ...

So, given that I started out saying that I was going to argue *against* the coherence of moral relativism, how can I say that this sort of relativization to circumstances is not only coherent, but is even sometimes *true*?

The answer is that, while it may be perfectly legitimate to call this a type of ‘moral relativism’, (as I said, ‘relativism’ is a technical term so you have a lot of

⁴ A similar example can be found in (Scanlon 1998).

leeway in how you get to use it) it is not the sort of moral relativism that can accommodate the metaphysical and epistemological motivations that typically motivate relativists and which I outlined at the beginning of this paper.⁵

Why would relativization to circumstances not be capable of meeting the original metaphysical and epistemological concerns?

The reason is that such a relativism does *not* escape a commitment to absolute (and universal) moral facts. For what a statement like:

If circumstances are C, then you ought to stop and help the broken-down motorist; but if they are C*, then you are permitted to keep on going.

says is that:

(6) It holds for everyone that he/she ought to do help if circumstances are C; and holds for everyone that he/she is permitted to carry on if circumstances are C*.

This is the sort of content that moral claims have when they are relativized to circumstances.

So, if you were worried about how there could be impersonal normative facts, this sort of relativization would not allay those concerns. There is just as much of a problem seeing how there could be impersonal normative facts of the form

(7) You ought to Φ if circumstances are C

as there is about facts of the form:

(8) You ought to Φ no matter what the circumstances.

6 Thoroughgoing Relativism

This helps explain why a moral relativist, like Gilbert Harman, relativizes not to a person's circumstances but rather to his/her background moral code, adding that none of these codes is any more privileged than any of the others (see Harman 1996). With this relativization, which I called a *Thoroughgoing Relativism*, we

⁵ To reiterate: this explains why it is so important, in explaining the position that concerns you, to specify what philosophical work you take it to do. Without such a specification one can get bogged down in pointless terminological disputes.

have a real chance of getting away from a commitment to absolute moral facts of a kind that we were worried about. For when we say that the only moral facts there are, are facts of the form

(9) According to moral code M, one ought to Φ if C,

while insisting that none of these codes is any ‘truer’ than any of the others, we really do seem to get away from the idea that there are absolute facts about morality. For, if we now ask:

If C, ought we to Φ ?

the answer will have to be: That depends, according to moral framework M1, yes, and according to moral framework M2, no. There are only facts about what your background moral values tell you to do, and none of these sets of values is any ‘truer’ than any of the others.

Naturally, no one will want to deny that people have background moral values, or that some normative claims follow from those and others don’t. And since that is all that a Thoroughgoing Relativist is committed to, it looks as though we have finally formulated a relativistic view about morality that is responsive to the concern about the metaphysical strangeness of absolute moral facts.

The problem is that this is not so much a relativism about moral judgment as an eliminativism or nihilism about it, since *any* trace of normativity in the ‘relativized’ moral judgments has been lost. If all I can say are things like

(10) It’s right to educate girls according to my moral code

and

(11) It’s wrong to educate girls according to the code of the Taliban

then I’ve only said things with which everyone can agree, no matter what their moral perspective. Such judgments are *merely descriptive* remarks about what particular moral codes do and do not allow. And the upshot is indistinguishable from an eliminativism or nihilism about moral judgment.

Recall: relativism was supposed to be distinct from nihilism. Relativism was supposed to be a way of *retaining* moral discourse while evading its naïve commitment to absolute moral facts, by accepting only a relativized version of those facts. But if what I’ve said is right, then real relativism, one that has a *prima facie* chance of evading commitment to absolute moral facts, does not do that at all:

rather, it ends up eliminating moral discourse replacing it with purely descriptive remarks that are ill-suited to play anything like a normative role.⁶

If one were content with eliminativism about morality, one could achieve that outcome very quickly by putting forward not a relativism about morality but an *error theory* about it: one could just say: this discourse is committed to absolute moral facts; there aren't any; so we should just get rid of this discourse in favor of descriptive remarks about the sort of world we would prefer to live in.

That's in effect what we did with 'witch' discourse. We said there are no witches so we should just get rid of witch discourse. No one would confuse an eliminativism about witch discourse with a 'relativistic' view of witches.

I'm not now arguing that we *shouldn't* be error theorists about morality. I'm just making the point that relativism about morality was supposed to be something *distinct* from an eliminativism about it. But so far we have not found a formulation of relativism that manages both to retain moral discourse and to evade a commitment to absolute moral facts.

Contrast the case of morality with the case of simultaneity. Why do we end up eliminating moral judgments when we relativize them, but do not end up eliminating simultaneity judgments when we relativize them? Is it because moral properties are normative whereas simultaneity is not? That is not the right answer.

Take the case of phlogiston (which I'll safely assume is not a normative notion). Once we give up on the existence of phlogiston, the only real option is to eliminate phlogiston discourse and not use it in application to the world. It's not a real option to 'relativize' phlogiston discourse, urging that it is ok to use it provided we relativize phlogiston discourse to something. There is no useful relativistic cousin of phlogiston that plays anything like the role that phlogiston was supposed to play: the property of "being phlogiston according to theory T" is not a kind of phlogiston, but a kind of content (the content of theory T): it's a way of characterizing what theory T says, not a way of characterizing the world.

The problem, then, seems to derive not so much from *what* we are relativizing, but rather from what we are relativizing *to* – in particular from the fact that we are relativizing to a set of propositional attitudes that are said to contain a 'conception' of the subject matter in question. This makes the relativization look like a complete change of topic – from something about the world, to how things are according to a certain conception of the world.

⁶ Some philosophers have thought that if we worked with an *alethic* version of relativism, rather than a *property* version, as I have been doing, we would evade this difficulty. I explain in detail why that is not so in (Boghossian 2011) and in a longer version of the present paper (Boghossian ms).

By contrast, in the Special Theory of Relativity case, we are not relativizing to a conception, or even to anything mental, but rather to a spatio-temporal frame of reference. This sort of relativization ends up being consistent with a retention of the original subject matter, even if in a somewhat altered form.

Now, you might ask, why don't we relativize moral judgments to something other than moral codes, why don't we relativize to something non-mental, like circumstances? As we already saw in the discussion of relativization to circumstances, however, if we were to apply this strategy to the case of morality, while we retain the subject matter of morality, we do not succeed in evading a commitment to the existence of some absolute moral truths.

So we seem to face a dilemma: we could relativize moral claims to circumstances or to background moral codes. On the first option, we get credible results, but nothing that evades commitment to absolute moral truths. On the latter option, we get avoidance of commitment to absolute moral truths, but we preserve nothing of the original subject matter.

7 What About the Worries that Led to Relativism in the First Place?

All of this suggests that it's in *the very nature* of a normative subject matter that if there are to be moral judgments at all, they have to be meant in an absolutist sense. But what about the original metaphysical and epistemological concerns that made the existence of absolute normative facts so problematic-seeming in the first place?

It would take a large book to address those in a satisfactory way. But let me say some brief things now. I won't be telling you how to solve those problems. I will just indicate my reasons for thinking that we should feel very confident that there are solutions to those problems.

First, the conclusion that I am most directly arguing for here is not

There are absolute moral facts

but, rather,

To make moral judgments is to commit oneself to there being at least some absolute moral facts.

So, most directly, the conclusion I'm defending is only the conditional:

If you want to continue making moral judgments, you had better be willing to countenance some absolute moral facts. Relativism will not allow you both to hang onto the discourse while distancing yourself from such facts.

But I would want to go further and say that we *should be* willing to countenance absolute moral facts. How, then, might we deal with the metaphysical and epistemological concerns that we raised right at the start?

First, the metaphysical question: how could there be impersonal normative facts 'out there'?

One possible reply is that the facts are not impersonal after all, that they are constituted by the verdicts of a certain sort of ideal judge. As I've already indicated, I don't hold out much hope for such theories, but they have not been definitively ruled out.

But even if we could not make such theories work, I think we have no choice but to acknowledge at least *some* absolute *normative* facts. The absolute facts that we don't have much choice about acknowledging are not facts about morality, but rather facts about *rationality*: facts about what you ought to believe, given the evidence available.

Why do we have no choice but to acknowledge facts about rationality? Because facts about rationality are presupposed by *any* judgment, including the judgment that one ought not to acknowledge facts about rationality.

If you say: facts about rationality should be rejected since, if they existed, they would be problematic normative facts, you are tacitly presupposing that there are facts about rationality, since you are claiming that the rational thing to believe, given your arguments, is to reject facts about rationality.

So, we can't but acknowledge some normative facts, since we can't but acknowledge some rationality facts. And, according to me, to acknowledge some normative facts necessarily entails acknowledging some absolute normative facts.

What about the epistemological problem of *knowing* normative facts? Once more there is a lot to be said, but the point to observe for the moment is that we are here in the domain of the *a priori*. And we know once again that we *have* to be able to explain at least how *some* a priori knowledge is possible.

I say this not only because it is overwhelmingly plausible that we have a priori mathematical knowledge. But also because, once more, it is not really an option for us to claim that we don't have knowledge of at least some a priori propositions since it is not an option to claim that we don't know at least some truths

about logic – about what follows from what – or some truths about rationality – about what one ought to believe given such and so evidence.

So all of this leads me to be confident that we can solve these deep philosophical problems and so that we should not be afraid of at least some measure of normative absolutism.⁷

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