

## Three Kinds of Relativism

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### Abstract

This chapter looks at three big ideas that have been associated with the term “relativism.” The first maintains that some property has a higher degree than might have been thought. The second that the judgments in a particular domain of discourse are capable only of relative truth and not of absolute truth (an idea that is sometimes associated with the idea of “faultless disagreement”). And the third, which I dub with the oxymoronic label “absolutist relativism,” seeks to locate relativism in our acceptance of certain sorts of spare absolutist principles.

The first idea is well illustrated by the famous cases drawn from physics, but is ill-suited for providing a model for the sorts of relativism about normative domains that have most interested philosophers. The second idea – according to which it is the truth of certain judgments that is relative – seems subject to a very difficult dilemma. The final idea provides a coherent model of cases like etiquette but is not plausibly applied to the moral or epistemic domains.

### 1. Thoroughgoing Relativism

If we look at the variety of views that have been called “relativistic,” we can discern three importantly distinct ideas. The first, which I will call, “thoroughgoing factual relativism,” is best illustrated by the cases made famous by Einstein, the cases of time order and mass. Einstein, we may all agree, discovered that a relativism about simultaneity is true. What kind of a discovery was that?

Consider an utterance, *U*, of the sentence type

- (1) “*e*<sub>1</sub> is simultaneous with *e*<sub>2</sub>”

said of some particular pair of events  $e_1$  and  $e_2$ , prior to Einstein's discovery. Could we say that Einstein discovered that anyone uttering  $U$  would have *meant* not the content

- (2)  $e_1$  is simultaneous with  $e_2$

but, rather, the content

- (3)  $e_1$  is simultaneous with  $e_2$  relative to the (salient) frame of reference  $F$ ?

No. It's very implausible that ordinary competent speakers prior to Einstein would have meant the content specified in (3). Plausibly, pre-Einsteinian speakers attached absolutist meanings to their discourse about time order and had no awareness of the need to relativize their time order claims to frames of reference. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain why Einstein's views came as such a surprise or why he couldn't have arrived at them by doing some semantics.

So, at least in this case, relativism should not be equated with some claim about meaning.

Might relativism in this case be identified with a claim about *reference*: the claim that while "simultaneous" expresses an absolutist concept its reference is not a two-place relation but, rather, a three-place relation, between a pair of events and a variable frame of reference? This was essentially Gilbert Harman's way of construing relativism about simultaneity. He used it as his model for developing a relativism about morality.

Einstein's relativistic conception of [simultaneity] involves the following claim about the truth-conditions of judgments of [simultaneity]:

For the purposes of assigning truth-conditions, a judgment of the form, [ *$e_1$  is simultaneous with  $e_2$* ] has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, [*in relation to spatio-temporal framework  $F$   $e_1$  is simultaneous with  $e_2$* ]. (Harman 1996: 3–4)<sup>1</sup>

There are, I suppose, different ways of reading this. But on one natural way of reading it, what Harman is saying is that although we should take asserters of (1) to have meant (2), and although they themselves would think of their assertions as having a truth-condition involving a two-place relation, *we*, for the purposes of assigning their utterances truth-conditions, should take them to have meant (3). Unbeknownst to them, the truth-conditions of their simultaneity judgments involved a three-place relation rather than a two-place one.

I am less opposed to this way of understanding a relativism about simultaneity; but I am still inclined to think that it does not get at the most fundamental characterization of the phenomenon in question.

We can bring out why by asking: How could the meaning and truth-conditions of our ancestors' assertions have come apart in this way? What would justify our overriding their account of the truth-conditions of their own assertions?

There are two possible routes to such a justification. The first is the one proposed by Harman, which invokes a *principle of charity* in interpretation. Harman says that while

it would be implausible to attribute to our ancestors a three-place *meaning*, it would be “mean-spirited” not to attribute to them a truth-condition involving a three-place relation, for we would then end up accusing them of massive and systematic untruth in their judgments about time order.

There are two big issues with Harman’s reasoning here. First, even granting the principle of charity as a constitutive principle governing interpretation, I don’t think that applying it automatically yields Harman’s picture. For notice that, even on Harman’s account, we will have to attribute to our ancestors a serious error, for we are going to have to say that they didn’t know what the truth-conditions of their own thoughts were. So there’s no avoiding the imputation of some error, and the only question is: Which is the more plausible imputation? It’s not obvious to me that it is more charitable to impute error about the content of one’s own thoughts than it is to impute error about the world.

Second, there are issues about the principle of charity itself, understood as a constitutive principle of interpretation. Even in its original version, as a constraint on the attribution of *meaning* (rather than reference, as Harman has it), I never saw any reason for preferring 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*. But humanity would certainly not give one any grounds for reconstruing the truth-conditions in the simultaneity case: the error involved – of not realizing the need for variable frames of reference – is certainly rationally explicable.

In any event, I certainly don’t see the plausibility of applying charity in Harman’s selective manner, 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 that 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 simultaneity?

A second route to the envisaged bifurcation of meaning and truth-conditions, distinct from Harman’s invocation of a principle of charity, would come from what we might call “dual-aspect” semantics. Suppose you thought that the meaning of a word was fixed by something like its internal conceptual role but that its reference is fixed not by Fregean fit with that conceptual role, but partly by causal relations to the environment. And suppose that it is true about the world that we live in (as we may presume Einstein to have shown) that there are no two-place (absolute) simultaneity properties instantiated, but only three-place ones involving a variable frame of reference. Then, on such a view, it could happen that the internalist conceptual role of “simultaneous” fixes an absolutist concept of simultaneity even while the reference of any token of the word “simultaneous” is always some three-place property of “simultaneity relative to a contextually salient frame of reference.”

I think that this reasoning works a little better than Harman’s. Notice, however, that, while this kind of dual-aspect story may work well for theoretical terms in physics, it seems very implausible as applied to the central terms of morality or of epistemic rationality. These are not meant to be natural kind terms and their reference is not plausibly thought to be hostage to empirical contingencies in the same way. It would

be odd to think that natural science will discover for us what property “being epistemically rational” refers to. (Even a crude reliabilism does not have that consequence, even as it does have the consequence that which beliefs are, as a matter of fact, rational can turn out to be an empirical matter.)

Moreover, whether on this view or on the earlier Harman view, for anyone to be in a position to *claim* relativism about simultaneity requires them to be in a position *first* to make the *factual* claim that there are no instantiated two-place but only three-place simultaneity properties and *then* to draw from that the metalinguistic conclusion that the reference of “simultaneous” is not a two-place property but a three-place one. This is true whether we are applying charity to figure out the reference or if we are inferring the reference from facts about what our terms stand in causal relations to.

But what is it to judge that there are no two-place but only three-place *simultaneity* properties? What qualifies these three-place relations to be called “simultaneity relations” when our original discourse about simultaneity recognized only two-place simultaneity relations?

A plausible answer is that the three-place relations play much the same explanatory role as the original (uninstantiated) two-place relations and so can be thought of as three-place versions of the same genus. However, once we have got as far as saying that there are no two-place simultaneity relations but only three-place simultaneity relations, isn't that enough *by itself* to constitute a relativistic view of simultaneity, without our having first to translate that discovery into a metalinguistic discovery about the reference of the predicate “is simultaneous with”?

The moral of this discussion is twofold: first, that a relativism about simultaneity is best construed as a *factual* claim; and, second, that it's best construed as a *revisionary* claim to the effect that, while the semantics of simultaneity discourse might lead one to think that there are two-place simultaneity facts, in reality there are only three-place simultaneity facts.

Having established this factual claim to our satisfaction, we now face the question how we should accommodate this factual discovery at the level of language or thought. The answer is that there is absolutely no problem accommodating it by saying that we should speak a language in which the relativization to a frame of reference is made explicit. We should no longer make claims of the form (2) but only claims of the form (3).

Let me summarize this discussion of how to understand a relativistic thesis about simultaneity:

- (a) The central predicate of simultaneity discourse is the predicate “is simultaneous with.” (Identification)
- (b) This predicate appears to express the concept of a two-place relation and to denote a two-place relation. (Semantical Appearances)
- (c) These semantical appearances are in fact correct. (Appearances Correct)
- (d) However, no such two-place relation is instantiated in the world; instead the only instantiated property in the vicinity is a three-place relation: e1 is simultaneous with e2 relative to variable frame of reference F. (Error)
- (e) Because of this fact, we should no longer make judgments of form (2) but only those of form (3). (Recommendation)

Generalizing this picture, we get the following template for a relativistic thesis about a domain of discourse D:

- (i) The central predicate of D is the predicate R. (Identification)
- (ii) R appears to express the concept of an n-place property and to denote an n-place property. (Semantical Appearances)
- (iii) These semantical appearances are in fact correct. (Appearances Correct)
- (iv) However, no such n-place properties are instantiated in the world; instead the only instantiated property in the vicinity is an n+k-place property, R\*, where part of what is involved in the more complex property is a parameter that can assume different values, no one of which can be thought of as factually privileged. (Error)
- (v) Because of this fact, we should no longer make judgments of form 'aR' but only those of form 'aR\*'. (Recommendation)

### 1.1 *Hermeneutic thoroughgoing relativism*

I looked at the case of simultaneity in order to highlight a fact that is often overlooked: that relativism about a given domain is *compatible* with an *error thesis* about the discourse of that domain.

I don't claim, however, the stronger thesis that relativism about a domain D *entails* an error thesis about the pre-relativistic discourse of D. I think we can imagine cases in which the relativist holds that the semantical appearances are in fact not correct, effectively giving up (iii) in the template above.

For my purposes, though, the crucial point is that, even in such cases, the relativism is fueled primarily by a *factual* thesis to the effect that there aren't the sorts of n-place properties suggested by the semantical appearances but only the closely related n+k-place properties put forward by the relativist.

Unless that factual thesis were in place, relativism about a given domain – morality, for example – would amount merely to a claim about the nature of moral discourse as we have come to develop it up to that point. And that claim would appear to leave it open that – out there – there are perfectly 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, a purely semantical construal of relativism seems consistent with something that one would have expected any real relativism to foreclose upon, namely, that there are absolute facts of the relevant sort out there waiting to be represented by our language and which we have up to now somehow managed to overlook.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 *Thoroughgoing relativism about morality*

Thoroughgoing factual relativism provides a good model for the famous cases drawn from physics. But it doesn't provide a good model for understanding the sorts of relativism that have most interested philosophers – relativisms about such normative domains as morality and epistemic justification.

There are many problems (for detailed discussion, see Boghossian 2006b); here I will focus on just one. Whether on the revisionary or the hermeneutical version of a thoroughgoing relativism about morality, the relativist's view would be that we should not judge simply that

(4) Slavery is wrong

but only that

(5) Slavery is wrong relative to some particular moral code M,<sup>3</sup>

where 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.

But unlike what is true in the case of simultaneity, claims of form (5) have no prospect of serving as relativistic surrogates for claims like (4). The trouble is that claims like (4) are clearly *normative* and that is crucial to their role as moral judgments; whereas claims like (5) are merely logical remarks about what does and does not follow from a particular moral code. Even people with starkly conflicting moral perspectives could endorse a claim like (5).

Intuitively, someone who asserts the negation of (4), namely,

(6) It's not the case that slavery is wrong

would be sharply disagreeing with the person who utters (4). But if we are restricted to claims like (5), we seem unable to capture that disagreement. Someone asserting

(7) It's not the case that slavery is wrong relative to moral code M

would simply be disagreeing about the logical properties of M and not about the wrongness of slavery. And if he were to assert

(8) Slavery is wrong relative to (his own) moral code M\*

he would have expressed no disagreement with (5) since both (5) and (8) could be true. Either way, we seem unable, on the view on offer, to explain how there could be genuine disagreement about normative matters.

## 2. Alethic Relativism

This sort of problem has served as one of the principal motivations for a different version of relativism – alethic or truth relativism – which has been the focus of much attention within analytic philosophy in recent years (see MacFarlane 2005; Richard 2008).

The basic idea behind such relativisms is to seek the relativism not in the claim that the central properties of some domain have a higher degree than might have previously been thought, but in the claim that the truth-values of the central propositions of that domain aren't absolute but, rather, relative to certain further parameters.

We can illustrate this thesis with an example. Consider the sentence type:

(9) "It is raining."

The standard view is that the sentence type (9) does not itself express a complete judgeable or thinkable content. It no more expresses a complete thinkable content than does the open sentence "Tom is taller than x." Individual tokens of (9) typically *do* express complete contents but that is because, when produced, they express a proposition of the form

(10) It is raining at l at t,

where the values of l and t are determined by the context of utterance. This may or may not be because a token of (9) can properly be said to be elliptical for the sentence

(11) "It is raining at l at t."

On this standard treatment, then, the truth of a token of "It is raining" is relative to the context of utterance because the complete thinkable content expressed by any such token is relative to the context in which it is uttered. Thus, one token, when produced in NYC at t would express the proposition *It is raining in NYC at t* and so would be true iff it was raining in NYC at t; and another produced in Chicago at t' would express the proposition *It is raining in Chicago at t'* and so would be true iff it was raining in Chicago at t'.

On this standard contextualist picture, then (which some writers also refer to as *indexical relativism* or *expressive relativism*), there is nothing very exciting going on as far as truth is concerned. Contents have absolute truth-values. The only sense in which anything is relative to anything else is that the thinkable content expressed by a token of a sentence type is relative to that token's context of utterance.

David Lewis (1980), among others, suggested that it is also possible to give a non-standard treatment of "It is raining" along the following lines. We can say that the sentence type (9) does express a context-invariant complete thinkable content, namely, the content

(12) It is raining

and that every token of that type expresses exactly the same content. If we embrace this non-standard account, how do we explain how it is that if I utter a token of (9) in NYC when it is raining there, I say something true, whereas if you utter it in Chicago when it is not raining there, you say something false? If we said exactly the same thing, namely (12), how come you said something true and I said something false?

The answer is a relativistic view of the truth of the content (12). On such a view, one would have to say that the content (12) does not have an absolute truth value, but only a truth value relative to the context of utterance: the truth of the content I expressed was relative to *my* context of utterance, whereas the truth of the very same content that you expressed was relative to *your* context of utterance. We can call this a species of *alethic* or *truth-based relativism* to distinguish it from the indexical or expressive variety noted above.

Contemporary writers have tended to be interested in versions of alethic relativism where the relativization is not so much to contexts of *utterance*, but rather to the contexts of (potentially hypothetical) *assessments*; but the basic idea is much the same as that just outlined. In either case we get the claim that one and the same *complete thinkable content* can be true relative to one context yet false relative to another, even within a single world.

### 2.1 *Alethic relativism and faultless disagreement*

Now, an alethic relativism about morality looks as though it will allow us to formulate a relativism about morality with contents like (4) rather than contents like (5). Even as we keep contents like (4), we maintain a relativistic outlook by insisting that those contents only have relative truth-values and no absolute ones. This promises to recognize contents that look normative (by virtue of not making the relativization explicit) but which eschew absolute moral facts by recognizing normative contents that only have truth-values relative to variable moral codes.

So we have reason, in the case of morality, or in that of any other normative discourse, to take seriously the idea that a relativism about that discourse should be expressed by an alethic relativism. It looks like an appealing way to formulate a relativistic view of morality because it promises simultaneously to preserve genuine moral judgment and, hence, genuine moral disagreement, while acknowledging that there are no absolute moral facts.

How might such a relativism be motivated? (It is easiest to provide a plausible motivation by looking at judgments of personal taste rather than those of morality. Since what interests me in what follows are structural difficulties in the resultant view, I won't worry about this here.) Imagine two thinkers, Dora and Norma, one of who asserts that

(D) Healthcare coverage ought to be universal

while the other denies it:

(N) There is no requirement for healthcare coverage to be extended to everyone.

It is part of the example that Dora and Norma are operating with different moral standards, different conceptions of what counts as a just or fair social arrangement. It is also part of the example that this is known, or knowable, to all concerned. Dora and Norma may be presumed to know that each of them is operating with different moral standards and that their judgments, (D) and (N), are true relative to their respective standards.

One classic way of motivating an alethic relativism about these judgments goes something like this (Max Kölbel (2003) may have been the first to lay it out with some care). We start out by claiming that it doesn't merely *seem* that Dora and Norma disa-

gree with one another, but that they genuinely do so. Moreover, their disagreement is a substantive, factual one, not a metalinguistic one, about what the ingredient terms mean or how any vagueness inherent in them is to be resolved. This entails that Dora affirms and Norma denies one and the same content.

This, in effect, rules out a contextualist view of the case, according to which Dora and Norma are not really disagreeing because what they mean by their utterances is, respectively,

(D1) According to standards S(D), healthcare coverage ought to be universal

and

(N1) According to standards S(N), healthcare coverage ought not be universal.

Second, this disagreement is *faultless* in the sense that neither Dora nor Norma could be said to have committed a mistake in believing what they do. Here is Kölbel's characterization of faultless disagreement:

(Faultless Disagreement) A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgment) p such that:

- (a) A believes (judges) p and B believes (judges) not-p,
- (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault). (2003: 53–54)

If we put disagreement and faultlessness together, we seem to get a neat argument for relativism. Dora and Norma disagree with one another: in particular, one of them asserts p and the other not-p. Yet neither of them is guilty of a mistake. If neither of them has made a mistake, then both of their beliefs are true ("mistake" here is not purely epistemic). If their beliefs were capable of absolute truth, we would have to allow that there are true contradictions. But we don't want to allow that. Hence, their beliefs must be at most capable of *relative* truth. This allows both Dora and Norma to have correct (faultless) beliefs, even as they disagree with one another.

Philosophers who want to use faultless disagreement to motivate alethic relativism, however, face a formidable challenge, one that has been well brought out by Mark Richard. (Richard himself is an alethic relativist about certain domains, but he rejects the claim that it can be motivated by appeal to faultless disagreement.) He says that a commitment to the existence of faultless disagreement cannot be sustained:

simply because when one is willing to ascribe truth or falsity to a particular claim p, one treats p and the claim that p is true as equivalent: *within* a perspective, truth is "disquotational." Suppose I think that Beaufort is a better cheese than Tome, and you think the reverse. Suppose (for *reductio*) that each of our thoughts is valid – mine is true from my perspective, yours is from yours. Then not only can I (validly) say that Beaufort is better than Tome, I can (validly) say that it's true that Beaufort is better than Tome. And of course if you think Tome is better than Beaufort and not vice versa I can also (validly) say that you think that it's not the case that Beaufort is better than Tome. So I can (validly) say that it's true that Beaufort is better than Tome though you think Beaufort isn't better

than Tome. From which it surely follows that you're mistaken – after all, if you have a false belief, you are mistaken about something. This line of reasoning is sound no matter what the object of dispute. So it is just wrong to think that if my view is valid – true relative to my perspective – and your contradictory view is valid – true, that is, relative to yours – then our disagreement is “faultless.” Faultless disagreement is possible – but such disagreement is not one to be evaluated in terms of truth. (2008: 132)

According to Richard, then (for a similar argument, see also Wright 2008) just because *p* is at best relatively true, and just because it is true from my perspective and false from yours, it is not *therefore* right to say that our disagreement is faultless. For even if all of this is true, it will still be true that if I validly (that is, truly, relative to my perspective) judge that *p*, then it will also be valid for me to judge that “It is true that *p*” and also “It is false that not-*p*.” And if I can validly judge that “It is false that *p*,” then I must regard anyone who believes that *p* to have made a mistake.

So, at least for a committed thinker – a thinker who has plumped for one of these perspectives over the others with regards to the proposition that *p* – there can be no such thing as a “faultless disagreement” concerning *p*, even if the thinker *also* accepts that *p* is at best relatively true and that it is *false* from the perspective of his interlocutor. He will have no choice but to regard his interlocutor as having made a mistake.

Richard concludes from this that the disagreement itself cannot be faultless, allowing himself to infer that conclusion from the fact that the committed participants in the dispute can't regard it as faultless. We can supply a consideration in support of this transition by appealing to the plausible claim that if a disagreement were faultless, it must be possible for a rational thinker to claim that it is.

Let us call this the Argument from (Perspectival) Immersion. It will prove useful to lay it out with some care. Suppose, as before, that *D* judges *p*, *N* judges not-*p*, and that both judgments are valid (i.e., true relative to the individual perspectives from which they are judged). According to Richard, the alethic relativist about the content *p* holds all of the following:

*The Argument from (Perspectival) Immersion:*

- (13) The content (*p*) is at best relatively true. (Alethic Relativism)
- (14) If *D* judges validly that *p*, it will also be valid for *D* to judge that *It's true that p*. (Truth is Disquotational within a perspective)
- (15) If *D* judges that *It's true that p* then *D* must, on pain of incoherence, judge that *It's false that not-p*.
- (16) If *D* judges that *It's false that not-p*, then *D* must, on pain of incoherence, judge that anyone who judges *not-p* (e.g., *N*) is making a *mistake*.

Therefore,

- (17) *D* must judge that *N* is making a mistake and so cannot regard the disagreement with *N* as faultless.

Therefore,

- (18) The disagreement between *D* and *N* is not faultless.

Now, I think that we can use the Argument from Immersion to formulate a quite general dilemma for any alethic relativism about any content *p*:

(Dilemma) Either we regard the Argument from Immersion as sound or we find a plausible way to reject it. If we regard it as sound, then not only does alethic relativism not look like relativism intuitively understood, it is also unstable. However, there is no plausible way to reject the Argument from Immersion. Hence, alethic relativism is unstable.

The problem, as we will see, derives from an inevitable “creeping minimalism” about truth, a phenomenon familiar from discussions of other forms of anti-realism, such as expressivism and non-factualism. To bring it out, we will need to make a small further assumption that seems as safe as can be:

(Committed Relativism): It is possible for the theorist propounding the relativist view of the content *p* to be himself a committed thinker with regards to *p*.

This is certainly something that is accepted by all the relativists involved in this debate. They think of themselves as simply providing an accurate account of what it is for anyone to judge that *p*, they themselves included. Henceforth, then, I will assume that I am both a relativist theorist about the contents (D) and (N) as well as a committed thinker on the question who thinks that (D).

## 2.2 *Two problems for alethic relativism, given the Argument from Immersion*

If I endorse the Argument from Immersion, I will have to conclude that on the question whether healthcare coverage ought to be universal – about which I am supposed to be a relativist – there is only *one* correct thing to think, namely that it ought to be. That would seem to be implied by the fact that I must take any conflicting view to be, first, *eo ipso* false and, second, *eo ipso* mistaken.

However, to hold that to a given question there is exactly one correct answer doesn't sound particularly relativistic. If on the question whether one ought to place one's elbows on the table while eating, I take there to be exactly one correct answer, applicable to anyone, anywhere, no matter what their backgrounds, standards, interests, and cultural setting, it seems to me that I am not being a relativist about that particular table manner.

If this is right, then it would seem that we should say that alethic relativism doesn't *in and of itself* amount to a relativism of a recognizable and intuitive kind, since it is possible to combine its technical framework concerning the dependence of truth on indices with the Argument from Immersion to yield a highly *intolerant*, objectivist view of the subject matter at issue.

However, the problem that we are focusing on at the moment has the potential not merely to raise a question about the relativistic *credentials* of an alethic relativism, but to expose a fundamental instability in the view itself. That is what I now want to turn to.

The content (D), I say, cannot be true or false *simpliciter*. It can only be true or false relative to a moral standard. I know that my belief that (D) is true relative to my standard; and I know that your belief that (N) is true relative to yours. Still, I think that your belief is mistaken and I will attempt to get you to change your mind.

What can be my attitude towards your *standards*? Well, obviously, I must regard them as mistaken. After all, it's part of the example that you are reasoning impeccably from our standards. Since I regard your judgment as mistaken, I must regard your standards as mistaken. Further, I'm trying to get you to change you mind – why would I do that if I regarded your standards to be just as correct as mine.

So in the presence of the Argument from Immersion, I have no choice but to regard your standards as mistaken. Indeed, I have no choice but to regard any standard that yields verdicts incompatible with mine as mistaken. Holding the details of the case fixed, I am committed to there being a uniquely correct standard by which the question of healthcare coverage to be judged (and obviously I am in possession of it).

Now, however, the following question looms: How can I cogently say that the truth-value of (D) varies across our perspectives? If, as I am now insisting, there is a *best perspective* on (D), shouldn't we say that (D) *has* an absolute truth-value, and not merely relative ones, namely the truth-value that it has in the 'best perspective'?

So, an intolerance about the opposing standards threatens to destabilize the thesis central to an alethic relativism, that (D) has only relative truth-values and no absolute ones.

Let me sum up this horn of the dilemma. If the alethic relativist endorses the Argument from Immersion, then not only can his view not be effectively distinguished from a view that is anti-relativist/objectivist in spirit, but its central claim, that some given content (D) only has relative truth-values, appears to be destabilized.

### 2.3 *Rejecting the Argument from Immersion*

This gives the relativist strong reason to reject the Argument from Immersion. But which bit of it can he plausibly reject? Not (13), since that is just the statement of relativism. Not (14), since it is unquestionable that, if someone validly judges that p, it will be valid for him to judge that "It's true that p." Not (15), since we can stipulate that bivalence is not in question. Not (17), since that is definitional. And not the inference to (18) since that looks both ironclad and is in any case not necessary to the argument's dialectical effectiveness. That means that we need only look at:

- (16) If D judges that *It's false that not-p*, then D must, on pain of incoherence, judge that anyone who judges *that not-p* is making a *mistake*.

What this premise is doing is connecting judgments of truth and falsity with *normative evaluations* of those judgments: if I judge that it is true that p, then I must rationally judge that it is correct to judge that p; and if I judge that it is false that p, then I must rationally judge that it is a mistake to judge that p.

The only real hope for the relativist, therefore, is to try to persuade us that judging that it is true that p and false that not-p doesn't have the normative significance that it is usually accorded. How might he do that?

Well, there is something that we could try, far-fetched as it might seem. We know that the primary sort of truth-value that these contents have are relative truth-values and not absolute ones. So we need to confront the question: Given that the contents in question have only relative truth values and not absolute ones, under what conditions should we regard a thinker as having judged *correctly*? What should the aim of belief and assertion be for such contents?

The theorist who regarded the contents in question as having absolute truth-values would have the obvious answer:

(Absolute Belief) A thinker should believe *p* only if *p* is true.

(Absolute Assertion) A speaker should assert *p* only if *p* is true.

The relativist, obviously, can't offer these norms. Instead, he will offer norms that are appropriate for a relativist, perhaps something along the following lines:

(Relative Belief) A thinker should believe *p* only if *p* is true within the speaker's perspective.

(Relative Assertion) A speaker should assert *p* only if *p* is true within the speaker's perspective. (Cf. Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009)

Now, these norms, note, *are* tolerant of opposition. If I operate with these norms, I will only consider a thinker to have made a mistake if he believes something that is not true within *his* perspective. But I know that what Norma believes is true within her perspective. So I will not consider her to have made a mistake. And so, we are making progress toward our goal of coming up with a version of alethic relativism that is tolerant of opposition.

But what about the disquotational-seeming truth-predicate of the immersed thinker? Well, the relativist would have to say that this only looks like the ordinary disquotational truth predicate. For the content in question, "It is true that *p*" will itself be capable only of relative truth-value, as follows,

"It is true that *p*" is true at a perspective, *C*, just in case "*p*" is true at *C*.

As Cappelen and Hawthorne point out, if we assume that every claim is either true or false at a perspective, it will follow that

"It is true that *p*" is true iff *p*

will be true at every perspective. And so we will have something that behaves like the ordinary disquotational truth predicate even as it is fundamentally governed by the relative truth predicate and the norms appropriate to it.

Now, if all of that were to work, it looks as though I would be able to reject (16) and so not repudiate the notion of faultless disagreement after all. For I would be able to make sense of the fact that I can judge that *p*, recognize that someone else judges that not-*p*, take my own judgment to be "true" and the other person's judgment that not-*p*

to be “false,” recognizing all the while that when I say that my own judgment is true and his false, I effectively mean “true and false relative to my perspective.” That leaves me free to judge that his judgment that not-p is not a *mistake*, since the fundamental norms governing my attitudes will now be relative belief and assertion and not their absolutist counterparts.

#### 2.4 *Genuine disagreement?*

Is the relativist home clear? I think not. Having found a way of making sense of the faultlessness, a problem now emerges with the disagreement.

I know that my claim is true relative to my standards and that yours is true relative to your different standards. I acknowledge that your standards are just as correct as mine – for, after all, I don’t regard your judgment as mistaken and I know that you are reasoning impeccably from them. Hence, each of us counts as having spoken correctly because of having said something that is true relative to standards that are no more correct than one another. And moreover: each of us knows this.

The problem now becomes: How is it possible to regard this as a *genuine* disagreement?

I know that Norma has different standards from mine. I regard her standards as just as correct as mine. I know that her judgment is true relative to her standards. And I also affirm that these sorts of judgment have no other kind of truth-value, no absolute truth-values.

It’s simply obvious, it seems to me, that if I have said all this, I cannot regard this as a real disagreement, no more than I can regard the guy who says “It is morning” in the morning to be disagreeing with the guy who says “It is afternoon” in the afternoon.

So, even if we were to grant that (16) could be cogently rejected, that still wouldn’t get us disagreement, and so wouldn’t get us relativism.

### 3. Absolutist Relativism

We have been trying to make sense of the idea that there are no absolute facts about morality. To this end, we have tried both claiming that moral properties have a higher degree than the realist thinks and that the truth of moral judgments is at best relative and not absolute. Neither strategy has taken us very far.

But, surely, an objector might observe, there *are* normative domains about which we ought to be relativists, aren’t there? Etiquette, for example. If we are not able to capture those through the formulation of an alethic relativism, how can we do it?

Let us take a closer look at the case of etiquette. None of us is objectivist about (at least certain) table manners, for example, about the question whether people ought to slurp their noodles while eating them. We don’t think: We think that one ought not to slurp one’s noodles noisily, and nor should anyone else. We recognize that in Tokyo it is considered polite to slurp one’s noodles, a display of one’s appreciation. How can we make sense of this, given what I’ve been saying?

Here is what I take to be the correct account of etiquette. In the first instance, the judgments we make are of the form

(R) It is rude to slurp one's noodles in (our) community C.

The relativization is made explicit.

But how do we now explain how a statement like (R) can have normative force? It looks as though it is just a sociological remark about how things are done around here, one with which anyone could agree, even someone who belonged to a culture in which it is not rude to slurp one's noodles. Yet, if I say (R) to someone, a child, for example, I intend my remark to have normative force, to give her a reason to stop slurping her noodles.

The answer is that we all subscribe to a non-relative moral norm, one that we typically express by saying

(Rome) When in Rome do as the Romans do!

or, perhaps more precisely,

(Etiquette) With respect to certain behaviors, one ought to behave as the members of the community one finds oneself in find it appropriate to behave.

This normative principle is a non-relative, universally binding principle. Nevertheless, it prescribes acting in different ways depending on one's cultural location. It is our acceptance of this principle that explains how remarks like (R) can have normative force even as it accommodates our tolerance for alternative practices.

There is no coherent way to make sense of genuine faultless disagreement. What you can make sense of is universal, non-relative principles that call for radically different behaviors under different circumstances. This can look like faultless disagreement, but it isn't really disagreement at all.

An objector might now have the following thought. OK. Suppose we formulated moral relativism in the way that you recommend we formulate etiquette. For example, something along the following lines:

(Relative Morality) On a certain range of morally sensitive questions, one ought to do that which the members of the community one finds oneself in find it most natural to do.

This is a non-relative moral principle. But it has significant relativistic bite. And nothing in the proffered arguments has questioned its coherence. So, the major controversies about relativism can now proceed in this form.

I don't dispute this. But what we must recognize is that the aspiring relativist now has a much harder hand to play.

The thoroughgoing normative relativist has two very strong cards to play. First, he can observe that it's very hard to see where absolute normative facts could come from, that it is very hard to see how such facts could just be part of the fabric of the universe.

His other strong card is that it is also hard to see how one could *know* anything about such facts, even if we could make sense of their existence. These powerful considerations give very strong support for the claim that launches a relativistic outlook, that there are no absolute facts in the relevant normative domain, but only relative ones.

However, on this absolutist way of formulating relativism, where what underlies the relativism is some universally binding non-relative normative principle of some sort, both of these cards are taken away from the relativist. Having committed himself to knowing of the existence of at least one non-relative moral principle, he can no longer avail himself of either of those powerful considerations.

Instead, he will have to find some way of arguing that, although there are universally binding normative principles and although we are able to know what they are, still these consist only of the sorts of spare principles that govern etiquette. But it's hard to see where an argument for this claim could come from. Once we have admitted some absolute normative principles, we can no longer pretend to have metaphysical or epistemological scruples against them. And ordinary normative reasoning militates against the claim that the only two normative principles there are, are the sorts of spare principle that govern etiquette.

The upshot is that once we have admitted that there are at least some non-relative moral principles, it's hard to see how to stop short of claiming that there are at least as many as there intuitively seem to be. It's morally plausible that you should adjust your table manners (and not even all of those) to whatever the local practice is, but not your views on the treatment of children or the sick.

Viewed in that light, any attempt to assimilate morality to etiquette will seem simply normatively implausible.

## Notes

- 1 I have changed Harman's example from mass to simultaneity.
- 2 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 strategies for getting around this difficulty.
- 3 Moral codes are the preferred parameter of relativization. For an explanation as to why, see Boghossian 2006a; 2006b.

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