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Title: An Enquiry into Contemporary Relativism: *Arguing in Favour of Irrealist Metaethics*

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## Abstract

This project will firstly set out to argue that relativism is a viable and defensible stance which can be taken up in many contemporary philosophical debates. This will be achieved firstly by drafting an overview of the lineage of relativist theories; a pivotal task, due to the fact that there is no clear “school” of relativism – as there is in other areas of philosophy. Of course, the history of this theory is perhaps more a history of attempts to refute it than anything else. For this reason, it will be crucial to address some of the many concerns that have been voiced about the implications of a relativist approach over the years. Once these matters have been sufficiently addressed, there will be solid ground on which this project may build a unique moral perspective. Ultimately, it will be argued that relativism is an available stance within moral irrealism and that a moral irrealist relativism would be an attractive position to take up in contemporary metaethical debate.

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## Introduction

The overarching goal of this project will be to identify the most robust truth value that might be ascribed to moral statements, outside of moral absolutism. It will ultimately be argued here that the source of a truth value like this can be found in a specific form of relativism, one that might be labelled irrealist in nature. However, instead of being thought of as an available – or even attractive – position to take up in philosophical debates, relativism has often been considered a kind of anti- theory. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, it has been doomed to play a role which resembles something of a pantomime villain. One or another relativist caricature has been used to represent the anti-philosopher. These figures are often faceless, but not always. Plato’s Protagoras is perhaps the clearest example which can be used to corroborate these claims.

Listing the many transgressions which these relativist caricatures have been accused of committing in any great detail will be outside the scope of this project. For now, it need only be said that they can range anywhere from: doing analysis for the sake only of showing that no analysis can be done, to espousing self-refuting nonsense.<sup>1</sup> It has even been suggested that relativism has dangerous implications and ought to be avoided at all costs.<sup>2</sup> At least one version of these criticisms will likely be familiar to readers with prior exposure to the topic. Many of them can trace their roots back to the argument made by Plato’s Socrates, commonly known as the *peritrope*. The argument goes something like this: if there is no such thing as truth, then that claim itself cannot be true. Whilst this argument has enjoyed tremendous support, there are ways around it. For example, one need not accept that the relativist wants to claim that there is no such thing as truth – on the contrary; ‘the relativist holds that there is lots of truth’ (Knorpp, 1998, p. 285).

This is but one example of the many confusions which have consistently surrounded this topic. In order to address said confusions as a whole, it will be crucial to lay out, in detail, the many diverse forms relativism can take. The first chapter of this project will therefore be solely

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Greene, for example, has referred to “the proverbial relativist” in ethical debates. This imaginary figure is someone who, according to Greene, denies that we can ‘make tough choices’, or make ‘trade-offs among competing tribal values’ (Greene, 2014, p. 291). Greene’s Proverbial relativist holds that ‘there are different tribes with different values, and that’s all there is to say’ (*ibid.*, p. 290).

<sup>2</sup> Former Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger has made various arguments along these lines. He considers relativism to be a fundamental element of contemporary life, which is, of course, one where the influence of the institution he represents is becoming increasingly diminished. According to him, relativism is a “dictatorship” which rules our lives. Although he does not do much to define what he means when he uses the term, it is clear that for him, it implies many bad things (Stenmark, 2018, p. 180).

dedicated to thoroughly answering the question: what is relativism? This will be achieved primarily by way of literature review. One can only be open to the idea of a particular relativism being an available or even attractive position if they can understand it within the wider context of other relativisms. Also, if they can understand what it means for a particular theory to be labelled a relativism. Sections 1.1-1.3 will prime readers for some of the arguments made in later sections.

Chapter one will seek to address confusions which have consistently surrounded relativisms, whereas chapter two will seek to address some of the anxieties which have been caused by them. Broadly speaking, sections 2.1-2.3 will be dedicated to answering the question: how worried should we be? Take, for example, the notion of relative truth. The idea that this is something about which we ought to worry would most likely be based on the assumption that truth is only valuable when it is “absolute”. There is no obvious reason to assume that this is the case. Although, it might be argued that absolutist truth is the most robust form of truth value – and we ought to strive for a clear idea of what is absolutely true – this is not the only available position.

Jesse Prinz has proposed that we may even be better off without the constraints of a strict adherence to absolutist truth (Prinz, 2011, p. 5). In other words – through relativism, there is a way in which we can make truth work for us. If what is taken to be a moral truth is deemed absolute, independent, unchanged by outside factors and so on, there is hardly any room for moral progress. By cutting the brakes on moral progress, for example, we may be allowed to think of morality as a tool which can be made to work for us; ‘we can think about what we would like that tool to do for us and revise morality accordingly’ (*ibid.*). It is worth noting that there are more moderate formulations of relativism than Prinz’s one very briefly sketched here. These arguments may seem a step too far for many, formulating a full defence of them will not be possible at this stage.

There are more moderate relativist propositions which might be more easily shown to be no cause for concern. For example, plenty of us would not hesitate to accept “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. On the other hand, it is safe to assume that there are not quite so many who would be willing to accept something like the idea that human sacrifice need not be labelled “wrong” when cultural context is taken into account. These two positions are not mutually exclusive, one can therefore be simultaneously labelled a relativist with respect to beauty and an absolutist with respect to human sacrifice.

It would, however, be a mistake to not anticipate that critics would likely see this as a manoeuvre around the point. Well and good, they might say, you can call me a relativist if I believe that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; but as long as I am fully truth committed with respect to morality in this case, I am an absolutist where it really matters. Such an objection would be understandable; problems of aesthetics are rarely, if ever, matters of life and death, whereas ethical problems often are. It will therefore be necessary to direct special attention to these problems as they pertain to relativism. This will be another goal of chapter two.

Of course, a meaningful answer to the question “how worried should we be?” will have to be based on a relativism, or relativisms, about which people have tended to worry. Moral problems and ethical theory in general are one of the more divisive topics with respect to which a relativist stance may be taken. Sections 3.1-3.3 will therefore be focused on moral problems, particularly from a metaethical perspective. Of course, this will also serve to set up an attempt to achieve the overarching goal of this project. Namely, to deny absolutism and establish what exactly the most robust truth value that can be ascribed to moral statements then is.

In order to achieve this, it will be argued that a relativist stance is available within moral irrealism. Different versions of moral irrealism advanced by thinkers generally associated with metaethical perspectives, like noncognitivism and expressivism<sup>3</sup>, will be compared with a moral irrealist relativist<sup>4</sup> perspective in order to showcase its strengths. The difference between M.I.R and other forms of irrealism, it will be argued, is that the former can be labelled a descriptivist theory and can therefore hold that moral statements describe, what Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons have referred to as ‘way-the-world-might-be content’ (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75).

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<sup>3</sup> For example, one version of the early Wittgenstein, Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons.

<sup>4</sup> Henceforth abbreviated to M.I.R.



## Chapter 1: What is Relativism?

### *Introduction*

Overall, this chapter will go on to demonstrate that there are several different forms of relativism, that it is no one theory and that it is perhaps more accurately referred to a collection of related but distinct relativisms. Section 1.1 will sketch an overview of the long past of these relativisms with the help of Maria Baghramian (2004-2014). As briefly hinted in the introduction to this project, relativism's long past can be traced as far back as ancient Greece in Plato's Protagoras. However, as per Baghramian, relativist-like arguments can also be identified in pre-Socratic thought. Taking the likes of Euripides, Xenophanes and Heraclitus as its starting point, 1.1 will review the progression of what Baghramian identifies as early relativist thought through Protagoras, on to the enlightenment and right up to the modern era. Overall, this will serve to shed some light on a legacy which has, to some extent, remained in the dark. The historical context provided by 1.1 will serve as solid foundations for this project going forward.

A number of rigorous efforts to categorise relativisms, where a relativism is understood as an instantiation of Susan Haack's scheme "x is relative to y", have been made in recent years. Prominent examples of these can be found in the work of Martin Kusch and Baghramian specifically. Section 1.2 will lay these out in some detail. Baghramian has also come up with a helpful method of defining relativisms, which she calls "definition by enumeration", this will be explored in 1.2. Achieving clarity with respect to what relativism is not, is perhaps just as important as understanding all that it can be; for this reason, Section 1.3 will be dedicated to some negative definitions put forward by William Max Knorpp and others. This groundwork will allow readers to recognise that it is possible to be a relativist in one area and not in another; that many of us are most likely, whether we realise it or not, relativists in some domain.

### 1.1 History of Relativism

As stated in the introduction to this chapter, section 1.2 will go on to lay out the many different forms of relativism that exist today. Unlike other philosophical theories, relativism does not necessarily have a commonly accepted genealogy. Tracking down the exact origins of each strand will likely need its own dedicated project. Said origins are likely as diverse as the theories themselves. For this reason, mapping the history of relativism is no easy task. It is one which has only recently begun to be undertaken. Speaking to this, Kusch has adapted one observation made by Hermann Ebbinghaus in the early 20th century, with regards to psychology in that case, and suggested that relativism has a ‘long past, but a short history’ (Kusch, 2019, p. 1).

One key contributor to this short history is Maria Baghramian, she has worked extensively to shine light on the “long past” of relativisms; this is a past which, like many other areas of western philosophy, finds its roots in ancient Greece. Herodotus [fifth century B.C.E] argued that ‘if people were asked to name the best laws and customs, they would name their own’ (Baghramian, 2010,

p. 32). She also points out that one of Euripides’ plays from that same era featured a character who announces that ‘no behaviour is shameful if it does not appear so to those who practice it’ (*ibid.*). Later, Xenophanes [sixth century B.C.E] made the argument that different people have different conceptions of God and ‘if cows, horses, and lions had hands, and were able to draw with those hands... horses would draw images of gods like horses and cattle like cattle’ (*ibid.*).

All that said, Baghramian rightly points out that Protagoras [fifth century B.C.E] is often considered the first official representative of relativist views. He famously stated, ‘man is the measure of all things: of the things which are that they are, and of the things which are not, that they are not’ (*ibid.*, p. 33). Of course, the formation of this perspective was not an isolated incident; it could perhaps be seen as the result of increased contact between the ancient Greeks and other civilisations. Baghramian suggests the Persian Wars [490 - 480 B.C.E] in particular, and the turmoil of which they were a cause, ‘cast doubt over the old certainties and introduced the idea that social and ethical rules which had been construed as unchanging, universal or of divine origin were in fact merely transitory and local’ (Baghramian, 2004, p. 16). This, however, is not the only factor which set the stage for Protagorean relativism.

Readers will likely be familiar with attempts made by presocratic philosophers to find ‘all-encompassing metaphysical-cum-scientific explanations of the ultimate constituents and

principles of the universe' (*ibid.*, p. 17). It was in their failure to reach a consensus that the seeds of Protagorean relativism were sewn. As Baghramian puts it, 'irresolvable disagreement among the natural scientists on the constitutive elements and origins of the universe led to disillusionment with the idea of there being a single unifying account' (*ibid.*). In addition to this, traces of relativist ideas can be found in a number of presocratic philosophers that preceded Protagoras. Some examples include Euripides and Xenophanes, who have already been referred to here.

One other key example of a presocratic philosopher whose thought shows early traces of relativism, and one who is regarded as having a direct influence on Protagoras, is Heraclitus. Baghramian has suggested that Plato, Aristotle and others considered this to be the case and, according to her, it is in Heraclitus' doctrine of the unity of opposites and his theory of flux that the Protagorean thesis finds its 'ontological backbone' (*ibid.*). Of course, in tracing a history of relativism, we are forced to discuss "the Protagorean thesis" in a somewhat general sense given the lack of any first-hand account of Protagoras' thought. This is of course due to the fact that, as Baghramian has also pointed out, 'almost all our knowledge of Protagoras comes to us indirectly through the works of Plato, Aristotle and the later Hellenistic philosophers' – only eleven such fragments of his work survive to this day (*ibid.*, p. 18).

It will perhaps not come as much of a surprise to learn that attempts to defend relativist perspectives are far outnumbered by the converse; 'the history of relativism is simultaneously a history of the attempts to refute it' (Baghramian, 2010, p. 33). The fact that Protagoras, the original relativist, survives almost solely in the work of his critics illustrates this claim nicely. Chief amongst those critics is Plato who, as per Baghramian, attributes a kind of alethic relativism to Protagoras. Baghramian takes alethic relativism to mean, that 'truth should be relativised to a framework or perspective – to Protagoras' (*ibid.*).

The *peritrope*, Plato's criticism of Protagoras referred to briefly in the introduction to this project, is a key argument in the history of relativism, which is, to reiterate, simultaneously a history of anti-relativism. Relativism has often been labelled as self-refuting on the basis of arguments which are, more or less, interchangeable with those found in Plato's *Theaetetus*. In this dialogue, Plato famously concludes, 'most people believe Protagoras' doctrine to be false. Protagoras believes his doctrine to be true. By his own doctrine, Protagoras must believe that his opponent's view is true. Therefore, Protagoras must believe that his own doctrine is false'

(*ibid.*). Readers will likely be familiar with this argument, either in its original form or another; something like that sketched briefly on page four.<sup>5</sup>

One other significant criticism of Protagoras is that of Aristotle. According to him, Protagoras was guilty of contravening the law of noncontradiction. This is, in part, due to the fact that he is reputed to have ‘taught his pupils to praise and blame the same things and to find support for the weaker arguments and to undermine the stronger ones’ (Baghramian, 2004, p. 19). According to Baghramian, it is perhaps also due to the fact that Aristotle would argue – ‘if man is the measure of all things, then different people would assign the value true or false to the same assertion, rendering it both true and false’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 34). It would then follow that the possibility of contradiction itself would be eliminated and, in a similar move to that made by Plato’s arguments, Aristotle suggests that ‘the very expression of relativism is meaningless since it does not exclude its denial’ (*ibid.*).

Evaluating these criticisms fully will be outside the scope of this section; for now, it will be enough to say that the lengths to which Plato and Aristotle went to refute the Protagorean thesis speaks to its significance. As suggested by Alasdair MacIntyre, ‘nothing is perhaps a surer sign that a doctrine embodies some not to be neglected truth than that in the course of the history of philosophy it should have been refuted again and again’ (MacIntyre, 1985, p. 22). Despite the high-profile criticisms from Plato and Aristotle, Baghramian notes that the influence of the Protagorean thesis ‘survived into the Hellenistic period in the work of the Pyrrhonian Sceptics in particular’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 34). Instead of criticising the Protagorean thesis, the Sceptics used it to support their views. Baghramian cites the following passage from Sextus Empericus, whom she describes as the most influential Pyrrhonian.

*Protagoras has it that human beings are the measure of all things, of those that are that they are, and of those that are that they are not. By ‘measure’ he means the standard and by ‘things’, objects; so, he is implicitly saying that human beings are the standard for all objects... for this reason he posits only what is apparent to each person, and thus introduces relativity. Hence, he is thought to have something in common with the Pyrrhonists (ibid.).*

According to her, Sextus argues that judgements/observations are relative to the person making them or the object being observed.

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<sup>5</sup> Something like, “claiming that there is no truth is itself a truth claim” or, “if it is true that there is no truth, then there is no truth cannot be true either”.

Nowadays, relativism and scepticism are generally not regarded to be one and the same; however, the distinction between them was not always so clear. Relativism and indeed, scepticism went through something of a dark period and, according to Baghramian, had been ignored for around fifteen centuries until the publication of *Outlines of Scepticism* in 1562. Scepticism and relativism ‘once more became live philosophical topics’ (*ibid.*, p. 36). According to Baghramian, it was Michel De Montaigne who provided the ‘the most significant link between the relativism and scepticism of the ancients and the various relativistic doctrines developed by modern philosophers’ (*ibid.*).

Professor of anthropology, Norris Brock Johnson has suggested that ‘during the sixteenth century sustained contact with the peoples and sociocultural traditions of the New World and Africa altered Euro-Western conceptions, and images, of the human’ (Johnson, 1993, p. 153). Montaigne, who has been significantly influential in the field of anthropology surely fits this description. Cultural relativism has been and continues to be an important concept in the field of Anthropology; Montaigne is considered, by anthropologists, to be a key “purveyor” of this concept in his time (*ibid.*). It is unlikely that Montaigne thought of himself in this light, as Baghramian points out, he did not distinguish between scepticism and relativism; let alone, between different forms of relativism. ‘He seems to think that the two philosophical attitudes are fundamentally the same’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 37).

Given that some contemporary forms of relativism have condemned the enlightenment ‘for its faith in universal norms of rationality’ (*ibid.*), it may come as a surprise to see Montaigne – whose influence on the French Enlightenment is undeniable – associated with relativism. However, one need not go to great lengths to discover seemingly relativistic sentiments in his writing; in *Of Cannibals* he claimed, ‘everyone gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country’ (Johnson, 1993, p. 158). He is not the only of his contemporaries to espouse such views either; Baghramian writes, ‘at least some strands of the Enlightenment bear the unmistakable signs of a nascent relativism’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 37). Voltaire, Diderot and Montesquieu are amongst the examples she lists. One of the key markers of a nascent form of relativism, for her, is any attempt to call for tolerance towards different creeds and peoples.

Diderot, for example, advanced a kind of “exoticism”; he idealized distant cultures in his *Supplement to the Voyage of Bougainville* by suggesting that ‘the Tahitian is mild, innocent and happy, whereas civilised people are corrupt, vile and wretched’ (*ibid.*). He opposed efforts

to civilise cultures such as these and, as per Baghranian, made the relativistic-sounding proposition that one must ‘put on the costume of the country you visit, but keep the suit of clothes you will need to go home in’ (*ibid.*). Similarly, Montesquieu wrote that ‘negroes paint the devil sparkling white and their gods black as coal’ and that if ‘triangles had a god, they would give it three sides’ (*ibid.*); this should sound familiar.<sup>6</sup>

It appears that at least one form of relativism can find its roots in enlightenment thought, namely, cultural relativism as popularised by anthropologists. Similarly, as it has already been hinted, the counter-enlightenment of the eighteenth century has proven just as influential to the development of relativisms. Thinkers like Johann Georg Hamann proposed that historical context is an essential criterion for understanding; he and others ‘opened the way for a historicized and situational interpretation of cognitive and moral systems’ (*ibid.*, p. 38). Hamann also has been credited with initiating “the great romantic revolt” which, according to Baghranian, amounted to a ‘denial that there was an objective order... whether factual or normative, from which all knowledge and all values stemmed’ (*ibid.*). This proved inspirational for the likes of Nietzsche and contemporary postmodernism; proponents of which saw themselves as opponents of the legacy of the enlightenment.

Now that an outline of the “long past” of relativism has been sketched, it will be important to explore some more contemporary approaches to the topic; this will be task of section 1.2. The relativisms outlined there can perhaps be seen take their starting point from the first contemporary use of the term, by John Grote in his *Exploratorio Philosophica* in the mid-nineteenth century. Around the same time, ‘William Hamilton advocated what John Stuart Mill calls the “doctrine of relativity of our human knowledge”, according to which there can be no unconditional human knowledge’ (*ibid.* p. 39).

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<sup>6</sup> See p. 8, where the belief that ‘if cows, horses, and lions had hands, and were able to draw with those hands... horses would draw images of gods like horses and cattle like cattle’ (Baghranian, 2010, p. 32) is attributed to Xenophanes.

## 1.2 Positive Definitions

Relativism has, it is fair to say, been something of a divisive topic throughout the history of western philosophy. Michael Krausz, in his contribution to *Relativism: A Contemporary Anthology*, rightly suggests that we should defer the question ‘who is right – the relativist, the absolutist, or neither – and first ask, which relativism?’ (Krausz, 2010, p. 30). For, as this section will show, ‘relativism is no one doctrine’ (*ibid.*) and any attempt to tackle it has to take clarification of the many diverse forms of relativism as its starting point.

There have been a number of projects which have shed valuable light on relativisms, understood by many as instantiations of Haack’s scheme –  $x$  is relative to  $y$ . One especially insightful example is *A Primer on Relativism* by Martin Kusch. He works from the assumption that the  $y$  to which any given  $x$  is relative varies for different versions of relativism. Kusch demonstrates this, using Haack’s scheme, in the following tables.

“x” stands for	Forms of relativism
1. Objects, properties, facts, worlds, truth(s)	Ontological
2. Classifications, concepts, meanings	Semantic
3. Moral values, norms, commitments, justifications	Moral
4. Knowledge or epistemic justification	Epistemic
5. Tastes	Gustatory

“y” stands for	Forms of relativism
A. Individuals	Protagorean
B. Cultures	Cultural
C. Scientific paradigms	Kuhnian
D. Classes, religions, genders	Standpoint

Propositions will be the primary  $x$  to which this discussion will refer; this term will, at times, be used interchangeably with “judgements” and “statements”. Of course, this does not represent every possible  $x$  in Haack’s scheme; one could not, for example, conflate “objects” with “propositions”. That said, one could make propositions about objects, what might be

called ontological propositions. Similarly, one could make semantic, moral, epistemic and gustatory propositions.

Take the adage “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”, this might be considered an expression of gustatory Protagorean relativism. That is, because the x in this case, beauty, can be applied to the category represented in line 5 of the above table and the y, the beholder, can be applied to line A. So, “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” is synonymous with “tastes are relative to individuals”. Similarly, if one was to consider the phrase “might makes right”, one might be led to the conclusion that this could be construed as a relativistic proposition. The x, in this case, could be seen as “right” and the y as “might”. This interpretation could then be applied to Kusch’s table, where it might be found that “right” is represented by line 3 and “might” is represented by line B. Thereby, “might makes right” would be synonymous with “morality is relative to culture”.

There is, no doubt, a near inexhaustible list of similar statements – which either bear the signs of nascent relativism like those above or are overtly relativistic in nature and can be easily applied to Kusch’s table. Now that it has been established that the subject and object of relativist propositions are variable, something will need to be said about the nature of these propositions. In other words, what does the link between x and y, “is relative to” mean exactly? Finding a satisfactory answer, or answers, to this question will be no easy task. It is perhaps the key element of any satisfactory positive definition of relativism. But first, more on x and y.

Similar work to that of Kusch just presented has also been done by Maria Baghramian. She provides her own interpretation of Haack’s scheme in the following tables.

Objects of Relativisation
1. Cognitive norms: truth, rationality, logic, justificatory standards (cognitive relativism, epistemic relativism, postmodernism, truth relativism)
2. Moral values (moral relativism)
3. Aesthetic values (aesthetic relativism)
4. Knowledge claims, worldviews, ontologies, systems of belief (cognitive, conceptual, and epistemic relativism, social constructivism)
5. Propositions or tokens of utterances (particularly those expressing personal preferences, future contingents, epistemic modals, aesthetic and moral predicates)



Domains of Relativisation
A. Individual's viewpoints and preferences (subjectivism, new relativism)
B. Historical epochs (historicism)
C. Cultures, social groupings (cultural relativism, social relativism)
D. Conceptual schemes: languages, theories, frameworks (conceptual relativism, social constructivism)
E. Context of assessment, e.g., taste parameter, assessor's/agent's sets of beliefs (new relativism, epistemic relativism)

Following this approach, reconsider the example of “beauty is in the eye of the beholder”. In Kusch’s table, line 5 was relative to line A; here, line 3 was relative to line A. Both Baghramian and Kusch elaborate the categories in their respective tables in detail, both systems represent a thorough account of x and y in Haack’s scheme. However, as mentioned above, they do not say much about that which links all these objects of relativisation and domains of relativisation, as Baghramian calls them. In order to fill in this gap, something will need to be said about what “is relative to” can mean.

One possible answer to this is that “is relative to” can be used interchangeably with “is contingent upon”. So, referring back to Kusch’s table, if one were to propose that line 4 is relative to line C, one would be making the epistemic Kuhnian claim that knowledge, or epistemic justification, is contingent upon scientific paradigms. Instead of using “contingent upon” here, “dependent on”, “conditional upon”, “subject to”, “based on” or “determined by” could have been used. All of these phrases used in this context would amount to the same set of meaning; that knowledge does exist, nor does it come about, in a vacuum. Anyone who might make this proposition would likely hold that anything which we may come to know, x, will have been preceded by a paradigm of some sort, y. Thus, x here is contingent upon, or dependent on, or conditional upon, or subject to, or based on, or even determined by, y. This list may not be exhaustive, but it should do something to demonstrate what can be meant by the phrase “is relative to” in this discussion.

Kusch and Baghramian’s tables combined with the above clarification, broadly speaking, demonstrate that ‘relativism does not stand for a unified doctrine with more or less discrete boundaries or intellectual genealogy’ (Baghramian, 2004, p. 62). Perhaps the only thing that might properly be considered in common between two relativist theories is that which links

their respective objects and domains of relativisation together. It has also been contended that one can be a relativist in one domain and not in another. For example, one might make the historicist proposition that, referring back to Baghramian's table,  $x$  is relative to line B but also reject the subjectivist proposition that  $x$  is relative to line A. For now, this will be assumed possible. In doing so, there is the potential for an impasse. It might be asked, is the relativist not subject to coherence commitments? How is it that they can be allowed to pick and choose when to defend relativism and when to shy away from doing so?<sup>7</sup> These concerns and many others will be addressed in chapter two. The purpose of this chapter is simply to lay out and contextualise some of the many possible definitions of this theory in detail.

These definitions, alongside the historical context given at the outset, will serve as pieces of a puzzle which ought to be completed before tackling some of the questions posed by later parts of this discussion. Also, as it will be suggested in chapter two, many criticisms of relativism have not been specific about which relativism we ought to be worried. Familiarity with the definitions laid out here should allow readers to accurately decipher exactly which relativism is the subject of criticisms which they may encounter. Subsequently, it may be deduced whether said criticisms are genuine and the particular form of relativism to which they are referring ought to be avoided; or whether said criticisms are simply a scare mongering tactic in order to bolster some other set of arguments.<sup>8</sup> The methods of defining relativism which have been outlined here so far are not the only ones however: back to the task at hand.

Said methods would likely be described by Baghramian as definitions of abstraction. Before digging deeper into relativism defined negatively, it will be necessary to outline what she calls definition by enumeration.<sup>9</sup> This particular method 'is empirical in its orientation in that it lists the major doctrines that have been labelled by their advocates or critics as relativist' (Baghramian, p. 1). The main difference between this method and definition by abstraction is that definition by enumeration does not seek to find a common thread between the different forms of relativism. Both Baghramian and Kusch drafted the above tables on this basis, that all the forms of relativism they listed shared the tendency to follow Haack's scheme,  $x$  is relative to  $y$ .

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<sup>7</sup> This will be a topic of discussion in chapter two. There, it will be considered whether the relativist can avoid coherence problems if they take up a relativist position with respect to one matter and not another.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Ratzinger's views about relativism can be used as an example here too. It would hardly be controversial to claim that they might be considered scare mongering.

<sup>9</sup> From this point forward, definitions of abstraction will be referred to as "DA" and definition by enumeration will be referred to as "DE".

When DE is used, there need not necessarily be a common thread which connects the various forms of relativism which it identifies. That is, of course, aside from the fact that they have all been labelled as such, either by their advocates or their critics. Cultural relativism is the first example which Baghramian's DE lists and it has already been briefly mentioned here. This theory was and continues to be primarily developed in the field of anthropology. Cultural relativism focuses on ethical, social and aesthetic issues; it has been strongly formulated by anthropologists like Clifford Geertz and other earlier figures such as Ed Westermarck. Broadly speaking, this theory focuses on the *y* to which any given *x* is relative; in the case of cultural relativism, *y* will always represent the cultural context of *x*. The task of the cultural relativist is to examine *x* and show that it is contingent upon *y*; that *y* has not always been the case in the past and may not continue to be the case in the future. This is, of course, based on the assumption that ethical, social, aesthetic etc issues are evolving just as the cultures which tackle them are evolving. Those who accept this premise then use it as a base from which they can argue that 'moral norms, aesthetic values and legal precepts are culture specific and should be evaluated according to local criteria only' (ibid., p. 3).

According to Baghramian, these arguments are motivated by an 'acceptance that there is a significant degree of diversity in norms, values and beliefs across cultures and historic periods' and 'a pessimistic induction to the effect that failures of previous attempts to resolve disagreements on moral and cognitive precepts show that there are no universal criteria for adjudicating between differing world views' (ibid.). This is certainly a fascinating insight. However, what seems to be presented here is a combination of two domains of relativisation listed by the DA presented in her in her representation of Haack's scheme: historical epochs and cultures or social groupings. In short, she seems to conflate historicism with cultural relativism. This move is a reasonable one. Of course, cultures and social groupings are constantly evolving and will all eventually be confined to one or another historical epoch.

Contemporary anthropologists facilitated what Baghramian calls the "full articulation" of cultural relativism. However, she also suggests that 'cultural relativism has the longest philosophical pedigree, going back to Protagoras and Classical Greece, re-emerging with Montaigne at the dawn of modern philosophy' (ibid., p. 9). This discussion will have proven more than a little sympathetic to these claims by the time its end is reached; moral cultural relativism will be one of the key forms of relativism to which the latter stages of it will refer. For now, though, allow that cultural relativism is simply one which can be defined using Baghramian's DA or DE.

Another form of relativism which can be considered as part of a definition by enumeration is conceptual relativism. This approach is based on the idea that ‘the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply different, and at times incompatible, ways of categorising and conceptualizing it’ (ibid., p. 3). It would perhaps be an oversimplification to think of this as a more rationalist method of understanding human life when compared with that of cultural relativism, but it may be a useful one. If cultural relativism was born from empirical observation of historic and cultural diversity, conceptual relativism was born from ‘reflection on the connection between mind and the world’ (ibid.).

It may come as a surprise to learn that the work of Immanuel Kant has occasionally been credited with laying foundations for some strands of contemporary relativist thought. This is especially true in conceptual relativism. This is certainly not an uncontroversial claim; many will be quick to point out that the Kantian perspective on a number of topics (ethics perhaps being the most obvious one) bore absolutely no resemblance to a relativistic one. More than that, many of Kant’s theories stand in direct opposition to relativist approaches to matters like ethical problems. It is in his distinction between raw experiences and the conceptual principle for organizing them that the lineage can be traced. This theoretical manoeuvre introduced the possibility that a variety of equally acceptable incompatible schemes of organization could exist. The appeal of this to anyone advocating a relativist perspective should be evident. Kant himself may not have been pleased if he had seen how relativist thinkers have interpreted aspects of his work, such as a priori knowledge. He certainly considered this concept to be anything but relative, nevertheless, the fact that it inspired relativist thought remains. ‘Naturalist interpretations of Kant’s scheme/content distinction... [by Von Helmholtz and Wundt] ... turned the Kantian a priori into the psychological or physiological categories, and hence contingent preconditions of human knowledge’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 40). Baghramian seems to be certain of this lineage in her description of conceptual relativism.

The third form of relativism to which Baghramian refers in her DE is social constructivism. This is a more radical form of relativism which is based on the idea that ‘reality... is not simply out there to be discovered by empirical investigation or observation only, rather it is constructed through a variety of norm-governed socially sanctioned cognitive activities’ (Baghramian, 2014, p. 4). Examples of these “socially sanctioned cognitive activities” to which Baghramian refers include interpretation, description and the manipulation of data. This form of relativism is quite a radical one; the result of social constructivist theory is that different social forces

create different “worlds” and ultimately, ‘there is no neutral ground for adjudicating between them’ (ibid.).

Baghramian identifies many of the most prominent criticisms of relativism as directed towards the relativism of social constructivism. One example of such a critic would be Paul Boghossian; on the other hand, examples of thinkers who have advocated social constructivist perspectives include Latour and Woolgar. Arguments from both sides would certainly warrant lengthy consideration but as long as the key aspects of social constructivist thought outlined above have been understood, enough has been done for the purposes of this chapter. Finally, it may be worth noting that social constructivism is a more recent area within relativism; according to Baghramian, it finds its roots in the work of early 20th century psychologists such as Lev Vygotsky (ibid., p. 9).

Another example of a relativism with a more recent pedigree, and one which happens to be the most prominent source of support for relativism which exists today, is postmodernism. Widely familiar and recognised as one of the more significant intellectual movements of the 20th century, postmodernism is also considered a form of relativism in Baghramian’s DE. According to her ‘the movement is identified with relativism because of its mistrust of claims to objectivity, denial of universal conceptions of rationality and rejection of the role of truth and reason as legitimate universal courts of appeal’ (ibid., p. 5). Postmodern points of view bear some similarity to those of social constructivist ones. Both viewpoints consider “reality” to be a product of social and historical forces. Postmodernists go even further however and deny the authority of reason, logic and rationality: ‘The Enlightenment ideal of reason, they claim, is a product of local socio-historical conditions and has no universal validity and yet in the hands of white men it has become a tool of intellectual and hence social repression’ (ibid.). According to Baghramian, postmodern thought sees any ‘defence of objectivity and universal values... [as] ...an indication of support for the status quo and a tool of further oppression’ (ibid., p. 6). It may be another oversimplification to think of postmodernism as a kind of political conception of relativism with a Marxist flavour, but it may also be a useful one. Like constructivism, this approach has been a common target of criticism from modern anti-relativists.

The final form of relativism which Baghramian includes in her DE is “new relativism”. Also known as truth relativism, new relativism was developed by philosophers of language in the analytic tradition. This approach was born of a desire to deal with ‘assertions containing

predicates that do not seem suitable for assignment of truth values in the usual fashion' (ibid., p. 6). New relativism is based on the views of Lewis and Kaplan, 'who believed that propositions are true or false, only relative to a circumstance of evaluation' (ibid.). The core element of new relativist thinking is that the truth of a proposition is not only contingent upon the context in which it is first proposed, but also contingent upon the context in which it is being assessed. Examples of contexts of assessment could include 'time of assessment, information state of assessor, relevance to the range of interests the assessor has, taste parameter, and the aesthetic or moral standards of the agent' (ibid., p. 7). Baghramian identifies possible discontinuity between this form of relativism and the others previously outlined too; new relativism, according to her, is a 'mere semantic theory while older relativisms make ontic and epistemic claims' (ibid.). As a more recent development in the field of relativism and one which is distinctly measured in its approach, it would be interesting to assess the response it has received in the wider landscape of philosophy. However, laying out the main aspects of new relativist thought will be enough for now.

### 1.3 Negative Definitions

Baghramian's work is an invaluable resource for positive definitions as well as the history of relativism. She herself would most likely agree that negative definitions are perhaps equally important for any thorough attempt to answer the question: what is relativism? She rightly points out that 'relativism amounts to the rejection of a number of philosophical positions' (*ibid.*, p. 12). Both Kusch and Baghramian hold a generally favourable view towards relativism. These sorts of voices are not the only ones who can aid in the task of this chapter. For example, the work by William Max Knorpp in his *What Relativism Isn't*, a piece solely dedicated to defining relativism negatively forms part of a wider anti-relativist project.

Knorpp describes himself as 'more than a little sympathetic' to objectivist perspectives (Knorpp, 1998, p. 278). Despite this, his efforts to define relativism are thorough; it may be that he wants to give the subject of his criticism a fair trial in order to provide solid foundations for his defence of objectivism. He refers to the general tendency for misconceptions about relativism to affect objectivism, when they are deemed simply to be opposites, as the motivation for clearing up said misconceptions. In any case, the negative definitions which Knorpp provides are useful; to reiterate, understanding what relativism is not perhaps just as important as understanding the many things which it can be.

The first negative definition of relativism outlined by Knorpp is relativism  $\neq$  pluralism. Given that pluralism is a term which arguably has an even more diverse set of meanings and uses than relativism, it is important to point out that he is discussing moral pluralism in particular here. The first manoeuvre executed by Knorpp is to establish a distinction between the following two forms of moral pluralism.

1. Descriptive moral pluralism
2. Normative moral pluralism

Considering this distinction will be doubly useful as it is one which also comes up in discussions of relativism.<sup>10</sup>

For Knorpp, descriptive moral pluralism is grounded upon the idea of incommensurability which, in this case, is the idea that a wide variety of irreconcilable moral perspectives exist. This claim only speaks to what is the case, it says nothing about what ought to be the case. This

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<sup>10</sup> Kusch distinguishes between methodological, descriptive and normative forms of relativism; this will be explored further in chapter two.

is where normative moral pluralism comes in; a claim of this sort would take this descriptive claim “this is” and add that all the moral perspectives it identifies ought to be tolerated. If descriptive moral pluralism is grounded on the idea of incommensurability, normative moral pluralism is grounded on this, what Knorpp refers to as, the tolerance thesis. This, he defines simply as the idea that ‘a relatively wide variety of beliefs and actions ought to be tolerated’ (*ibid.*, p. 283).

Consider for a moment, the example of the good. Presumably, the descriptive moral pluralist would simply want to point out that there are various different conceptions of what is good. Similarly, the normative moral pluralist would ask only that we take this assumption and consider that these different conceptions of what is good ought to be tolerated. What Knorpp wants to point out is that neither say anything about goodness itself, that neither consider goodness to be relative for example. Presumably the implication is that one could endorse a descriptive or normative pluralist theory about what is good, with an absolutist conception of goodness. This may well be a tenable position to take up. However, it is not very clear why, or in what way, something like a descriptive or normative pluralist theory about what is good, with a relativist conception of goodness, would be an untenable one. Knorpp is right to point out that they are not inherently relativist theories, but it seems that they are not necessarily absolutist either.

He is also right to point out that relativisms are often associated with certain areas of the social sciences. He cites A.L. Kroeber’s claim that societies should be evaluated on their own terms. Also, that there are ‘many values rather than a single value system’ (*ibid.*). For Knorpp, these sentiments are mistakenly classified as cultural relativism; he considers them ‘at least somewhat ambiguous between:

1. ‘A merely sociological claim... that preferences and/or opinions about what is valuable differ from group to group’ (*ibid.*).
2. ‘A philosophically interesting claim, to the effect that different and incompatible “value systems” can both or all be correct’ (*ibid.*).

The first claim listed above is, for Knorpp, an example pluralism; the second, an example of relativism. On the basis of work done in 1.2 of this discussion, it might be suggested that Baghramian would see the first claim as a motivating factor for the second. In other words, it is because it one may recognise that values differ from group to group that one may be led to the conclusion that different and incompatible value systems can both or all be correct. Knorpp



may very well agree with this sentiment, but he certainly would want to say that, although acceptance of the claim that values differ from group to group may lead one down the path of relativism, it is not a relativist claim in and of itself.

The second negative definition put forward by Knorpp is relativism  $\neq$  nihilism. According to him, ‘alethic nihilism is the view that there is no such thing as truth, that no (e.g.) propositions are true at all – that truth is a fiction’ (*ibid.*, p. 285). Herein lies the key distinction between alethic relativism and alethic nihilism, to use Knorpp’s term.<sup>11</sup> The former sees truth simply as relative, whereas the latter denies the existence of truth in the first place.

“Relative” here can be defined in a similar manner to that previously used to define “is relative to”. That is to say, the term can be seen to represent others such as “contingent upon”, “dependent on”, “conditional upon”, “subject to”, “based on” or “determined by” one thing or another. Though it may be implicit, it should be explicitly stated that “relative” here is also taken to mean “non-absolute”. Knorpp, in his comparisons between nihilism and relativism, sees himself as comparing two distinct forms of non-absolutism. This is a fair assumption; it is unlikely that anyone sympathetic to either theory would object to it. In the case of relativism, as mentioned above, “non- absolute” is perhaps implicit in the labels “relative”, “contingent” and so on.

On this distinction, between relativism and nihilism with respect to truth, Knorpp pithily remarks that ‘the relativist holds that there is a lot of truth; the nihilist holds that there is none’ (*ibid.*). Similarly, he says that ‘a relativist does not think that rightness is suspect or ghostly or second- class, or anything of the kind – just relative’ (*ibid.*, p. 286). Following this approach, one would be led to the conclusion that a nihilist would think that “rightness”, if it is anything at all, is indeed suspect, ghostly or second-class.

Clifford Geertz, a well-known anthropologist to which this discussion has already referred via Baghramian, has also denied that relativism can be conflated with nihilism or that it is some sort of version of it. Following the theme set out by Knorpp, he even does so from the perspective of cultural relativism specifically in his *Anti Anti-Relativism*. There, he considers whether a “genuine nihilist” is someone who can be thought to exist in the first place. Geertz renders an image of an individual ‘running around in so cosmopolitan a frame of mind as to

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<sup>11</sup> Alethic here means of or relating to truth, the term could perhaps be used interchangeably with “ontological”. That is, because Knorpp is speaking in terms of line 1 in both Kusch and Baghramian’s tables, both of which can be found in section 1.2. In short, Knorpp is here comparing nihilism and relativism as they relate to truth in particular.

have no views as to what is and isn't true, or good, or beautiful' (Geertz, 2010, p. 375); this image is a fantasy according to him. He does not totally rule out the possibility that there may very well be some genuine nihilists out there. However, he contends that if there are, they have hardly settled upon their world view after carefully considering the idea that truth, the good or beauty might be culturally contingent or relative in any other sense whatsoever. This argument is altogether plausible due to the fact that, as Geertz says, most of us are 'all too committed to something or other, usually parochial' to be considered genuine nihilists (*ibid.*).

What Geertz seems to be suggesting here is that one is either a nihilist or not; that in order to be considered a "genuine nihilist", one would have to represent a nihilistic outlook in every scenario where it is possible to do so. He can therefore be seen to be an advocate of coherence commitments with respect to nihilism. As per section 1.2 of this discussion, it will be assumed for the moment that the relativist is not subject to such strict constraints. However, the following passages will begin to justify this assumption, its final defence will be offered in chapter two.

Consider the following example<sup>12</sup>, Jill proposes that aesthetic values are relative to historical epochs. She is an art student and spends her days making abstract films. She suggests that if she were pursuing the same career in the 16th century, she would likely have spent her days painting landscapes or sculpting marble. Similarly, she expects that the work done by students in her school will change radically in the future. Jack agrees but also proposes that moral values are relative to individual viewpoints and preferences. He pokes fun at Jill and contends that the only grounds she has for claiming that the former Tottenham footballer, Sol Campbell signing for bitter rivals Arsenal was immoral is that she is a Tottenham fan. Jill firmly denies this, there is nothing that could convince her that this betrayal was anything but morally wrong.

So then, Jill is a relativist when it comes to aesthetics but a moral absolutist when it comes to footballing loyalties. Does this mean she is not a genuine relativist? It may be just as unlikely that there could be someone who would take up a relativist position in all cases as it is that there could be a "genuine nihilist" in Geertz's eyes. However, this does not mean there is no such thing as a genuine relativist. This is another reason why relativism cannot be conflated with, or considered some kind of version of, nihilism.

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<sup>12</sup> This is a more developed version of another example given in relation to Baghramian's table in section 1.2. There, it was put that one might make the historicist proposition that, referring back to Baghramian's table, x is relative to line B but also reject the subjectivist proposition that x is relative to line A.

If one were to make this argument, they would perhaps be guilty of advocating for an idea dreamt up by Rorty and Edmundson, what Knorpp calls, “the myth myth”. That is, ‘the myth that relativism is a myth, that no one has ever held the view’ (Knorpp, 1998, p. 289). This leads to the final negative definition of relativism which will be presented here: relativism ≠ theoretical egalitarianism. As the name suggests, theoretical egalitarianism holds that one theory is as valid as any other; it is, what might be called, an “anything goes” argument. This is a stick which is often used to beat relativism, unfairly so. It is not implicit in any attempt to demonstrate that a theory is relative, that said theory is no better or worse than any other theory.

As per Knorpp, these manoeuvres are clearly distinct, ‘there is a clear difference between [the suggestion that] a view is good only relative to some perspective and [the suggestion that] no view is better than any other (*ibid.*, p. 290). One need not abandon their views upon accepting that they are relative. Similarly, one need not concede that their, e.g., ontological, semantic, moral, epistemic or gustatory; views are equal to those of others if one were to declare themselves an, e.g., ontological, semantic, moral, epistemic or gustatory; relativist. There are a number of allies to this claim that might be called upon. Joshua Greene, to whom the chapter two will also refer, suggests that ‘recognizing that there is no objective reason to favour oneself over others does not entail abandoning one's subjective reasons for favouring oneself’ (Greene, 2014, p. 201). Similarly, Owen Flanagan, Hagop Sarkissian and David Wong suggest that ‘the localized and contingent nature of many of the values we hold dear is no reason for not cherishing them, no reason to deny them a constitutive role in providing meaning’ (Flanagan, et al., 2016, p. 31).

## Chapter 2: How Worried Should we be?

### *Introduction*

As stated in 1.1, ‘the history of relativism is simultaneously a history of the attempts to refute it’ (Baghramian, 2010, p. 33). This is perhaps just as attributable to the anxieties that have so often surrounded this topic as it is to the confusion that has done the same. However, this chapter will not seek to suggest that there are no forms of relativism about which we ought to worry. For this reason, section 2.1 will consider some tenable and untenable relativisms. Martin Kusch has highlighted a distinction between descriptive, methodological and normative relativisms. One might be tempted to divert all worries towards normative forms, but this would perhaps go too far to limit the scope of a relativist stance. In Kusch’s view, normative forms of relativism are the only ones which exclude the possibility of absolute truth.

Seeing that later sections of this project will seek to endorse a metaethical perspective which excludes absolutism, whether or not normative relativism is a cause for worry will need to be considered further in section 2.2. There, an alternative conception of normative relativism, that of Ryan Gillespie, will be considered. Ultimately, it will be argued that many of the features of normative relativism about which the likes of Gillespie and others have urged us to worry are already prevalent in contemporary society. In that context, many possible features of normative relativism are actively encouraged. Namely, what Knorpp has referred to as the tolerance thesis. The normative relativist shares with the likes of Barack Obama, the idea that one ought to translate their own particular values into universal values that might be shared by wider society.

One key trait of an individual equipped to do this is an acceptance of moral irrealism. This and other features of a ‘card carrying’ (Kusch, 2019, p. 6) relativist will be explored in section 2.3. There, it will also be argued that a relativism which embraces moral realism is one about which we certainly ought to be worried – if it were a popular stance. However, it will also be argued, that moral realism is rarely embraced by the relativist; that most if not all card carriers would be more likely to favour moral irrealism in metaethical debates. This will be the first step necessary to reach the conclusion that becoming a card carrier would be an attractive prospect, rather than anything about which we ought to be worried. Finally, section 2.3 will consider whether the relativist can justifiably defend relativism in one domain and not another, thus avoiding any potential coherence problems.

## 2.1 Tenable and Untenable Relativisms

Section 1.3 made reference to Knorpp's distinction between descriptive and normative moral pluralism, Martin Kusch has established a similar distinction with respect to relativism. In his general introduction to the topic, *A Primer on Relativism*, Kusch identifies three distinct forms of relativism: descriptive, methodological and normative. For Kusch, 'forms of descriptive relativism claim that, as far as moral beliefs or standards are concerned, one finds fundamentally different standards in different cultures' (Kusch, 2019, p. 3). On the other hand, 'forms of methodological relativism insist that in investigating moralities we had better approach cultural differences in an "impartial" and "symmetrical" way' (*ibid.*), in his view.

However, there is one key similarity between two of these three forms of relativism identified by Kusch in his *Primer*, 'descriptive and methodological forms of relativism', he suggests, 'leave open the possibility that there are absolute norms or truths' (*ibid.*). Interestingly, he adds that 'as far as descriptive or methodological relativisms are concerned, one of the cultures might well be on the absolutely right track' (*ibid.*). As for Normative relativisms, they take matters one crucial step further and 'deny that there are any absolutely true or absolutely correct beliefs or standards' at all (*ibid.*).

The above suggestions may come as a surprise to some, one might imagine that many anti relativists would be at least somewhat appeased if it were true that not all relativisms deny the existence of absolutely true or correct beliefs or standards. With that said, it may be tempting to conclude that one should worry about normative forms of relativism and not others but that would perhaps oversimplify things slightly. Whilst it is unlikely that anyone would be worried by descriptive or methodological relativisms, as defined here at least, normative relativism will likely have the potential to do so. Kusch outlines several different possible features of a normative relativism; the following pages will list some of these features and assess whether or not they are properly considered worrisome.

As well as advancing the overarching question posed by this chapter, this will serve to lay out some of the features of both tenable and untenable relativisms. It will be argued here that not all possible features of a normative relativism outlined by Kusch are indefensible, on the contrary. Those that are, as it will be shown, are not represented by real world, what Kusch refers to as, "card-carrying" relativists. Many of these features, which have been repeatedly attributed to relativism by its critics, have been rejected by card carriers (*ibid.*, p. 6).

The first feature of any relativism listed by Kusch is dependence. He describes this as the idea that ‘a belief has an epistemic status only relative to either... a system of epistemic principles [regularism], or... a coherent bundle of precedents or paradigms [particularism]’ (*ibid.*, p. 4). It is not inherent in the suggestion that the regularist or particularist ideas on which a belief depends cannot be absolute; further elements need to be considered. This would include pluralism, which Kusch describes as the idea that there can be more than one system or bundle relative to which a belief can claim epistemic status. Still, this combination of ideas should not be cause for too much controversy; it is not difficult to accept that there are different sources from which a belief can draw its epistemic status.

Take, for example, the belief that the earth is round. This claim can be verified as true on the basis of a number of different regularist or particularist findings. Two astronauts in orbit around the earth can look down and observe that it is round. Of course, they can verbally agree upon this observation and verify that what they are both looking at is the earth and that it is round. They can also take a photograph in order to document their findings and solidify the epistemic status of their shared belief.

Similarly, any one of us could walk ten thousand kilometres in one direction, turn ninety degrees to our right, walk another ten thousand kilometres, turn right again, walk a final ten thousand kilometres and find that we have ended up where we had started. Therefore, we would have mapped out a triangle on the earth’s surface using only ninety-degree angles; a feat which could only be achieved on a round surface. These are just some of the means by which the proposition “the earth is round” can be verified. The fact that there are various means of doing this, from photography to geometry, should do nothing to undermine the epistemic status of the belief.

In other words, the fact that there is more than one method of labelling a proposition “true” should not make it any less so. Individuals may find one or another of these methods more or less convincing but ultimately, they will come away with the same impression; that “the earth is round” is a true proposition. Clearly, this definition of pluralism alone is no cause for concern, nor does it seem to imply normative relativism as Kusch understands it.

Adding non-absolutism to the equation will bring us closer to a normative relativism. According to Kusch, non-absolutism is ‘the minimal characterization of normative relativism’ (*ibid.*, p. 5). The non-absolutist would suggest that none of the systems or bundles on which our beliefs depend can be absolutely correct. Something should be said about the terms

“systems” and “bundles” as they are used here. The former, for Kusch, refers to a ‘system of epistemic principles and the latter, to a ‘coherent bundle of precedents or paradigms’ (ibid., p. 4). The precise meaning of these terms, it may be argued, remains a little vague. For now, it will be assumed, following the examples used above, that these terms may refer to practices such as photography or geometry.

Photography might be considered a source of epistemic verification based on the coherent bundle of precedents or paradigms which surround it. Photography could be seen to have brought about a paradigmatic shift in the way knowledge is verified; from the moment the first photograph was taken, a new precedent was set. Provided viewers are satisfied that a photograph has not been doctored, they take it to be an accurate snapshot of a moment in time and therefore a robust method by which a proposition, that the earth is round for example, can be verified. Similarly, the laws of geometry represent a fine example of a system of epistemic principles. To continue with the previous example, provided one understands that two 90o turns can only lead to the same point on a round surface, one has a robust method by which the proposition “the earth is round” can be verified.

In response to these examples, non-absolutism as defined by Kusch would hold that neither photographs of the earth nor the theorem outlined above can prove with absolute certainty that it is in fact round. Of course, we have all come to trust photography – “the camera never lies” – and the laws of geometry are difficult to doubt. However, even if one can be absolutely confident in the methods of systems or bundles such as these, Kusch’s non-absolutist would nevertheless hold that systems or bundles such as these can never be absolutely correct.<sup>13</sup>

So then, in order to deny that there are absolutely true or absolutely correct beliefs or standards, one must be committed to non-absolutism. It is not difficult to imagine how this may be construed as a significant cause for concern. If there are not absolutely true or absolutely correct beliefs or standards, is there such a thing as truth at all? If given the choice between absolute truth or none at all, hardly anyone would, or perhaps even could, choose the latter. There is little that could be done to undermine many of the most commonly held beliefs or standards; that “the earth is round” is a true proposition for example.

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<sup>13</sup> It is here assumed that photography and geometry can be properly understood as the sorts of things Kusch had in mind when he referred to “systems” and “bundles”. Once again, “systems” seems to refer to a system of epistemic principles and “bundles” seems to refer to a bundle of precedents or paradigms (Kusch, 2019, p. 4). One may or may not agree that the examples offered here fit these descriptions but seeing that Kusch offered none of his own, they are perhaps as good as any.

Thankfully, there is nothing that necessitates a choice between absolutist truth and none at all; few matters, if any, are so black and white. On the other hand, the earth is either round or it is not, and this must be acknowledged; but the minimum requirement for proving one of these two options to be true – for labelling one of them as a fact – is certainly up for debate. One might suggest that a proposition must be shown to be an absolute truth if it is to be considered a fact, but this is not the only viable approach. If a fact can be properly understood as a thing that is proven to be true, there is no reason to deny that a thing which is proven to be true in a relative sense is not a fact.

So many different credible sources report that the earth is round, that few would take issue with the suggestion that it has been proven to be true. That is to say, the majority of people take “the earth is round” to be a fact; only a tiny minority doubt it. Allow for a moment Kusch’s non-absolutist is right to suggest that this and other propositions can be considered true in a relative sense only; this should not do anything to affect the suggestion that “the earth is round” is a fact. Even if a proposition such as this can be proven to be true only in a relative sense, it can still be proven to be true; therefore, in the non-absolutist’s world, propositions can still be facts. It is for this reason that a relativism which invokes non-absolutism need not be deemed a cause for concern.

Unlike pluralism, non-absolutism is more intrinsically linked with normative relativisms. However, like pluralism, it should not do much to worry anyone interested in the preservation of facts. Speaking of facts, there are, of course, not many which are uncontested; as mentioned briefly above, even “the earth is round” has its doubters. This leads nicely to, what Kusch refers to as, an assumption which can be combined with non-absolutism – conflict. According to him, normative relativisms can recognize the conflict between epistemic verdicts such as “the earth is round” and “the earth is flat” and arrive at the conclusion that they exclude one another. This conclusion is reached either ‘because the two systems or bundles give incompatible answers to the same question’, or ‘because the advocates of one system or bundle find the answers suggested by the advocates of another system or bundle unintelligible’ (*ibid.*, p. 5). Regardless, this is an approach which hardly anyone is likely to accept.

This, if anything, would have to be deemed a feature of an untenable relativism. If it were to gain traction and become a central element of relativist thought, there would certainly be a cause to worry about relativism. It is one thing to question the bedrock of what is deemed to be factual, it is quite another to claim that there are no facts. Neither flat-earthers, round-earthers



nor anyone in between would accept that their epistemic verdict is any less true simply because someone disagrees with them.

Similarly, Kusch suggests that a normative relativism could combine non-absolutism with the idea that different systems or bundles, to use his terms again, are symmetrical because they are...

*based on nothing but local causes of credibility [LOCALITY]; and/or (b) impossible to rank except on the basis of a specific system or bundle [NON-NEUTRALITY]; and/or (c) equally true or valid [EQUAL VALIDITY]; and/or (d) impossible to rank since the evaluative terms of one system or bundle seem not applicable to another system or bundle [NON-APPRAISAL] (ibid., p.5-6).*

The primary sticking point here is likely to be the principal of equal validity. This, to reiterate, is the idea that, what Kusch refers to as, different systems or bundles are ‘equally true or valid’ (*ibid.*). It might be suggested, the claim that x and y are equally true is practically comparable to the claim that neither x nor y can be true. That is, only if one must insist that existence of lots of truth means that there is no truth.

This idea is one which is arguably becoming less prevalent, at least in W.E.I.R.D societies.<sup>14</sup> Consider some of the religious attitudes in this society, for example. Members of different religions in these societies, for the most part, recognize that their conception of religious truth is not the only one and that others are in their states are to be respected. It may well be that the Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist and so on, in these states each think that the other is wrong, but they are, in some sense, all allowed to be right.

That is to say, the principal of equal validity applies in practice even if not in theory when it comes to religious truth in W.E.I.R.D attitudes. Religious and nonreligious people are all expected to respect each other’s beliefs, to allow space for different conceptions of religious truth and at least behave as though they are all equally valid at a political level.<sup>15</sup> When this does not happen, whether it be through demonstrations or violent attacks, there is anything from general distaste to public outrage. Far from any sort of cause for concern, the principal

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<sup>14</sup> Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic

<sup>15</sup> This argument will be developed further in 2.2, it runs contrary to some anti-relativist arguments attributed to the likes of Paul Boghossian by Ryan Gillespie in his Normative Reasoning and Moral Argumentation in Theory and Practice.

of equal validity can be thought of as an essential element of political life in W.E.I.R.D societies.

So then, descriptive and methodological relativisms are surely tenable. They can hardly be considered theories about which many will be worried – given that they ‘leave open the possibility that there are absolute norms or truths’ (*ibid.*, p. 3). On the basis, at least, of Kusch’s understanding detailed above, it seems that forms of normative relativism can be thought of in the same way. That is, if they avoid certain possible features which many would consider objectionable, such as the idea that conflicting perspectives exclude one another.

## 2.2 Equal Validity, Tolerance & Realism vs. Irrealism Within a Relativist Framework

Section 2.1 has established that descriptive, methodological and even some normative relativisms are very tenable positions to take up; ones which need not cause any great concern. Few would likely take issue with the claims made there about descriptive and methodological relativisms, but the same cannot perhaps be said of those made about normative ones. Of course, Kusch's ideas about normative relativism are not the only ones that exist. Those not quite so sympathetic to the cause, in particular, have had their own ideas about the normative implications of relativism – one typical example of these will be investigated. It will then be considered how moral realism and moral irrealism can be understood with respect to relativism. Ultimately, it will be argued that the former is one about which we ought to worry, and the latter is not such a cause for concern.

Firstly though, some anti-relativist perspectives that appear in Ryan Gillespie's *Normative Reasoning and Moral Argumentation in Theory and Practice* will be considered. It will be assumed here that the efforts to dismiss the principal of equal validity referred to in that text – a version of an anti-relativist argument attributed to Paul Boghossian by him – are motivated by concerns about a view which would see systems or bundles, to use Kusch's term, as equally valid. This will serve to strengthen the claim made in 2.1; that the principal of equal validity, a feature of normative relativisms for Kusch, should not worry us.

In the text mentioned above, Gillespie attributes a version of the following argument to Paul Boghossian: relativist propositions, like “morality is relative to culture”, can be descriptive in nature but can, at the same time, have normative implications. The claim is not considered problematic in isolation – it is uncontroversial to claim that ‘many people in many different cultures have different moral beliefs’ (Gillespie, 2016, p. 49). However, ‘when one adopts moral relativism... the claim accrues a normative dimension’ – the result of which is a ‘flattening out of rightness, of one moral belief being better than another regardless of culture’ (*ibid.*). This is well and good but, Boghossian might say, ‘in practice, humans rarely, if ever, actually behave as if certain things or beliefs are not better than others, as evidenced in everything from foreign policy to religion to consumption choices’ (*ibid.*, p. 50).

Translating these sentiments to Kusch's terminology, Gillespie's Boghossian wants to establish that the principal of equal validity is not valid. That people do not see “certain things or beliefs” as equal to one another. It will be argued here that, even if only in W.E.I.R.D societies at the very least, that is exactly what they do. This argument has been made briefly in 2.1 but it will

be reformulated in its full form here. This will serve both to push back against Boghossian's criticisms and demonstrate that the 'flattening out of rightness, of one moral belief being better than another regardless of culture' (*ibid.*, p. 49) is practiced and with good reason. Of course, it is not clear what is meant by "certain things" – so, in evaluating this claim here, belief will be the main focus.

One does not necessarily need to be a relativist to make this argument; as per Joshua Greene, a version of it has been made by one of the more well-liked leaders of the W.E.I.R.D world, Barack Obama. Helpfully, Obama, in the following statement quoted by Greene, also focuses on belief and uses the example of religion...

*Democracy demands that the religiously motivated translate their concerns into universal, rather than religion-specific values. It requires that their proposals be subject to argument, and amenable to reason. I may be opposed to abortion for religious reasons, but if I seek to pass a law banning the practice, I cannot simply point to the teachings of my church or [invoke] God's will. I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all (Greene, 2014, p. 175)*

There is great potential for controversy here, one can imagine there are many who are, or would be, horrified at the suggestion that they might need to bracket their religion-specific values in order to engage in political discourse. Former conservative US senator, and all-round problematic figure, Rick Santorum declared that this statement had made him sick to his stomach; 'what kind of country do we live in that says only people of non-faith can come into the public square and make their case?' (*ibid.* p. 176). Of course, this is not what Obama is implying. Non-secular values – or rather, values which cannot be presented in a neutral way – are not exclusive to religious perspectives. The point is that all religious and irreligious people alike must be able to present their particular concerns in a way that is accessible to those who do not share their values. Anyone can "come to the public square and make our case", as Santorum puts it, so long as they can meet this criterion.

If their concerns are voiced in such a way that they can be accessible to everyone, they are more likely to elicit sympathy and support; perhaps, eventually they can then be written into the law of the land as "universal" values of the democracy. One way of interpreting what Obama is trying to do here is to urge, in this case, religious people to set aside their moral realism for the benefit of their fellow citizens. This is most likely because, as Greene suggests, religions 'exacerbate, rather than ease, conflicts between the values of Us and the values of Them' (*ibid.*, p. 183). The sort of person to which Obama refers in his statement can be

considered a moral realist because they derive their moral convictions from the teachings of their church or the perceived will of their god. This, if anything, is an absolute standard for morality – one with which few beyond their faith would likely sympathise.

If they were to set aside this approach, in favour of a moral irrealism, they might become better able to express their concerns to members of different faiths, or non-believers. This would not necessarily entail abandoning their moral convictions, but it would force them to think about how something like abortion, to use Obama’s example, affects their society from a secular perspective. That is, because moral irrealism would detach them from the stringent commitment to the existence of absolute moral facts set by the tenets of their faith.<sup>16</sup> Interesting as it may be to consider, equating Obama’s statement above with an argument in favour of moral irrealism in this manner can hardly be seen as anything other than mere conjecture.

It may simply be that Obama wants to argue against religion-specific values, in favour of secular- democratic ones. Perhaps even secular-democratic values with foundations just as absolute as “Gods will” or any source of religion-specific moral convictions. Similarly, it may be that he is making a prescriptivist argument with purely pragmatic, political considerations in mind. Only Obama himself can speak to the motivations of this statement but, seeing as it is perhaps the most likely to be the case and for argument’s sake, we will assume that his concerns here are more practical than anything; that he is simply searching for, to borrow a term used by Joshua Greene in his *Moral Tribes*, a “common currency” of morality.

According to Greene, a “common currency” of morality is as ‘a universal metric for weighing the values of different tribes’ which can form the basis of what he calls “metamorality” (*ibid.*, p. 175). If this is in fact what Obama is after, he would perhaps not be very enthused to be associated with the principal of equality but again, because this cannot really be known and for argument’s sake, we will assume that he can conceive of a ‘system for making compromises [and] trade-offs’ (*ibid.*) with a different idea of common currency than that of Greene. In other words, that his idea of common currency need not rank the values of different tribes, to use Greene’s term, and instead seeks to accommodate them all equally as much as possible.

This should not be too farfetched an assumption, surely democracies can be said to at least try to accommodate all perspectives. It is in the spirit of this that Obama seems to be making the

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<sup>16</sup> These sentiments should not be conflated with the tolerance thesis [see 1.3]; which, as per Knorpp, is a possible feature of a normative relativism. Neither moral realism nor moral irrealism is intrinsically linked with one or another relativism

statement referenced above in the first place. This may just be enough to constitute an implicit endorsement of the principal of equal validity. Similarly, it may be enough to constitute an endorsement of the tolerance thesis which, as per Knorpp, is a possible feature of a normative relativism.<sup>17</sup> Kusch also identifies this in relativisms, he sees it as a common motivation for those who endorse relativist views (Kusch, 2019, p. 9).

This, of course, does not provide sufficient grounds for the claim that Obama is some sort of secret relativist. If the suggestion that his statement referenced here is a critique of moral realism would be conjecture, this certainly would be too. To repeat, it is far more likely that he is simply making a prescriptive argument with pragmatic, political motivations in mind. Farfetched as it may be that Obama is a secret relativist and/or moral irrealist, it is still possible. If this were the case, and these were the motivations behind his statement, would it suddenly become a cause for concern? Surely only the likes of Rick Santorum would maintain that it ought to worry us.

Not enough has been said about moral realism, moral irrealism and the ways in which they can fit within a relativist framework. This will be important both for advancing the overarching question posed by this chapter<sup>18</sup> and for laying foundations for the final chapter of this discussion. There, particular focus will be directed towards a moral irrealist relativism. For now, though, consider moral realism. It has already been suggested here that “the religiously motivated”, through their commitment to the tenets of their faith, are usually moral realists. If moral realism can be understood as a commitment to the idea of absolute moral truth. Clearly, this will also mean that they are, at the same time, usually not relativists. It can therefore be deduced that neither moral realism is intrinsically linked with any form relativism.

The same can be said of moral irrealism, as it will be suggested in chapter three, one can simultaneously be a moral irrealist and a relativist – but it is also possible to simply be one or the other. If the religiously motivated anti-abortionist can be taken as an example of a non-relativist moral realist, an example of a non-relativist moral realist might be something like an emotivist. Broadly associated with the metaethical theory referred to as noncognitivism, which will be another focus of chapter three, emotivism represents irrealism due to the fact that it denies that there are objective moral values. The most basic understanding of emotivism refers to it as a “boo- hurrah” theory. That is, because emotivism – again, according to the most basic

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<sup>17</sup> See 1.3.

<sup>18</sup> I.e., by assessing whether or not we ought to be concerned about moral realist or irrealist relativisms.

understanding of it – does not deem moral propositions capable of being labelled “true” or “false”.

In other words, emotivism does not consider moral statements to be truth apt. The emotivist instead would take a statement like “stealing is wrong” as simply another way of saying “boo stealing”; or statements like “becoming a vegetarian is the right thing to do” as another way of saying “yay vegetarianism”. A significant part of the chapter three will go on to argue that the relativist need not deny that moral statements such as “stealing is wrong” or “vegetarianism is the right” can be truth apt. This will take some proving but of course, that task is outside the scope of this section. For now, allow that the relativist can deny that there are objective moral values without denying that moral statements can be truth apt. Therefore, emotivism can be considered an example of a non-relativist moral irrealism.

Enough about emotivism and religiously motivated anti-abortionists, what about moral realist and irrealist relativisms?<sup>19</sup> First, consider the latter: M.I.R would deny the suggestion that there are any absolute moral truth or objective moral facts. It would, of course, also suggest that any attempt to speak about moral truth or facts could only ever hope to be successful in a relative sense. According to M.I.R, moral propositions are always determined by, or reliant upon, some contingent or variable factor. This theory would certainly be a cause for concern if it were to also stipulate that, because they cannot represent absolute or objective truth or fact, they are really incapable of being labelled “true” or “false” and are therefore meaningless. Chapter three will go on to demonstrate that moral propositions can, in fact, be truth apt and that we need not worry about M.I.R.

M.R.R, on the other hand, would share with moral absolutism the idea that there are independent moral truths. A M.R.R would, of course, stipulate that there are more than one set of these truths, and they are determined by cultural context or some other variable factor. If it is not already clear why such a theory would be a cause for concern, one need only imagine that, for example, it would most likely determine that slave ownership was right in the context of the pre-civil war American South. No set of truths can, in this approach, ever really be wrong; “might makes right”. It is hard to imagine that anyone would abide a theory with as thorny an implication as this – M.R.R is certainly one form of relativism about which we ought to worry. Real world, what Kusch calls, card carrying relativists share this intuition, but how

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<sup>19</sup> To reiterate, moral realist relativism will be shortened to M.R.R and moral irrealist relativism to M.I.R henceforth.

can they be concerned about thorny implications? Are they not just as guilty of creating them as the M.R.R? These questions will be considered in the following section.



### 2.3 *The Card Carrying Relativist*

The first two sections of this chapter have sought to establish which features of a given relativism can be justifiably considered worrisome. The purpose of this section will be to argue that those features which fit that description are not of relativisms defended by real world, what Kusch has referred to as, “card carrying” relativists. To recap, section 2.1 suggested that one clear example of an untenable relativism would be a normative relativism that would suggest that conflicting propositions cancel each other out. Section 2.2 then argued that there would be cause for concern if a moral realist relativism were to gain popularity.

This section will argue that these more pernicious forms of relativism are not actually represented by card carrying relativists. Kusch has his own ideas about the meaning of this term<sup>20</sup>, but these will not be a main focus here. Instead, a hypothetical card carrier will be dreamt up. Firstly, based on some of the work done in 2.1 and 2.2, the sort of relativism which our hypothetical card carrier might represent will be considered. Then, it will be determined whether this hypothetical relativist can avoid coherence problems. In other words, whether it is possible to be a relativist in one domain but not another. Finally, by extension of that discussion of potential coherence problems, it will be determined whether the relativist can be allowed to choose when to defend relativism and when to shy away from doing so.

It is fair to say that, up to this point, identifying oneself as a card carrying relativist has not been especially popular. Even those who might be considered prime candidates have worked hard to distance themselves from the label. One such example can be found in the work of Joshua Greene. The first patch of common ground between Greene and the card carrying relativist which will be presented here is the denial of realism. Of course, it is theoretically possible to hold a M.R.R perspective. In practice however, it is one which is seldom, if ever, defended seriously. If M.R.R were to be defended seriously, it would likely cause more than a little controversy. Even some of the more controversial relativist perspectives represented in recent years have perhaps not gone so far as to embrace realism.

To embrace M.R.R would involve both affirming that whatever may be deemed a true proposition, for example, is absolute as well as relative in some sense. The M.R.R would adopt something of an “anything goes” policy, where more than one moral position on a given topic would be right. In other words, two conflicting moral judgements like “slavery is wrong” and

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<sup>20</sup> Kusch lists the likes of Bloor, Field and Herbert as examples of card carrying relativists in his view.

“slavery is right” would both be allowed the space to be moral absolutes. Their truth value would most likely be determined by one of a number of variable factors – cultural context, for example. In this case, that of the moral realist cultural relativist, “slavery is right” would have to be judged an absolute truth, when in the context of pre-civil war American South. Of course, the implications of this theory are problematic, it is likely one which would not appeal to many.

It is surely far more common to consider that slave owners during that period were anything from misguided, to outright evil. Non relativist moral realists have a straightforward means to defend this claim and reject M.R.R. Namely, by pointing to their particular conception of absolute moral truth and demonstrating how M.R.R does not align with that. Quite simply, by establishing that “slavery is wrong” has and always will be the case, regardless of cultural context or any other variable factor whatsoever. Our hypothetical card carrier can be described as a M.I.R and therefore, must set about defending the claim that slave owners were anything from misguided, to outright evil without absolutes; this is not quite so straight forward.

Our hypothetical card carrier, let us refer to him as John, cannot deny that “slavery is right” was a true claim in the very specific context of the law of the land in the pre-civil war American south. However, being a moral irrealist, he can of course deny that this claim, “slavery is right” was ever an absolute truth. He can therefore argue that its “rightness” was weak and destined to be swallowed up by the tide of moral progress. If given the choice between these two options, many would likely favour the former and hold that “slavery is wrong” is an absolute truth. John too would like this to be the case.

Like Joshua Greene, who can arguably be labelled an example of a non-relativist moral irrealist, John longs for the ability to discover moral truths in the way that we have been able to discover the cause of earthquakes. If this were possible, as Greene says, we’d be in good shape to solve the moral problems that occupy so much of our attention; ‘but instead, we’re thrown back on the morass of competing moral values’ (Greene, 2014, p. 188). John’s M.I.R could be seen as the result of Greene’s pessimistic induction that reason by itself doesn’t tell us how to make trade-offs among the competing values of different moral tribes, and it doesn’t tell us which rights we have or how people’s competing rights weigh against one another’ (*ibid.*, p. 185).

Is Joshua Greene therefore an example of a M.I.R? Can his work simply be considered in place of John, our imagined card carrier? Greene himself would deny that he might be considered any sort of relativist; according to him, “the proverbial relativist” simply holds that ‘there are

different tribes with different values, and that's all there is to say' (*ibid.*, p. 290). Well and good, but this criticism does not apply to the card carrying relativist that has been imagined here. John can, as suggested above, judge that certain moral claims are stronger or weaker based on a projection of the course of moral progress. Moral progress, he claims, can be more easily advanced if M.I.R is embraced and 'we've resigned ourselves to working with the morass' (*ibid.*, p. 188).

If this were to be the case, as per Greene, 'the question of moral truth [would lose] its practical importance' (*ibid.*). Far from standing in the way of moral progress, the loss of moral truth's practical importance would perhaps even fast track it. Unattached to one or another conception of absolute moral truth, following Jesse Prinz's conception of moral relativism, we would then be allowed to think about morality as a tool. We would then be able to 'think about what we'd like that tool to do for us' and 'revise morality accordingly' (Prinz, 2011, p. 5)

John has so far been described as a card carrying relativist insofar as he represents M.I.R, but it will now be considered whether he can hold non-relativist positions in other areas and maintain a consistent position. Section 1.2 made reference to Baghramian's DE, which identified conceptual relativism as the idea that 'the world does not present itself to us ready-made or ready-carved, rather we supply different, and at times incompatible, ways of categorising and conceptualizing it' (Baghramian, 2014, p. 3). Although John maintains a relativist stance with respect to morality, he firmly considers himself a conceptual absolutist. His moral relativism is born of the belief that moral truths cannot be discovered in the way that we have been able to discover the cause of earthquakes. On the other hand, his conceptual absolutism is born of the belief that it is very much possible to discover the true cause of earthquakes, for example.

It is not immediately evident how these two positions could be considered incompatible or liable to cause any sort of coherence problems. Something like an earthquake, John would argue, is a very tangible event; those who experience it can be left with no doubt about its effects. Moral propositions are not quite so tangible; however, if some sort of natural disaster, perhaps an earthquake, were to eradicate all traces of human life, one could imagine that morality as we know it would be lost too. There is surely no reason to believe that this would have any sort of effect on earthquakes however, they can hardly be considered intrinsically linked with human existence. Also, moral claims can hardly be considered natural phenomena.

It might be suggested that another species could possibly evolve to discover the moral truths which are upheld so strongly by us humans, but that would be more than a little speculative.

It is then, fair to say, that one can simultaneously be considered a relativist and an absolutist without holding incompatible positions or committing any coherence problems in at least some cases. Of course, if John were to maintain his M.I.R position with respect to one ethical issue and not another, he would be guilty of creating coherence problems. On the whole however, it is possible to be a relativist in one domain and not another. By extension, of course, the card carrying relativist need not defend all versions of relativism. The earlier parts of this chapter have laid out some versions of relativism which few if any are likely to defend. Our hypothetical card carrier John, and any other perspective relativist are well within their rights to reject one or another version of the theory with which they do not identify. Similarly, they need not answer to criticisms to which their relativisms do not apply.

Greene's "proverbial relativist" paints the image of a kind of anti-theorist that seeks to engage in theory only to show that no theory can be done but this charge cannot be levelled at our hypothetical card carrier. If anything, John can be seen as someone seeking a viable way to think about morality and facilitate moral progress in a way that recognises, what Greene refers to as, 'the morass of competing moral values' (Greene, 2014, p. 188) and tries to make sense of it. For this reason, John, as a card carrying relativist is not someone about which we ought to worry; the position he occupies is both an available and attractive one in contemporary metaethical debates.

## Chapter 3: Relativism, Yes! Expressivism, No!

### *Introduction*

Chapter one set out to undermine some of the more general critiques of relativism that have been prevalent throughout the history of western philosophy by shining a light on the diverse perspectives which are encapsulated by the term. However, the anxiety created by these critiques is not so easy to dismiss. The second chapter was therefore dedicated to pushing back against this anxiety, which has persistently surrounded relativisms, by emphasising that some of the more pernicious forms of relativism are not actually supported by real world, “card carrying” relativists – to use Kusch’s term. The third chapter of this discussion will now explore some of the factors that might make becoming a card carrying relativist something of an attractive prospect. The central element of such a relativism, according to the sections that follow, is moral irrealism. It will be shown how a relativist stance can be made available within moral irrealism and why this would be an attractive one to take up compared to other forms of relativisms and moral irrealisms.

3.1 will situate relativism within the context of other forms of moral irrealism<sup>21</sup>, primarily expressivism, a noncognitivist-like theory advanced by Terry Horgan & Mark Timmons. An overview of these two forms of moral irrealism will be presented by highlighting some of the arguments in Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on ethics*; subsequently showing that, although they may be construed as such, Wittgenstein’s arguments are not examples of relativism or expressivism. It will then be argued that this divergence, between this triad of moral irrealist theories<sup>22</sup>, is the result of a difference of approach with respect to descriptivism; that relativism is a descriptivist theory and expressivism is a nondescriptivist one.

3.2 will also utilise Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics*, in this case, as an example of an approach which holds moral statements to be unique from other sorts of statements. It will then be argued that this, if it were the case, would be an undesirable outcome; one which the sort of relativism defended by this discussion will deny. Work done in 3.1 to demonstrate that a relativist approach can allow for moral judgements to have descriptive ‘way-the-world-might-be content’ (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75), will allow the claim that moral judgments are not

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<sup>21</sup> Of course, as the second chapter of this discussion has sought to demonstrate, relativism does not always lead to moral irrealism. However, it is a position which is most often occupied by moral relativists and therefore, moral relativism can usually be thought of as a form of moral irrealism – and least with respect to the typical “card carrying” relativist laid out in 2.3.

<sup>22</sup> The version of relativism advocated for in this discussion, the expressivism of Horgan & Timmons and the particular moral irrealism of Wittgenstein in his *Lecture on Ethics*.

unique to be made. That is, because they can be considered truth apt relative to some set of standards like any sort of judgement that may be made.

Finally, 3.3 will consider whether the relativist can allow that moral judgements have any sort of truth value. Of course, 3.2 will have already established that the relativist can consider moral judgements to be truth apt; true or false relative to some set of standards. Therefore, more time will be spent considering what this might look like and whether or not a relativistic conception of truth value would be a meaningful one.

### 3.1 An Irrealist Moral Relativism Contextualised

One way of understanding relativism which was not emphasized in earlier parts of this discussion is as an available position in contemporary metaethics. As suggested in chapter two, there are ways of thinking about relativism that are more or less worrying than others. For example, we may understandably be worried about a realist moral relativism; such a theory would share with moral absolutism the idea that there are independent moral truths. A realist moral relativism would, of course, stipulate that there are more than one set of these truths, and they are determined by cultural context or some other variable factor. If it is not already clear why such a theory would be a cause for concern, one need only imagine that it would most likely determine that slave ownership was right in the context of the pre-civil war American South. Once again, it is hard to imagine that anyone would abide a theory with as thorny an implication as this. These arguments have already been made in the second chapter of this discussion, there it was argued that the M.I.R can avoid said implications, due to the fact that they can reject absolute truth and make projections about the direction of moral progress.

This section will focus on relativism, understood as one of a number of available approaches to metaethical theories. One other available approach is moral irrealism. Once again, it will be argued here that moral irrealism can be combined with relativism and that there are advantages to doing so; however, it should be noted that moral irrealism is not inherently relativistic. Horgan & Timmons succinctly described moral irrealism as the idea that ‘there are no moral properties or relations to which moral terms... might be used to refer and, relatedly, there are no moral facts that moral judgements might describe or report’ (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75). It must be noted, their project here was an anti-relativist one; this fact leads nicely to the suggestion that moral irrealism is implicit in a number of metaethical perspectives other than relativism. The perspective defended by Horgan & Timmons is a version of what they call, expressivism.

Expressivism is, in their own words, ‘a metaethical view according to which... a typical moral judgment functions to express some psychological state other than a descriptive belief’ (*ibid.*, p. 73). This is, again by their own admission, essentially the same as another metaethical view known as noncognitivism; according to Horgan & Timmons, noncognitivism is included in, but not limited by their expressivism, but these finer details are not pressing for now. Something should first be said about noncognitivism itself.

Broadly speaking, moral noncognitivism suggests that we do not know what it is that we are saying when we try to make moral statements, for example. The moral noncognitivist holds that moral statements are not descriptive, that they do not represent or describe verifiable facts about the world. Berit Brogaard can be used to support this view, in her words ‘noncognitivism holds that moral statements do not express beliefs or other truth-apt mental states’ (Brogaard, 2012, p. 548). One form of this theory identified by her is prescriptivism; to use her words again, prescriptivism can be traced back to Rudolf Carnap, the prescriptivist ‘holds that moral statements are commands’ (*ibid.*). Another form of noncognitivism identified by Brogaard is expressivism – ‘or emotivism, which holds that moral statements express desires, emotions, or other affective states’ (*ibid.*). This version of noncognitivism was referred to briefly in 2.2; there referred to as a “boo-hurrah” theory of morality.

There are surely many diverse versions of noncognitivism; seeing that this discussion has set out to focus on relativism in particular, not too much time will be spent elaborating their finer details. The purpose of drawing attention to noncognitivism here is simply to give a wider context to the metaethical perspective of a contemporary card-carrying relativist. It is not simply a matter of relativism vs absolutism in metaethical debates, there are many diverse perspectives with their own horse in this race. One which has already been mentioned is Horgan & Timmons’ expressivism.<sup>23</sup> All that said, some time will be spent considering this approach as well as moral noncognitivism in a broader sense.

In order to better understand an irrealist approach to moral thought, it may be helpful to lay out what is, arguably, an archetypal example of it. Namely, one version of the early Wittgenstein; that of the Lecture on Ethics. In this short text he...

- A. distinguishes between, what he calls, judgements of absolute value and judgements of relative value.
- B. claims that judgements of absolute value are not reducible to, or do not correspond to, facts about the world.
- C. suggests that moral statements are judgements of absolute value and are therefore meaningless.

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<sup>23</sup> For the sake of simplicity, the term “expressivism” will be used from this point forward. Its use here will be interchangeable with the term “noncognitivism” and so, it may refer either to Horgan & Timmons’ own particular brand or, more generally, a more traditional understanding of the latter term.



These sentiments, it is fair to say, have a distinctly irrealist flavour. Judgements of absolute value can be thought of as non-relativised truth claims; for example, propositions which are independent and non-variable. They are the bread and butter, so to speak, of the moral realist and Wittgenstein's declaration that they are meaningless can be seen as a strong expression of moral irrealism.

This claim is perhaps best supported by the "world book" argument Wittgenstein puts forward in the lecture. The argument is as follows...

*'Suppose one of you were an omniscient person and therefore knew all the movements of all the bodies in the world dead or alive and that he also knew all the states of mind of all human beings that ever lived, and suppose this man wrote all he knew in a big book would contain the whole description of the world; and what I want to say is, that this book would contain nothing that we could call an ethical judgement or anything that would logically imply such a judgement' (Wittgenstein, 2014, p. 2)*

This imaginary book to which Wittgenstein refers is, in Horgan & Timmons' terminology, a kind of compilation of 'way-the-world-might-be content' (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75). An ethical judgement or anything that would imply such a judgement would be, continuing with Horgan & Timmons' terminology, in some other book; a compilation of 'way-the-world-ought-to-be content' (*ibid.*). One can imagine that Wittgenstein would see the latter as a book of nonsense and therefore, in Wittgenstein's framework, there would be no reason, in the strong sense, to avoid sticking knives into each other or any action which we generally consider ought to be avoided.

At a surface level, legal stabbings aside, Wittgenstein's argument is a typically expressivist one which, most likely, would be supported by Horgan & Timmons. Some of their arguments are directly comparable with those of Wittgenstein. They have, for example, suggested that 'there are no moral properties or relations to which moral terms (and the concepts they express) might be used to refer and, relatedly, there are no moral facts that moral judgments might describe or report' (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75). New readers of the *Lecture* would not likely find anything out of place if this excerpt was pasted into that text without their knowing. What then, is the difference between Wittgenstein and Horgan & Timmons here? Is it simply that Wittgenstein's position is expressivism which also tends towards some kind of relativism? Some of the arguments that have been and will be made here can allow us to say no, that the M.I.R can relativise what Wittgenstein refers to as judgements of absolute value without

discarding them completely, so that we may continue to live in a world where sticking knives in each other is illegal.

Although it will be argued that the Wittgenstein of the *Lecture on Ethics* is not a “card carrying relativist” in the mould created by this discussion, traces of relativism can be found outside of his conception of judgements of absolute value. Specifically, in his treatment of the term “good”. More will be said about this in the pages that follow but first, the two distinct uses of the term identified in the Lecture will need to be established. Just as he did in the case of value judgements, Wittgenstein distinguishes between the term “good” used in an absolute sense and “good” in a relative sense. If, for instance, one were to declare that Ethics, generally speaking, is an enquiry into what is good, one could just as easily say that ‘Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or... into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living’ (Wittgenstein, 2014, p. 1). Readers will likely anticipate then, that “good” here is used in an absolute sense. On the other hand, ‘the word good in the relative sense simply means coming up to a certain predetermined standard’ (*ibid.*). Translating this to the terminology used in the first chapter of this discussion, using Haack’s scheme demonstrated in Kusch & Baghrarian’s tables, it might be said that Wittgenstein’s x, his object of relativisation, here is “good” and his y, his domain of relativisation, is “coming up to a predetermined standard”. This represents a relativistic conception of moral irrationalism nicely.

Now that an overview of the expressivist approach and the relativist approach have been detailed, this section is left with the task of answering the question: what are the key differences between the relativist perspective and that of expressivism? First, consider one way in which they are likely to be the same. Both card carrying relativists and expressivists would want to distance their approaches from that of Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics* for at least one key reason. He takes the claim that judgements of absolute value are not reducible to, or do not correspond to, facts about the world and uses it to draw the conclusion that moral statements are judgements of absolute value and are therefore meaningless. Meaningless is used in a strong sense here, it might be argued that a moral irrationalism would not take moral judgements to be meaningless and Wittgenstein is therefore not any sort of moral irrationalist in the first place. This would be a fair criticism, perhaps his metaethical perspective could therefore be thought of as a kind of hard-line descriptivism. He has specific criteria which a statement must meet in order to be verified. If this criterion is not met and a given statement is therefore not deemed to be descriptive, it is simply unverifiable, in other words, meaningless.

Of course, there are means by which both the relativist and the expressivist may deny this. The relativist can do so without too much manoeuvring. There is nothing to say that she cannot allow that moral statements are in fact reducible to, or correspond to, facts about the world. The *Lecture* defines the use of “good” in a relative sense by the following example, ‘If... I say that this is a good chair this means that the chair serves a certain predetermined purpose and the word good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon’ (*ibid.*). Wittgenstein does not do enough to prove that moral statements cannot follow these same principles. The relativist can simply say that the claim “not sticking knives in each other is good” can be reduced to something like “the claim that not sticking knives in each other is good serves a certain predetermined purpose, that I might be able to go for a walk without getting stabbed for example, and good here has only meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon.

The relativist can, for example, say that  $z$  is a good deed; this would mean that the deed fulfils a certain predetermined purpose, say to alleviate suffering, and the word good here would only have meaning so far as this purpose has been previously fixed upon. This predetermined purpose could be culturally contingent, historically contingent or transient in any other way whatsoever. Therefore, the relativist can deem moral statements to be descriptive, verifiable and so on. They would only need to stipulate that their truth value is contingent upon some outside factor; say, the near universal desire to avoid being stabbed. Similarly, it has been argued that the expressivist can say no; moral statements are not unverifiable but are rather differently verifiable compared to other sorts of statements.

Now that some similarities between these two metaethical perspectives have been established. Wittgenstein’s *Lecture* may be used again to demonstrate key differences between expressivism and relativism. Some typical relativist and expressivist arguments have been identified in that text but, as it has been argued, Wittgenstein’s hard-line descriptivism will likely alienate many. The term descriptivism here is used to describe the staunch commitment to statements which have descriptive intentional content on display in the *Lecture*; judgements of relative value, to use the language from that text. Of course, the metaethical perspective could also be conceived of as an ethical nondescriptivism, given his belief that moral statements do not have descriptive intentional content.

With this, Horgan and Timmons would agree. However, to repeat, they would not share the sentiment that moral statements are totally meaningless. Their approach is a more moderate,

carefully worded version of a somewhat similar line of argument; they contend that moral statements express psychological states rather than verifiable facts. In their own words, ‘moral judgments express psychological states whose primary role is not representational and hence whose intentional contents are not descriptive, way-the-world-might-be contents’ (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75). These psychological states to which they refer are ‘not primarily representational’ and are what they call ‘a certain kind of evaluative action-guiding state’ (*ibid.*). Establishing what exactly they mean by this will be outside the scope of this discussion. It will be enough to say that expressivism is a nondescriptivism.

In contrast, at least some forms of moral relativism can certainly be considered descriptivist theories. Relativism is, generally speaking, a truth-positive theory, which seeks not to undermine truth value but to widen its scope. The relativist can speak about moral judgements in terms of descriptive, way-the-world-might-be contents because they can conceive of them as true relative to some set of standards. Even nondescriptivists like Horgan & Timmons, and possibly even the Wittgenstein of the Lecture on Ethics, accept that moral judgements can be ‘properly evaluated as “true” ... or “correct” ... relative to some set of standards’ (*ibid.*, p. 84). This leads nicely to the topic of the next section. Now that a map of relativism within the wider metathetical landscape has been drawn, further questions may be considered.

### 3.2 Are Moral Statements Unique?

This section will take a similar approach to 3.1, in that the Lecture will be used as a kind of reference point to which moral relativism can be compared. Readers will likely anticipate how some of the arguments made in the *Lecture on Ethics* can be used here to represent a perspective which sees moral statements as unique. That is, unique in the sense that they are not verifiable. Readers may also anticipate that there would be some cause for concern if it were the case that moral statements were totally meaningless, as Wittgenstein suggests. It will be argued here that the moral relativist need not accept this claim. She may firmly deny that moral statements are unique in the manner implied by the Lecture, or any other manner whatsoever. This would be vital to any defence of moral relativism for obvious reasons; we all have more than a little interest in the preservation of at least some moral statements. There would, for example, be few who would be without concern if it were widely accepted that “murder is wrong” is an unverifiable proposition.

The first section of this chapter distilled the main arguments made by Wittgenstein in the lecture to A, B, and C. Before going on to criticise their implications, it may be necessary to elaborate them a little further. Judgements of relative value, for Wittgenstein, are essentially the way-the-world-might-be content that is compiled by his imaginary “world book”. In other words, judgements which are reducible to, or correspond to, facts about the world. Consider another example offered by Wittgenstein, he suggests that a statement like “she is a good pianist” is reducible to, or corresponds to, the fact that she can ‘play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity’ (Wittgenstein, 2014, p. 1). On the other hand, the statement “she is a good person” cannot be stripped back to such a tangible form. To be a good person is to be intrinsically good, rather than good at something. “She is a good person” is, of course, a moral claim, which, according to Wittgenstein is a meaningless one.

This may seem to be somewhat radical – after all, it seems perfectly clear to us what we mean when we say that someone is a good person. Usually, that possessing certain traits which we deem to be desirable or that they do not possess certain traits which we deem to be undesirable. There is, most likely, some sort of minimum level of adherence to these ideas of ours which must be reached in order for us to make this judgement. I might say that anyone who is a good person is someone who is kind, charitable, modest, helpful etc. So then, when I say that so and so is a good person, I can be seen to be making a judgement of relative value because my

proposition can simply be reduced to statements of fact. That they are charitable, modest, helpful etc.

Wittgenstein's assessment of this statement could be considered something of an oversimplification. That she can 'play pieces of a certain degree of difficulty with a certain degree of dexterity' is not the only fact which might move us to make the statement "she is a good pianist". We might, for example, be moved by the emotions which a pianist stirs in us with her playing. We might also be taken with a pianist's appreciation of the space between notes, at her ability to know when and when not to play. There are a wide variety of factors which might motivate us to arrive at the judgement "she is a good pianist"; if the only measure of success in the art of piano playing was technical ability, there would certainly be a different roster of the most popular pianists. It may be that there is no one statement to which "she is a good person" might be reduced but surely the same can be said of "she is a good pianist".

Wittgenstein seems to use the idea that there is no one fact to which the statement "she is a good person" may be reduced to support the idea that it is not a judgement of relative value unlike other sorts of judgement. However, as we have seen, "she is a good pianist" is a statement which can be reduced to any number of different facts. As mentioned above, when we judge someone to be a good person, we may be doing so because we have seen them to be charitable, modest, helpful etc. As in the case of the statement "she is a good pianist", the variety of facts to which this statement may be reduced should do nothing to undermine its validity.

At this point, it may be worth noting that Wittgenstein thought about ethics in a much broader sense than merely the practice of formulating moral judgements like those just discussed. He considered ethics 'in a wider sense, in a sense in fact which, amongst other things, includes... the most essential part of what is generally called 'Aesthetics' (*ibid.*). In the lecture, he writes...

*'Instead of saying "Ethics is the enquiry into what is good" I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life or into what makes life worth living or into the right way of living' (ibid., p. 5).*

With that said, it may be misleading to suggest that Wittgenstein considered moral judgements to be totally unique. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that he considered any sort of judgement pertaining to "the good" to be unique. That is, any sort of moral or aesthetic

judgement. This should not do much to stand in the way of what this section will seek to convey.

So then, Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics* considers moral, and indeed aesthetic, judgements to be uniquely unverifiable. As mentioned briefly in 3.1, expressivists such as Horgan & Timmons would suggest that moral statements are not unverifiable but are rather, differently verifiable compared to other sorts of statements. Both of these metaethical perspectives can be considered as varying degrees of nondescriptivism. Relativism then might need only to be established firmly as a form of descriptivism in order to deny that moral statements are unique. Efforts have been made to achieve this in 3.1, there, it was suggested that the relativist can speak about moral judgements in terms of descriptive, 'way-the-world-might-be' (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75) contents because they can conceive of them simply as true relative to some set of standards. Once again, it was argued that the moral statements like "not sticking knives in each other is good" can function in the same way as statements, what Wittgenstein refers to as judgements of relative value, like "this is a good chair". In this sense, the M.I.R can refer to moral statements as truth apt.

Similarly, Horgan & Timmons concede that even if their perspective – that 'moral judgements are properly construed as nondescriptive' – were assumed to be the case, moral judgements can 'nevertheless be properly evaluated as "true" (using this term very broadly) or "correct" (if one would rather reserve "truth" talk for descriptive judgments) relative to some set of standards' (ibid., p. 84). If one were to travel back in time and interview the Wittgenstein of *the Lecture on Ethics*, one may find that even he would concede this point. He would hardly deny that that a moral judgement such as "murder is wrong" can be properly evaluated as true – or, at least, correct – relative to a set of standards. It would, for example, be difficult to deny that this judgement is true in contemporary democracies where the law of the land represents a very tangible means by which it may be verified that "murder is wrong" is a true judgement; more on this will follow in 3.3.<sup>24</sup>

So then, following this system, the relativist can contend that moral statements are not unique in the manner proposed by the *Lecture*, contemporary expressivists or any other manner

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<sup>24</sup> It is not the intention here to equate what is moral with what is legal, rather to imply that the law of a given land can sometimes be a useful insight to the ethical convictions of its inhabitants. Of course, this will not always be an accurate metric. Imagine, for a moment, a more authoritarian society where citizens do not have much say in the laws enacted by their government. There, the law of the land would have little to do with what is generally considered to be right and/or wrong. Therefore, there is not always a correlation between that which is moral and that which is legal.

whatsoever. Relativists can, returning to Wittgenstein's example of the pianist, contend that the claim "she is a good person" functions in the same way that "she is a good pianist" does. Each express truth claims which can either be verified or rejected on the basis of their adherence to some set of standards, "She is a good person" has intentional contents which are primarily descriptive; these intentional contents are just as concrete as those of a statement like "she is a good pianist".

The relativist can, therefore, strongly argue that – if a judgement that fits the description of Wittgenstein's absolute value exists, moral judgements need not be counted as one of them. They are just as verifiable, truth apt etc. as any other judgement of relative value which we may be moved to make.



### *3.3 Does Relativism Preclude Truth Value?*

This chapter has thus far considered some features of moral relativism in relation to other metaethical theories and argued that it need not align itself with one fundamental element of metaethical noncognitivist or expressivist theories. That is, that moral statements are fundamentally different to other sorts of statements. This has laid the foundations for the question posed by this section: does moral relativism, due to the fact that it judges moral statements to only ever be judgements of relative value, preclude truth value?

As demonstrated in 3.2, moral relativism labels moral statements “true” relative to some set of standards, but is this a robust conception of truth value? 3.2 also suggested that moral statements can, in fact, be considered judgements of relative value. It was argued that “she is a good person” functions in the same way as “she is a good pianist”, both are reducible to any number of facts, depending on the perspective of the speaker or some framework to which the speaker is referring. Therefore, we may agree that she is a good pianist, or indeed a good person, but disagree about why this is the case

What would be the outcome if we were to consider a judgement with which hardly anyone would be likely to disagree; for example, “murder is wrong”. There is perhaps no better example of an absolutist statement. The following example demonstrates how and why murder is wrong by definition. Consider for a moment an imaginary reader, we will call her Jane. Being a Christian, Jane if anyone would be an absolutist when it comes to morality. She holds the ten commandments of her religion in high regard; she believes that one should treat their neighbour as they would like to be treated themselves. These bases provide her with firm ground on which she may draw the conclusion that stealing is wrong.

That said, she is also realistic about the complexity of moral dilemmas with which many of us are regularly faced. She knows, for example, that the choice between stealing food and going hungry is one such dilemma and that sometimes, the need to survive must take precedent. Jane can therefore be convinced that her claim is not entirely absolute; that there are scenarios in which stealing may be the right thing to do. She realises that this stands out as an inconsistency in her position but hopes at the very least that she herself will never be forced to act in contradiction to her beliefs. To borrow Wittgenstein’s terminology, “stealing is wrong” is therefore a judgement of relative value. It is one which can be distilled down to other more specific judgements. For example, stealing produces such and such bad consequences, discouraging the act would produce such and such good consequences and so on.

Similarly, even if nowhere else, Jane may find in the tenets of her religion, the ground on which to draw the conclusion that killing is wrong. “Thou shalt not kill” is well and good, but her moral convictions are just as likely to become more lenient if she is left with no choice but to kill an aggressor in order to defend herself or her loved ones. Therefore, using Wittgenstein’s phrasing again, “killing is wrong” is perhaps another judgement of relative rather than absolute value for her. As in the case of stealing, it is one which can be distilled into other judgements. For example, stealing produces such and such bad consequences, discouraging the act would be in the interest of everyone.

So then, Jane can be convinced there are cases in which it may not be wrong to steal or kill; that stealing or killing may even be the right thing to do in very specific circumstances, despite the fact that they are explicitly prohibited by the commandments of her faith. She can accept that these moral prescriptions are not absolute, that defying them in certain circumstances is in fact permissible and that doing so would not make her any less of a Christian. Does this mean that Jane is a relativist?

Well and good you might say, but the previous page set out to tackle the statement “murder is wrong”. The notion that killing in self-defence may be permissible will have no effect on this proposition; if one were to kill in self-defence, one would not be committing murder. Murder is killing with an asterisk and “murder is wrong” is a judgement of absolute value if ever there was one. If this can be properly assumed, the *Lecture* would therefore deem it to be meaningless. This is not a desirable conclusion at which to arrive for obvious reasons, each and every one of us has a vested interest in “murder is wrong” being a truth apt statement. The question therefore remains, can the moral relativist hold these sorts of statements to be truth apt?

In order to do this, it will need to be shown how it may be that the statement “murder is wrong” can be conceived as a judgement of relative value. This may seem to be a difficult task but there is certainly a means by which it may be achieved. “Murder is wrong” might be a judgement of absolute value but it is perhaps not the most “live” topic of debate when it comes to the ways in which the concept of murder operates within our societies. We are all likely to agree that murder is wrong, but it is not quite so easy to reach agreement about what constitutes murder. The following pages will aim to demonstrate that although “murder is wrong” may be a judgement of absolute value, “x constitutes murder” is one of relative value. Also, that the latter is the more “live” topic of debate today.

Let us reconsider the example of Jane for a moment. Thus far, we have been able to convince her that there are cases where killing may be the right thing to do. Despite her religious convictions, she can be convinced that “thou shalt not kill” may take a back seat if her loved ones were to come under threat, for example. However, despite this concession, we go on to find that there is absolutely no scenario in which she could possibly be convinced that abortion may be the right thing to do. She experiences a kind of moral outrage when confronted with the issue and is resolute in her belief that the practice is wrong always and everywhere. Why might this be the case? There are sure to be any number of reasons that might be summoned but, for the purposes of this discussion, let us make the following assumption. Jane’s strong reaction to abortion, regardless of what may have first motivated it, can be attributed to the fact that she believes abortion to be a form of murder.

It will not be necessary to delve too deeply into debates surrounding reproductive rights here. That said, when Jane gets involved in those discussions, she would be likely to express her view through various slogans and arguments which would be ultimately based on the claim “abortion constitutes murder”. This can be considered a judgement of relative value simply because it is undoubtedly truth apt, hardly anyone would not have something to say about its truth or falsity. If it were a judgement of absolute value, following the approach taken in this discussion, it could neither be deemed true nor false. Both sides of the debates mentioned above would surely hold that it is truth apt, seeing as both sides wish to impress upon us that A.C.M is either true or false.<sup>25</sup> Of course, the claim “murder is wrong” is implied by the proposition A.C.M, but this does seem to undermine the potential for “abortion constitutes murder” to be judged true or false. An interesting problem has been brought up here, is it therefore the case the case that an allegedly meaningless judgement – “murder is wrong” – is presupposed by a meaningful one – “abortion constitutes murder”?

To be clear, “meaningless” and “meaningful” are used in very specific senses above. The first judgement is described as meaningless because it is a judgement of absolute value and is, as per Wittgenstein’s *Lecture*, not truth-apt. Similarly, the second judgement is described as meaningful because it is a judgement of relative value and is therefore truth-apt. Assuming these claims are anything but uncontroversial and more work will therefore need to be done to bolster them. Seeing as it is perhaps the lesser of the two tasks, the latter claim will be defended here first. Of course, when this section has referred to A.C.M as a meaningful claim; this is not

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<sup>25</sup> A.C.M will be used in place of “abortion constitutes murder” from this point forward.

placing any positive truth value on the claim itself. What it is doing is identifying in it the capacity to be reducible to facts which can then be judged true or false.

A.C.M can be reduced to statements like “abortion ends life”, “life is valuable”, “ending life should be avoided”, “x reasons are not sufficient to justify ending life”, “aborting a pregnancy for x reasons should therefore be unlawful”. These are all factual statements, that is, they are all statements which are concerned with what actually is the case. That is not to say that they are true of course; categorising them as such simply allows them to be verified or rejected. The ability to do this makes them inherently truth-apt. This, in turn, allows us to consider them to be judgements of relative value. Despite what Jane might say, there are undoubtedly grounds on which they may be rejected. If they were judgements of absolute value, this would not be the case.

What then about the claim M.I.W?<sup>26</sup> It was suggested above that this is an example of a meaningless statement. Once again, meaningless here is used in a very specific sense. That is, in the sense that it is a claim which cannot be reduced to statements of fact about the world. It may be a claim which is vital to the preservation of our species, we all have very good reason to ensure M.I.W is a claim which continues to be considered meaningful. Nevertheless, we can imagine how it may not be the case; would murder even exist if we were not here to talk about it? Is there such a concept in the animal kingdom? Murder is something of a metaphysical concept in this sense, it is not the only way to think about it, however. There is perhaps a way in which this seemingly archetypal judgement of absolute value could be relativised. Consider for a moment some ways in which M.I.W might be reduced to statements of fact.

Perhaps the concept of murder might be included in Wittgenstein’s “world book” if we were to reduce it to a statement like “murder is unlawful killing”. Surely the various laws of the land in existence today constitute facts; if one were to get on a bus right now, they would know that killing the bus driver would land them in jail just as well as they would know that the bus has wheels. Still, one can accept these as true without conceding that they will be so always and everywhere. One can imagine a time where buses no longer have wheels or where the rule of law has broken down such that one would not be convicted of murder if one were to kill the driver. This may seem to be nothing more than a farfetched notion, let us reconsider Jane for a moment.

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<sup>26</sup> M.I.W will henceforth be used in place of “murder is wrong”.

Being a citizen of a W.E.I.R.D country, she has had to cope with the fact that her government and, most likely, the majority of her fellow citizens reject her claim that A.C.M. She remembers a time when her claim was the law of the land and ultimately, she hopes that may be the case once again. That is to say, if we are to accept that murder = unlawful killing, Jane's perspective on this issue shows us that someone who seemingly cannot be convinced that her belief is anything but absolute is aware of the fact that it is in some way transient. Have we therefore been able to further Jane's relativism? No, it might be argued, her belief that A.C.M is not affected by the law of the land and instead draws its absolute truth value from religious sources, for example. But, if this were the case, why would she hope that A.C.M might be written into law again? She is, in her campaigning, participating in the system which conceives of murder simply as unlawful killing.

If modern W.E.I.R.D countries can be considered to be on the right path in their assumption that murder is simply unlawful killing, rather than any sort of metaphysical concept, this may allow for a way in which the moral relativist can hold that M.I.W might be a true statement. Following the parameters laid out by 3.2, it may be suggested that the set of standards to which the claim M.I.W is relative would be the law of the land. Murder need not be considered any sort of metaphysical concept if it is simply thought of as killing which is prohibited by law. Following this, M.I.W can therefore be properly referred to as true if the set of parameters to which that claim is relative is taken to be the law of the land.

Of course, laws are liable to change; therefore, "x constitutes murder can only ever be a judgement of relative value". Murder is, when thought of in this sense, a distinctly situated concept; the example of abortion shows us that what constitutes murder may not always be the case. X.C.M<sup>27</sup> will therefore always be a claim that can be properly understood as culturally contingent, historically contingent or relative in any other way whatsoever. The claim M.I.W will therefore always be reducible to one key contingent set of parameters, the law of the land. This should constitute a means by which M.I.W can be included in Wittgenstein's "world book". If this were not the case, if X.C.M and M.I.W were judgements of absolute value with way-the-world-ought-to-be content, moral progress would be difficult, if not impossible.

Following the example laid out by this section – it would have been difficult, if not impossible, for reproductive rights to have advanced to this point in W.E.I.R.D countries. This is perhaps the key factor which makes becoming a card carrying relativist an attractive prospect. If realism

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<sup>27</sup> "X constitutes murder" will be abbreviated to X.C.M from this point forward.

can be seen to stand in the way of moral progress, non-relativist irrealism can be seen to go too far to undermine the moral statements we can reasonably make. Whether they might be deemed unverifiable in the manner put forward by Wittgenstein's *Lecture* or differently viable in the manner put forward by Horgan & Timmons, both systems see moral statements as nondescriptive claims. This section has argued that irrealism offers the most solid foundations on which moral statements can be built and that M.I.R offers the most robust truth value which may be attributed to them.

## Conclusion

Proponents of an absolutist conception of moral truth might contend that not enough has been done here to debunk their perspective. How is it, they might say, that moral progress has been made up to this point – whilst relativism has remained a minority viewpoint? This would be a fair criticism but pitting the relativist perspective against that of the absolutist was not the goal of this discussion. The overarching goal of this project has been to identify a means by which moral statements can be deemed truth apt contra absolutism. One key aim of this project has been to allow readers to come away with the impression that relativism is an available position within moral irrealism.

The arguments made here have also allowed readers to come away with the impression that moral irrealist relativism is a viable position to take up in contemporary metaethical debates. Also, that becoming a card carrying relativist in the mould put forward here may even be an attractive prospect. At the very least, readers will have come away with a nuanced understanding of the many diverse forms of relativism that exist today; as well as a healthy scepticism of attempts to dismiss relativist perspectives in general or cast the relativist as a kind of pantomime villain. This should plant the seed for further development of some versions of relativism – if readers are not won over by that advanced here – being more widely regarded as viable stances in contemporary Western philosophy.

The particular brand of relativism defended by the latter parts of this project does still have the potential for further development. Future research into M.I.R could be helped by investigating the criticisms of non-relativist moral irrealists like Horgan & Timmons more closely. A significant portion of the research carried out here was dedicated to the groundwork necessary for defending a relativism and, more specifically, suggesting that becoming a card carrying relativist might be an attractive prospect. As stated in the earlier sections of this project, significant confusion and controversy has consistently plagued relativism but, of course, not all anti-relativists are quite so unnuanced as some of those referenced here.

The M.I.R position could be strengthened by considering some of the more sophisticated anti-relativist perspectives – once again, like the expressivism of Horgan & Timmons – in more detail. It could, for example, be investigated whether M.I.R might be properly thought of as an available position within descriptivism. This would provide a clear avenue in which the moral irrealist relativist could distinguish themselves from other, non-relativist moral irrealists. The goal of the latter parts of this project and thereby, the overarching goal of this project,

could perhaps have been better achieved if the moral irrealist relativist could have been more clearly shown to make available the idea that moral statements can describe ‘way-the-world-might-be content’ (Horgan & Timmons, 2006, p. 75).

All that said, one key success of this project has been to show that the relativist can hold moral statements to be, referring back to Wittgenstein’s terminology, judgements of relative value. It has here been successfully shown that the relativist can translate statements which, at first, appear to be judgements of absolute value into more manageable statements. For example, “abortion is murder” = “x constitutes murder”; x = abortion. In this manner, moral statements can more straight forwardly be considered truth apt and can subsequently be judged true or false.

The stakes are high here; moral realism ought to be avoided. If the moral realist is right and moral statements refer to objective features about the world, then the obstacles in the way of moral progress are more concrete. Moral irrealism, of course, provides a clear solution to this problem; but not just any moral irrealism ought to be accepted. More extreme versions, like that of Wittgenstein’s *Lecture on Ethics* would have us do away with moral statements altogether – this would be a mistake. Moral statements allow us to promote desirable behaviours and discourage harmful ones. As Prinz argued when considering the idea of moral progress in a relativist world, ‘moral values do not become more true, but they can become better by other criteria... some sets of values are more conducive to social stability’ (Prinz, 2011, p. 5)

Is a desire to reach and maintain social stability not at the heart of all sensible ethical debates? Surely, we are not in search of “the good” simply for the sake of it? Free from any attachments to the one set of values or another, we might be able to hone our ideas of right and wrong to better promote social stability – to promote the desirable and denounce the harmful. There is perhaps no better reason to support M.I.R, to become a card carrier. Prinz goes on, ‘the discovery that relativism is true can help each of us individually by revealing that our values are mutable and parochial... these realisations make us more tolerant and more flexible’ (*ibid.*). Perhaps then, we might be able to cut the brakes on moral progress and make ethical discussions more like collaborations than debates.



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