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RAGNAR FRANCÉN

METAETHICAL RELATIVISM

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Against the  
Single Analysis  
Assumption

Ragnar  
Francén



## Metaethical Relativism



Acta Philosophica Gothoburgensia 24

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## Against the Single Analysis Assumption

Ragnar Francén



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# Chapter 1

## Relativizing the Truth of Moral Judgements

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

This book investigates the plausibility of relativism in metaethics. In the end I will suggest that moral discourse is relativistic in a previously unappreciated way. But the discussion leading up to this conclusion starts in more common forms of moral relativism.

The more common forms of relativism are usually defended on two grounds. The first is the observation that, when it comes to questions about what we are morally allowed or not allowed to do, people just don't seem to be able to agree. This is true of people situated in different societies with different cultures, but also of people within the same society and with similar social backgrounds. Relativists have argued that the nature of moral disagreement gives us reason to doubt that moral statements and thoughts have the same content regardless of who makes and has them. If different people actually spoke and thought about the same thing, couldn't we expect their moral views to converge, at least to a larger extent than they do? On the other hand, if, perhaps contrary to first appearance, statements and beliefs about, say, the moral wrongness of acts are about different things when made and had by different people, it is quite natural that different people reach different conclusions about which actions are wrong. Roughly, then, the view that such considerations have been taken to support is that moral judgements made by

different people have different content depending on their different moralities.

The second aspect of moral practice sometimes adduced in support of this form of moral relativism is the connection between moral judgements and motivation. Thinking that an action is right normally makes us more inclined to do it and when we find an act morally wrong we are normally to some extent discouraged to do it. This is often thought to be hard to explain on theories according to which moral judgements are beliefs about objective facts. Such beliefs, it is thought, cannot suffice to motivate us. But suppose that what someone's moral judgements are about, depends on what she likes and dislikes, in such a way that her moral judgements are in line with her likings and dislikings. (We can still think of this view as saying that the content of moral judgements depends on people's *moralities*. Which morality a person has, then, is determined by her likings and dislikings.) If this is so it is not at all surprising that I'm inclined to avoid doing what I think is wrong – these actions are, after all, actions that I dislike.

I have described what we might call individualistic forms of moral relativism. According to these the content of a moral judgement depends on the individual speaker's own morality. Such views can be contrasted with social or cultural forms of relativism. According to these forms, when we make moral judgements, the content depends on the morality of our culture or society. The focus in this book is almost exclusively on individualistic forms. Partly, this is a matter of choice and delimitation of subject: I want to talk about the kind of relativism that seeks support in arguments from motivation and diversity of moral views. The connection that holds between moral judgements and motivation holds between the individual agent's moral views and what she is motivated to do. Similarly, the diversity between different people's moral views exists between people in different societies but also between people within the same society or culture. Partly, I focus on individualistic forms of relativism because I think that often what looks like a social version of relativism, really isn't. There is sometimes a confusion between the idea that an individual's moral judgements are relative to the morality of his culture, and the (very plausible) idea that an individual's morality (to which his judgements are relative) is affected by the values and morality (or moralities) in the culture where he lives.

Individualistic forms of relativism imply that the truth-value of any specific moral sentence (whether the sentence is true or false) is relative in the sense that it can vary depending on who utters it or believes it (or,

according to certain variants, depending on who assesses the sentence). This is the claim that binds together the forms of relativism discussed in this book, their common core. The discussion in this book thus centres around views according to which moral sentences are true or false, not absolutely, but *as spoken or assessed by someone*. I will use the expression ‘moral truth-value relativism’ as a generic term to denote these views. The main question of this book is whether any form of moral truth-value relativism is correct or plausible.

Moral truth-value relativism is a position in metaethics. While enquiries in *normative* ethics set out to examine and answer normative moral questions – such as, “Is female circumcision morally wrong?” – *metaethical* discussion concerns the nature of morality. What exactly characterises *moral* beliefs and utterances of *moral* sentences? Can they be true? What are the facts like, if there are any, which make these beliefs true? Can we have good reason to have such beliefs? In metaethics, then, one does not set out to take a stand on normative moral claims, but to investigate what characterises such claims.<sup>1</sup> The form of moral relativism we will be concerned with is one view about the characteristics, or nature, of moral judgements; they can be true when uttered or believed by one speaker, but yet false when uttered or believed by another.

Though positions of this kind have been represented in metaethical discussion for at least the past hundred years, they have never been as popular as their rivals. Moral relativism is often discarded in a few sentences. Often this is done by reference to the fact that moral relativism is thought to have a very counterintuitive implication: those situations that we think of as moral disagreements will often not be cases of disagreement at all, since what each of the disputants speaks about is determined by her own morality.

This objection should of course be taken seriously. However, there are several reasons to discuss moral relativism more thoroughly. First, every metaethical theory has implications that at least some philosophers find counterintuitive. Therefore, it is premature to discard a theory on the basis that it has one counterintuitive consequence. Second, in recent years, new variants of moral truth-value relativism have been suggested and argued for, theories that have been motivated partly by their alleged ability to remove such counterintuitive implications.

<sup>1</sup>This is not to reject the idea that some metaethical theories might have normative implications.

Third, when one presents the idea of moral truth-value relativism to non-philosophers, a very common reaction is that this view is obviously true. Of course, they say, there is not just *one* true answer to moral questions and, of course, different people can mean different things by moral terms. Some philosophers also share this view on moral truth-value relativism as intuitively obvious.<sup>2</sup> Others find this form of relativism as intuitively unappealing as some find it appealing. However, the mere fact that the view is thought to be obviously true by some is a reason to examine it further. The fact that some find it obviously false makes the matter even more intriguing.

According to the form of moral truth-value relativism sketched out so far, the truth-value of a person's moral judgements depends on his or her *morality*. This is the kind of moral truth-value relativism that has been defended and discussed in philosophical literature. Let me call such views *standard* forms of moral truth-value relativism, or for short, *standard relativism*. I examine this kind of relativism in part 1 of the book. In three chapters I discuss two central arguments for and one objection to this form of relativism.

I argue that these arguments fail to settle the dispute between relativists and non-relativists. But the discussion suggests a new form of moral truth-value relativism. Traditional forms of relativism and non-relativism share a fundamental assumption. The assumption is that, in one sense, the same *analysis* of moral judgements holds no matter who makes the judgement. Remember, according to such moral relativism, it holds for *every* person that the truth-values of her moral judgements depend (in a specific way) on her morality. In this sense, there is *one* relativist analysis that holds for every moral judgement.

The "single analysis assumption", as we might call it, seems to be almost universally accepted in metaethical literature. A more radical or fundamental kind of moral relativism would deny this assumption. This would be a relativism according to which moral judgements made by different people should be analysed in different ways (implying that what makes them all *moral* judgements is something other than how they are analysed). Is it possible to question the single analysis assumption and defend this kind of radical relativism? In part 2 I argue that it is and that, given certain common methodological assumptions, there are good reasons to do so.

<sup>2</sup>See Harman, 2000.

The remaining part of this chapter lays the ground for the discussion that follows. The next section describes how moral truth-value relativism fits into metaethics and metaethical discussion. The sections after that give a more systematic account of the relativist views in question. First, I ask what characterises relativist views in general. After that the subject is narrowed down to forms of moral relativism, and then to moral truth-value relativism. This position is further characterised, and different forms of it are distinguished.

## 1.2 THE PLACE OF MORAL TRUTH-VALUE RELATIVISM IN METAETHICS

We all have moral opinions and most of us sometimes express these opinions in moral utterances. It has, however, proved very difficult to account for exactly what it is we do when we make moral utterances and exactly what it is we have when we have moral opinions. This difficulty has not manifested itself in hindering philosophers from coming up with many complex and ingenious accounts, but in the fact that philosophers are far from an agreement about which of these diverse and conflicting suggestions is correct.

Why is there so much disagreement about the nature of morality? Michael Smith has formulated one influential answer to this question. What we are after when we try to analyse or account for our moral practice – that is, the business of thinking and talking about the moral rightness and wrongness of actions, say, or justice and desert – is an analysis or account that captures all of the traits that we take to define or be characteristic of this practice. However, some of the different characteristics that we intuitively ascribe to our moral practice seem to pull in different directions.<sup>3</sup>

On the one hand there are aspects of moral practice that suggest it should be construed as a *realist* practice. Moral realism is often understood as the conjunction of three distinct metaethical positions:

*Cognitivism*: Moral judgements have truth-value.

*Ontological realism*: Some moral judgements are true. (Or: there are moral facts.)

<sup>3</sup> Smith, 1994, pp. 4-13.



*Truth-value absolutism:* Moral judgements have their truth-value independently of who utters or assesses them.<sup>4</sup>

Moral realism, then, as conceived of here, is the position that all of these three claims are true. The cognitivist part of realism states that moral statements belong to the kind of linguistic expressions that are capable of being true and false. Just like ordinary assertions about the world (e.g. the assertion that my coffee cup is empty), they represent the world as being in a certain way, and are true if and only if the world is in that way (like the coffee cup assertion is true if and only if my coffee cup is empty). Alternatively it can be stated as the view that moral judgements are beliefs. Just like my belief that my coffee cup is empty represents the world as being in a certain way, my judgement that it is wrong to lie is a belief that represents the world as being such that it is wrong to lie. (The latter formulation can also be seen as explaining the former; we might think that linguistic expressions have truth-value by virtue of expressing attitudes that have truth-value, i.e. beliefs.)<sup>5</sup>

Certain aspects of moral discourse make cognitivism seem plausible. Moral judgements have the form of declarative sentences, we argue about moral matters and we use moral sentences as premises and conclusions in logical inferences. This makes moral statements look like statements that represent the world as being in some way, thus expressing beliefs. In our moral thoughts and discussions we also seem to assume that some of these moral beliefs and statements are true; we are convinced that some of them hold rather than others and are ready to argue that that is the case. Furthermore, our way of arguing lends prima facie support to truth-value absolutism. In some sense we seem to take others to talk about the same things as we do: when I have said “it was wrong to lie” and someone else says “it wasn’t wrong to lie”, then we assume, and argue as if, the other person disagrees with us, saying something implying that my statement is false. These traits of moral practice, then, seem to lend support to something like moral realism.

<sup>4</sup> A fourth component is sometimes added:

*Non-scepticism:* It is possible to come to know moral truths.

Since this element will not matter to the discussion here, I leave it out.

<sup>5</sup> Other speech-acts, such as requests, apologies and many more are more plausibly characterised as not having truth-values. Requests and apologies cannot be true or false. We might think that this is so because these speech-acts do not express beliefs: when I make an apology I express regret; when I request something I express a desire that someone does something.

On the other hand, moral opinions and judgements seem tightly connected to our feelings and desires. If someone thinks that it is morally wrong to, say, eat meat, in normal cases he will be more inclined to avoid eating meat than if he had not accepted that moral thought. That is, our moral opinions can make us act and restrain us from doing so. According to a traditional view of motivation in analytical philosophy, often referred to as *the Humean view on motivation*, in order to be moved to act, a person needs a desire or some desire-like attitude. More exactly, she needs a desire that a certain state of affairs comes about and a belief that the action in question makes that state of affairs come about. Desires are then thought of as the moving force making actions happen, and they are thus necessary to make someone act or be motivated to act. Beliefs on the other hand, on this view, cannot by themselves make us motivated to act.

These considerations lend support to some form of non-cognitivism rather than cognitivism. Non-cognitivism (or expressivism) is the denial of cognitivism – moral judgements do not express beliefs and thus do not have truth-values. Instead, according to non-cognitivism, moral judgements express non-cognitive attitudes like emotions, desires or acceptance of norms – attitudes that can motivate the one who has the attitude.<sup>6</sup> (There are also *anti-humean* cognitivists. They reject the Humean view on motivation, thus claiming that moral beliefs can themselves give rise to motivation.<sup>7</sup>)

Non-cognitivism is also often seen as better equipped than moral realism to explain another trait of moral practice: the large diversity between people's moral opinions. If moral judgements express desire-like attitudes this seems to be what we can expect, since people have different desires. If moral judgements represent absolute facts, on the other hand, then why do not people converge in their moral opinions to a higher degree?

<sup>6</sup> The way metaethics has developed in recent years it has become increasingly hard to draw a clear-cut distinction between cognitivist and non-cognitivist theories. Non-cognitivists tend to accept claims about moral practice which were previously thought to be defining claims of cognitivism, such as that moral judgements can be true and that there are moral facts. (See e.g., Blackburn, 1993, Blackburn, 1998, Gibbard, 2003.) There are different ideas about how to formulate a meaningful distinction between cognitivism and non-cognitivism in light of this. (See e.g., Dreier, 2004, Ridge, 2006) This will not matter to my discussion though.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Dancy, 1993, McDowell, 1979.

As we have seen, these are exactly the traits of moral discourse that have been thought to support also standard forms of moral truth-value relativism. If the truth-values of moral judgements depend on our desire-like attitudes, then this seems to explain the connection to motivation. It also seems to explain the large diversity among moral opinions. So, even though moral truth-value relativism is a form of cognitivism (since it holds that moral judgements have truth-values and express beliefs) it has similarities with non-cognitivism.<sup>8</sup> In contrast with absolutist cognitivism, they both start from the subjective aspects of our moral practice and in a straightforward way incorporate these in their respective analyses of moral judgements.

This gives rise to the following contrast between absolutist cognitivism on the one hand, and truth-value relativism and non-cognitivism on the other. Let me stipulate a sense of ‘moral claim’ such that two people make the same moral claim if intuitively, they make the same moral evaluation of the same (type of) thing. So two people who both hold that it is morally wrong to lie accept the same moral claim. (I will return to this intuitive notion of a moral claim later in this chapter.) According to absolutist cognitivism, what characterises any specific moral claim (such as the claim that lying is wrong) is that it is made true by certain (moral) facts. Two moral statements are used to make the same moral claim only if they are made true by the same facts. This is something that both moral truth-value relativism and non-cognitivism denies. Another way of putting this is that both views imply that whatever it is that keeps together the class of moral judgements, no matter who makes them, it is not that they are made true by the same (kind of) facts. Rather than being made true by the same facts, it is this strong connection to our subjective desire-like attitudes towards actions that make the class of moral judgements into a homogenous class.

This, then, is how standard forms of relativism fit into metaethical discussion. On the view underlying Smith’s explanation of metaethical

<sup>8</sup> Sometimes ‘relativism’ in metaethics is not reserved for cognitivist theories. Some philosophers use the term ‘moral relativism’ as roughly equivalent with moral anti-realism. In Wong’s terminology, for example, a relativist is one who denies that there is one single true morality (Wong, 1984). This makes not only those who deny absolutism count as relativists, but also those who reject either *Cognitivism* or *Ontological Realism*. Non-cognitivism and ontological nihilism (the denial of ontological realism) both imply that there is no true morality at all. This, of course, means that there is no single true morality. Since I wish to talk about a more narrow class of views, I choose to call the view in focus here ‘moral truth-value relativism’.

disagreement – what we might call the traditional methodological approach to metaethical investigations – an analysis of moral judgements is supported to the extent that it coheres with what people take to be defining traits of moral practice and moral properties. Given this, certain such traits function as arguments for and others as arguments against standard relativism.

In part 2 of this book, however, I suggest that if we adopt this methodological approach none of the common analyses of moral judgements work. People take different traits to be definitional of moral properties. This might seem like a trivial point, but I argue at length that, given a plausible way of cashing out the traditional methodology, a consequence is that different analyses hold for moral judgements made by different speakers. The conclusion is that we have to give up either what I have called the single analysis assumption, or the traditional methodological approach.

Before we begin to examine the arguments for and against the different forms of moral relativism, however, the rest of this chapter gives a more systematic presentation of these positions, starting with what characterises relativism in general.

### 1.3 RELATIVISM

#### 1.3.1 *The structure of relativism*

All kinds of relativism claim that something is relative to something else. They hold that a certain property of a certain class of things is relative to a certain property of another certain class of things. We can choose ‘frame of reference’ as our general term for that to which things are relative. If we let F stand for frames of reference, any relativism can be expressed in the following form:

##### *The Core of Relativism*

(Rel. 1) For any x that is an I, x is P relative to some F:s – F:s that are Q – and x is not P relative to some other F:s – F:s that are not Q.

(Rel. 2) It is both possible for F:s to be Q and possible for F:s to be not Q.<sup>9</sup>

(Rel. 1) is the claim that things of a certain sort (I:s) have a certain property (P) relative to frames of reference of some kind (F:s). Relative to some frames of reference – frames of reference that are in a certain way (Q) – these things have P. Relative to other frames of reference – frames of reference that are different (not Q) – these things do not have P.

(Rel. 2) is needed because relativism, as I conceive of it, involves the claim that the property that is relative can vary with that to which it is relative: whether x is P can be different relative to different parameters. (Rel. 1) by itself does not exclude that any possible frame of reference, F, necessarily has G – the property that x's being P depends on. If this were the case then whether x is F could not vary relative to different frames of reference.

Depending on what I, P, F and Q stand for we get different forms of relativism. Let us see how a couple of forms of relativism fit into this formula. It follows from Einstein's special theory of relativity that two events cannot be simultaneous absolutely, but only relative to a frame of reference:

Events which are simultaneous with reference to the embankment are not simultaneous with respect to the train, and *vice versa* (relativity of simultaneity). Every reference-body (co-ordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement of the time of an event.<sup>10</sup>

This form of relativism holds that the simultaneity (P) of pairs of events (I) is relative to reference bodies (F:s) such as a train or an embankment. Of course, reference bodies have to be in a certain way (Q) for a certain pair of events to be simultaneous (unfortunately I am not able to spell Q out). When we express this in the form given by *the core of relativism* we get: For any pair of events, those events are simultaneous relative to some reference body (with certain characteristics), but not simultane-

<sup>9</sup> This way of formulating the common core of all forms of relativism is a variation of Kölbel's:

(R1) For any x that is an I, it is relative to P whether x is F.

(R2) There is no uniquely relevant way Pi of fixing P.

(R3) For some x that are I, and for some Pi, Pj, x is F in relation to Pi but not F in relation to Pj. (Kölbel, 2002, pp. 117-18).

<sup>10</sup> Einstein, 1960, p. 26.

ous relative to other reference bodies (with other characteristics). We also have to add that there are both possible reference bodies relative to which pairs of events are simultaneous, and possible reference bodies relative to which they are not (*Rel 2*).

Next we can consider a radical form of truth-relativism: truth is relative to what we believe. Any  $x$  that is a proposition (I) is true (P) relative to persons (F:s) who hold it true (Q) but not true relative to people who do not hold it true.

These two examples serve to illustrate ways in which different forms of relativism can differ from one another. First, different properties – in our examples simultaneity and truth – of different things – pairs of events and propositions – can be held to be relative. Second, the relative properties can be held to be relative to different kinds of properties of different things.

Another rather common way to characterise relativism is in terms of the arity of the properties in question, that is, in terms of the number of places of the properties. A non-relativist view of truth might hold that truth is a one-place property of propositions. The truth relativist depicted above claims that truth is a two-place relation between propositions and persons (more specifically their beliefs).<sup>11</sup> The intuitive picture of simultaneity might be that it is a two-place relation between two events. But the relativist claims that it is a three-place relation between two events and a reference body.

It thus seems possible to characterise relativism roughly as the idea that a certain property has more places than one might have thought. However, even if some forms of relativism can be characterised in terms of the number of places of a certain relation, we will see later, in section 5.2.3, that this is not the case for all forms of relativism.

### 1.3.2 *Local and restricted forms of relativism*

The general characterisation of relativism, *the core of relativism*, purposely leaves certain questions open. Consider for example relativism about simultaneity, as we stated it in line with the general characterisation. It does not claim that it holds for every pair of events that there are both reference bodies relative to which those events are simultaneous

<sup>11</sup> This is a simplification. On standard views, the truth of propositions is at least a two-place relation, namely between propositions and circumstances of evaluation (see further section 4.5 for an explanation of this notion). Given this, relativism is the view that truth is a three-place relation.

and reference bodies relative to which those events are not simultaneous. We can call relativism about simultaneity that actually makes this further claim *unrestricted relativism* about simultaneity. But it is also possible to defend a restricted form of relativism according to which some pairs of events are not simultaneous relative to any possible reference body. In the same way we can distinguish between restricted and unrestricted variants of relativism concerning any specific topic.

Another distinction is that between local and global forms of relativism. A global form of truth relativism claims that truths of all kinds are relative while a local form claims that relativism only pertains to truths of a certain kind, such as moral, aesthetic or scientific beliefs. Whether a form of relativism counts as local or global in this sense depends on the comparison class: an aesthetic relativism may be a global aesthetic truth-relativism (it concerns the truth of all aesthetic beliefs) at the same time as it is a local truth-relativism (it concerns only aesthetic truths).

We can use *limited relativism* to refer to forms of relativism the scope of which is limited in any of these ways. Forms of relativism that are not limited in any of these ways we call *unlimited relativism*.

### 1.3.3 *Constraint on controversiality?*

All kinds of relativism can be stated as instances of *the core of relativism*. However, it is not obvious that all instances of *the core of relativism* are forms of relativism. It is sometimes maintained that a constraint on the triviality or controversiality has to be added. For example, the view that the sentence “I’m 28 years old” has different truth-values when uttered by different speakers – or, in other words, that it is true relative to some contexts of utterance but not relative to others – is not usually described as a form of relativism. However, the same claim about other sentences, such as “Abortion is wrong”, is often labelled as a form of relativism. The difference seems to be that the first claim is uncontroversial while the second challenges at least many people’s previous understanding of the type of expressions in question. Similarly, the claim that the truth of sentences of the form, “x is to the left of y” is relative to the location of the observation, is not ordinarily thought of as a form of relativism. But Einstein’s claim that simultaneity is relative questions our ways of thinking, and is therefore not trivial.

Thus one might want to say that trivial or uncontroversial claims expressible in the form given by *the core of relativism* are not forms of relativism. Alternatively, one might choose to say that these are forms of

relativism, but not philosophically (or scientifically) interesting forms of relativism. The first choice would probably be more in line with common usage of the term “relativism”. The second has the advantage of making the matter of whether a certain claim counts as a form of relativism less vague, since it seems to be less than a straightforward matter to determine if a certain case of relativity is trivial or not. In any case, I will not have to take a stand on this issue here. The types of relativism that concern us in this book are both expressible in the form given by *the core of relativism* and are highly controversial.

#### 1.4 MORAL RELATIVISM

The kind of moral relativism in focus in this book, what I call “moral truth-value relativism”, says roughly that the truth-values of moral sentences are relative to the morality of the speaker of the sentences. Before giving it a more precise characterisation let me distinguish it from some other forms.

##### 1.4.1 *Descriptive moral relativism*

We have already seen that widespread moral disagreement is taken to support moral truth-value relativism. That is, it is based on what is sometimes called ‘descriptive moral relativism’: the empirical thesis or observation that people’s moral opinions diverge. Moral truth-value relativists do not argue that descriptive moral relativism *implies* moral truth-value relativism. But we will see in chapter 3 that they sometimes argue that the specific nature of the disagreement there is about moral matters justifies some form of such relativism.

##### 1.4.2 *Agent relativism*

Besides what I call moral truth-value relativism, the most common variant of moral relativism is agent relativism.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, two acts that are in every other aspect exactly similar can have different moral status, i.e. one can be morally right and the other morally wrong, depending on the morality of the one who is *performing the act*.<sup>13</sup> So while moral truth-value relativists accept the following claim:

<sup>12</sup> Lyons, 1976) makes the perhaps first systematic distinction between agent relativism and a form of moral truth-value relativism (which he calls “appraiser relativism”).

<sup>13</sup> One *could* choose to say that any view that implies that some property of the agent, *whichever property that is*, can affect the rightness of the acts she performs is a version of



the truth-value of P's utterance of the sentence "Q ought not to do A" depends on P's morality,

agent relativists think that

the truth-value of P's utterance of the sentence "Q ought not to do A" depends on Q's morality.

It might seem that this makes also agent relativism a form of moral truth-value relativism: the truth-values of moral sentences and beliefs are relative, not to the speaker or believer, but to the agent. I choose not to call it a form of truth-value relativism, however, since it does not imply that the truth-value of *the same moral judgement* can vary: the judgements with different truth-values have to be about different acts.

Some moral truth-value relativists, e.g. Gilbert Harman and David Wong, accept also agent relativism.<sup>14</sup> The discussion in this book, however, will focus on the truth-value relativist part of their theories.

### 1.5 MORAL TRUTH-VALUE RELATIVISM

The purpose of this section is to characterise the form of moral relativism we are concerned with in this book. Common to all forms of moral truth-value relativism is that they hold that it is the truth-values of moral judgements that are relative. According to the most common variants, the truth-values depend on who the speaker or believer of the judgement is. We will begin by looking at these *speaker relativist* variants and turn to other variants after that.

#### 1.5.1 Standard *speaker relativism*

For many expressions in natural languages like English, it is essential to know the context in which they are uttered even to begin to be able to decide if they are true or false. To know the truth-value of an utterance of, say, "I am the president of the United States" or "To the left you have the Eiffel Tower" we have to know things about the context in which

agent relativism. But this wide characterisation would include many moral principles that we normally do not think of as relativist views. Cf. Sturgeon, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> It also happens that philosophers mix up the two positions. See e.g. Levy, 2002 (especially p. 21 and p. 81) and Ryan, 2003 (see further footnote 128).

they are uttered. In other words, sentences like these have different truth-values relative to different contexts of utterance.<sup>15</sup>

Speaker relativists claim that moral sentences belong to this class of expressions (even though they typically don't hold that this is obviously so, as it is with uncontroversial indexicals like 'I' and 'here'). More specifically, speaker relativism is the view that the truth-values of moral judgements are relative to some property of the speaker or believer, where this is a property that can vary between different speakers and believers. The last clause is in line with (*Rel. 2*) of the general characterisation of relativism above. Unless the property that the truth-values of moral sentences are relative to is one that can vary between different speakers, speaker relativism would not imply that the truth-value of moral sentences can vary.<sup>16</sup>

Speaker relativists standardly hold that the truth-values of moral judgements are relative to the speaker's (or believer's) morality. (Different terms are used to refer to our moralities, for example "moral system"<sup>17</sup>, "moral framework"<sup>18</sup> and "moral perspective"<sup>19</sup>.) Whether my statement or belief that it is morally wrong to eat meat is true or false, depends partly on my morality. As I have said, I will refer to forms of moral truth-value relativism that relativize the truth-value of moral sentences to people's moralities as "*standard truth-value relativism*" or, for short, "*standard relativism*".

Standard relativists typically think that having a certain morality consists in having certain affective states, motivational states, emotions, desires, intentions, or the like; that is, attitudes of the sort non-cognitivists say that moral judgements express. I will not say more about this here; different relativists' views on this matter will emerge as we proceed in the book. (To make such a view plausible it is important, just as it is for non-cognitivists, to specify which sub-set of non-cognitive atti-

<sup>15</sup> The phenomenon of indexical terms and related notions such as contexts of utterance will be properly introduced in chapter 2.

<sup>16</sup> We could of course choose to include theories according to which the truth-value of moral sentences depend on properties that all speakers of moral sentences necessarily have. The reason for doing this would be that also according to these views, the truth-value of moral sentences is relative to speakers. (See Dreier, 2006, p. 244 for such a claim.) But this would not be in line with standard characterisations of speaker relativism in philosophical literature. Neither is it the kind of views I wish to discuss.

<sup>17</sup> Dreier, 1992, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996 p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Kölbel, 2002.

tudes that are distinctively moral attitudes. Some relativists do that while others don't. This issue will not be in focus in this book however.)

### 1.5.2 *Complexities in defining speaker relativism*

Moral truth-value relativism is a view both about the truth-values of *moral sentences*, and about the truth-values of *moral beliefs*. (I use 'moral judgement' to refer both to utterances of moral sentences and to moral beliefs. In contexts where the difference matters I will note this.)<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, it can also be expressed as a view about moral words or terms (such as 'morally wrong') and concepts (such as the concept of moral wrongness), saying that the extension of these varies depending on who utters the word or has the concept. The extension of a moral term is the class of things that have the property referred to by the term, the class of things that the term applies to. I will use all of these ways of putting the view in this book. In this section I point to some complications with these different formulations, and draw lessons from these.

Two complications arise for simple formulations of speaker relativism in terms of sentences or beliefs, which do not pertain to formulations in terms of moral words and concepts. First, speaker relativists do not claim that logically necessarily true moral sentences (such as "If abortion is wrong, then abortion is wrong") or logically necessarily false moral sentences (such as, "Abortion is both right and not right") have relative truth-value. The former are true and the latter false no matter who utters them. Consequently, if we think of truth-value speaker relativism as a view about sentences or beliefs we should bear in mind that it holds only for logically contingent moral sentences and beliefs. This complication does not arise if we choose to characterise speaker relativism in terms of the extension of moral terms or concepts.

The other complication arises from the fact that moral sentences and beliefs contain non-moral words or components in addition to moral ones. And some of these are context-dependent components, such as indexicals; that is, components that make sentences and beliefs that

<sup>20</sup> For characterisations in terms of moral sentences see e.g. Streiffer, 1999, pp. 9-10. Perhaps this is also how Wong, 1984) should be interpreted when he puts his relativism as a claim about "*A ought to do X*" statements. Many writers alternate between statements in terms of beliefs and sentences, see e.g. Dreier, 1990 and Kölbel, 2004. Often, as in metaethics at large, relativism is stated in terms of moral judgements (see e.g. Harman and Thomson, 1996, Prinz, 2006, Sturgeon, 1994).

contain them have different truth-values relative to different contexts. Because of this, it is uncontroversial that the truth-values of at least some moral sentences and beliefs are relative to different contexts of utterance. For example, consequentialists might say that “I ought not kill my neighbour” is true when most people utter or believe it but not when asserted or believed by Hitler’s neighbour. Or, we might think that someone who owes John 100 dollars truthfully can utter or think “I am morally required to give John 100 dollar”, while this comes out as false when uttered or believed by someone without such debts. Thus, everyone can agree that the truth-values of at least some moral sentences vary between different speakers.

For this reason, if we want to formulate speaker relativism as a view about sentences or beliefs, we should keep in mind that the idea is not merely that some or even all moral sentences or beliefs have relative truth-values. Rather, the speaker relativist view is that moral sentences and beliefs have relative truth-values, *due to the elements which make them moral sentences and beliefs* (such as moral terms or concepts). It is not due to other elements (such as (non-moral) indexical terms). Again, this is a complication that does not arise on formulations in terms of extensions of moral terms and words.

Another complication arises most evidently for statements of speaker relativism in terms of sentences or words. Let me state it for formulations in terms of sentences first. What makes something count as a (specific) moral sentence in a language? I see two alternative answers, both problematic. First, we could say that a moral sentence in a language is one that is exclusively used to make moral claims in that language. In English, this would probably restrict the class of moral sentences to those involving expressions such as ‘morally right’, ‘morally wrong’, ‘morally good’ and ‘morally bad’. Indeed, it might be questioned whether even such sentences would count as moral sentences on this account: there are contexts where such sentences are used in a so-called inverted commas sense, merely to report what other people think. One problem, then, with this account of what makes something a moral sentence, is that it might imply that there are no moral sentences.

But even if we find sentences that on all occasions are used to make moral claims, the problem is that we have excluded the vast majority of all moral assertions. Most of the time, we leave out ‘morally’ and say thing like, “That’s wrong”. Such a sentence can have a variety of non-moral meanings. It can be used to say that something is a breach of etiquette, that what is done is not the expected or intended way of acting,

that some proposition is false etc. We want speaker relativism to cover also those moral assertions that are made using sentences that, on other occasions, can be used to make non-moral assertions.

The second alternative is to say that a moral sentence in a language is a sentence that most often, or alternatively, at least sometimes, is used to make moral assertions. Depending on the exact suggestion, this could mean that sentences such as “it is wrong to lie” count as moral sentences in English. This view is also problematic, however. Everyone can agree that a sentence like “it is wrong to lie” have different truth-values in different contexts of utterance, since sometimes the sentence is used to make a certain moral claim, but on other occasions it is used to make other, non-moral, claims. Thus, on this account, our definition does not capture the relativist position of interest here.

The upshot of this, I suggest, is that we have to operate with something like an intuitive notion of *moral claims*. Intuitively, if two people think that it is morally wrong to kill, they accept the same moral claim; they make the same moral evaluation of the same thing. Given such an intuitive notion, two different sentences can be used to make the same moral claim. And the same sentence can be used to make different moral claims on different occasions of use. The most straightforward solution to the problem, then, would be to define speaker relativism as a view about moral claims: the same moral claim can have different truth-values when believed in or made by different speakers. Or, in other words: statements that we intuitively think of as involving the same moral evaluation of the same thing can nevertheless have different truth-value.

If we nonetheless want to state speaker relativism in terms of sentences, a qualified statement would have to say something like: When a sentence is used to make a moral claim, its truth-value is relative to some property of the speaker. This avoids the problems that pertain to a statement solely in terms of moral sentences: with the qualification, the theory pertains to every expression of a moral claim (not just to those that happen to be made using a typically moral sentence); and it is not a view everyone can agree with merely on the basis of the uncontroversial fact that the same sentence can be used to make different claims.

In order for the notion of moral claims to do the job we want it to do in a general definition of moral truth-value relativism, it must have certain characteristics. To begin with, we must not assume that moral claims are individuated by their truth-values: one and the same moral claim must be able to vary in truth-value depending on who makes it. Moreover, we will soon see that truth-value relativists sometimes make

further claims: that the content, or even meaning, of any specific moral claim can vary. Thus, to be able to characterise any kind of moral truth-value relativism in terms of moral claims, we should not presuppose that moral claims are individuated by their content or meaning. For this reason I think we have to work with an intuitive notion of moral claims along the following lines. Most often when two people use the sentence, “It is morally wrong to kill an innocent” we intuitively think that they use it to make the same moral claim. They both make a claim about moral wrongness, a claim to the effect that killing an innocent is morally wrong. This, I think, is the best we can say at this point: two sentences are used to make the same moral claim – *in the sense stipulated here* – if and only if intuitively they make the same moral evaluation (is right, is wrong, is good, is evil, is virtuous etc.) about the same thing (action, action type, character, person, motives etc.). The disagreement between moral truth-value relativists and absolutists, then, concerns whether the same moral claim can have different truth-values on different occasions. (While we have to use an intuitive notion of moral claims in the general definition of speaker relativism, specific forms of speaker relativism will include specific views about what makes something a specific moral claim and how this is connected to the idea that the same moral claim can have different truth-values when believed in or made by different people.)

It should be obvious that the same complication arises for statements of speaker relativism in terms of the extension of moral words, and that a similar qualification would have to be made for such a statement. A word may be used to make moral claims on certain occasions but non-moral claims on others and two different words can be used to make the same moral claim.

It might not be as obvious that the complication arises if speaker relativism is stated in terms of moral beliefs or concepts. This is because we intuitively think that what individuates moral beliefs are that they are beliefs in different moral claims in the intuitive sense above. That is, what makes something a specific moral belief is that it makes a specific moral evaluation of a specific thing (or kind of things). Nonetheless, I think that these considerations are highly relevant for such statements as well. One common way of individuating beliefs is in terms of their content (their truth-conditions or the propositions they express). However, when speaker relativism is defined in terms of moral beliefs, one has to keep in mind that what makes something a specific moral belief cannot be its content, since according some forms of relativism the

content of a moral belief varies with the morality of the believer. Rather, as we have said, one has to use something like the intuitive notion of a moral claim to individuate moral beliefs.

The lesson from this section is that a qualified statement of truth-value relativism should refer to moral claims. If it is made in terms of moral beliefs or sentences it should also be remembered that it holds only for logically contingent moral sentences and that the context-dependence holds because of that which makes moral sentences and beliefs *moral* sentences and beliefs. However, for sake of simplicity, when I mention and describe the view in this book, I will often use less qualified statements in terms of moral sentences, words, beliefs or concepts. I will use more qualified statements when there are special reasons to do so.

### 1.5.3 *Speakers and assessors, varying and stable contents*

All forms of moral speaker relativism involve the claim that the truth-value of moral sentences can vary. But the most common versions involve a further claim: the reason that the same moral sentence can have different truth-values when used by different speakers is that it can be used by different speakers to say different things. Two people who both utter the sentence “Abortion is wrong” may have said different things, much like two people who utter a sentence containing an ordinary indexical term (such as, “I am in Gothenburg”) have said different things (each person has said something about her own location). Expressed in philosophical terms, then, speaker relativism is often characterised as the view that different speakers’ assertions of a moral sentence may have different *content* (which, in turn, is sometimes cashed out as that they have different *truth-conditions* or express different *propositions*.) Thus Kölbel, Sturgeon and Streiffer describe this view (but under the names ‘indexical relativism’ and “appraiser relativism”, respectively) in the following ways:

Indexical relativists about, say, morality will hold that moral relativity is essentially a matter of moral sentences expressing different contents on different occasions of use. Moral sentences are thus very similar to indexical sentences in that the context of utterance determines which content is expressed by any utterance of them. Thus the same moral sentence can express one

content and be true in one context of utterance, while it may express a different content and be false in another context.<sup>21</sup>

Appraiser relativism [...] sees the truth conditions for moral judgments made by a given appraiser as determined by factors essentially including a feature that can vary from appraiser to appraiser – such as [...] the appraiser's moral norms.<sup>22</sup>

*Appraiser relativism* [is the view] according to which the propositions expressed by a moral sentence varies from context to context [...]<sup>23</sup>

As above, this form of speaker relativism can be stated in terms of moral words (or concepts) as well as in terms of moral sentences (or beliefs). The idea, then, is that the extension of moral terms differs between different contexts of utterance because the *referent* of moral terms differs between different contexts of utterance. That is, a moral term may refer to one property when used by one speaker and refer to another property when used by another speaker, just like “I” refers to different individuals when two different speakers use it.

Recently, this most common variant of speaker relativism has been challenged in its own arena. A new kind of moral truth-value relativism has been suggested that differs from the common forms of speaker relativism in two ways. First, the reason that the truth-values of moral sentences are relative, it is suggested, is not that moral sentences have different content in different contexts. The reason, instead, is that the contents of moral sentences (the propositions that they express) have different truth-values relative to different contexts. (Stated in terms of moral words instead of moral sentences the idea is that, while the reference of moral terms stays the same between contexts, their extension varies. The term ‘wrong’ for example, always refers to the same property – the property of wrongness – but this property has different extensions in different contexts.)

The second new element involved in the new forms of relativism is that moral sentences have their truth-values determined, not (partly) by the context in which they are used by a speaker (like ordinary indexicals), but (partly) relative to the contexts in which they are evaluated or assessed by someone. This means that a specific statement of a moral sentence may have different truth-values relative to different people who

<sup>21</sup> Kölbel, 2004, pp. 297-98.

<sup>22</sup> Sturgeon, 1994, p. 83.

<sup>23</sup> Streiffer, 1999, p. 9.



evaluate that statement. Thus we might call this new form of relativism *assessor relativism* instead of *speaker relativism*. The main part of the discussion of truth-value relativism in this book will focus on speaker relativism. Assessor relativism will be discussed in parts of chapter 4.

#### 1.5.4 *Pluralism and monism about analyses*

The forms of truth-value relativism surveyed above are forms of what I have called standard relativism – each of them holds that there is a specific way in which the truth-values of moral sentences are relative to moral systems (of speakers or assessors of the moral sentences). All moral judgements, they hold, should be analysed so that their truth-values are relative in this way.

As I said in the beginning of this chapter, there is another possible form of moral truth-value relativism, which I will elaborate and defend in the closing chapter. On this view, relativism is not true because *the* analysis that holds for moral judgements is such that it makes their truth-values depend, in a certain way, on the context. Instead, according to this idea, the reason that moral judgements made by different people can have different truth-values is that different analyses hold for moral judgements made by different people. This is the kind of relativism I introduced earlier as denying “the single analysis assumption”. The specific view I will defend is that a standard relativist analysis might hold for some speakers’ moral judgements, while an absolutist analysis holds for moral judgements made by other speakers.

While the standard forms of moral truth-value relativism we have seen above, the ones usually defended and discussed in the philosophical literature, are forms of “analysis monistic truth-value relativism”, I will call the present view “analysis pluralism”.

#### 1.5.5 *Truth-value absolutism*

Moral truth-value relativism stands in opposition to *moral truth-value absolutism*. The latter claims that for any given moral sentence (that does not contain other, non-moral, context-dependent expressions), the truth-value is the same no matter who utters (and assesses) it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Thus defined, truth-value speaker absolutism does not exclude that the truth-value of moral sentences vary with other things in the context, such as when or where they are uttered. If we want, we can define a stronger absolutism, excluding also such forms of truth-value relativism. In practice the distinction between these two forms of absolutism is not of much consequence however, since the other forms of relativism are never defended.

Defining absolutism this way makes the distinction between limited and unlimited forms of moral truth-value relativism relevant. According to *unlimited* forms, *every* moral sentence is true relative to some speakers, but false relative to others. We have seen that relativism concerning any subject can be limited in two different ways. Restricted forms of moral truth-value relativism hold that certain moral sentences are true (or false) relative to all possible moralities, because there are no possible moralities of the kind that would make them false (or true).<sup>25</sup> As we said above, any form of relativism can also come in more or less local or global forms. Moral truth-value relativism is in itself local since it concerns the truth-values of a restricted class of sentences, namely moral sentences. But there could also be forms of relativism that are local within moral truth-value relativism, holding that only certain kinds of moral sentences have relative truth-values. For example, one could hold that judgements concerning goodness are relative, but not judgements concerning rightness.

According to the definition of moral truth-value absolutism above, this view excludes both unlimited and limited forms of moral truth-value relativism, since it holds that the truth-value of *every* moral sentence is absolute. This might strike some as inconsistent. Limited forms of truth-value relativism are just as much limited forms of truth-value absolutism, since they are mixed views according to which some moral sentences have absolute truth-values and others have relative truth-value. Nonetheless, I will place such views on the side of truth-value relativism. I do so since classifying the mixed views this way – as forms of relativism and not forms of absolutism – marks what strikes me as the most interesting distinction in the context of the discussion in this book. Moral truth-value absolutism is the standard view on moral sentences (among those who think that moral sentences have truth-value), and any strain of truth-value relativism, however local or restricted, stands in opposition to this.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Wong, who argues that even though it is “logically possible” for a group to develop a system of moral rules that permits, say, torturing people on whim, “[i]n practice, a group will be limited in its attempt to develop an adequate system of rules and standards that will provide a relatively effective resolution of the conflicts a morality is intended to resolve. That is why rules permitting torture on a whim are not found in adequate moral systems.” (Wong, 1984, p. 74).

## 1.6 PLAN OF THE BOOK

The following two parts of the book deal with the question of whether any form of moral truth-value relativism is plausible. The main share of the discussion concerns what I have called standard forms of such relativism: that is, theories according to which the truth-values of moral sentences are relative to people's moralities. As we have seen, standard relativism has two main competitors in metaethics, absolutism and non-cognitivism. A full examination of relativism would have to be pursued in contrast with both. However, my discussion will almost exclusively focus on the question of what reasons there are to accept relativism or absolutism. This means that the discussion is pursued on the assumption that cognitivism is correct.

As we have noted, on a traditional way of understanding metaethical discussion, this is a discussion about which theory or analysis best captures the characteristics of moral practice. The three chapters of part 1 are concerned with the characteristics giving rise to the two most central arguments in favour of standard relativism and the most common argument against this view. Chapter 2 concerns the argument that standard relativism can explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation in a way that absolutism cannot. In chapter 3 I discuss the idea that relativism is supported by the large and pervasive diversity there is between people's moral opinions. Chapter 4 deals with the common objection to standard relativism that it cannot account for the fact that we disagree over moral matters: if moral terms have different extension when different people use them, it seems that we speak past each other rather than genuinely disagree.

I argue that none of these arguments (at least as they stand) can settle the battle between relativism and absolutism. This is the general negative conclusion in part 1: the common arguments in the debate between standard relativism and absolutism are inconclusive.

In the first chapter of part 2, I give my view on where we should go from this negative conclusion. While it is indeed true that there is a tension between the characteristics we experience moral practice and moral properties as having, one thing that has come forth in the discussion in part 1 is that different people also have very different intuitions about these characteristics; about the nature of moral properties. Some people think that moral properties have to be absolute (in the way absolutism implies) while others think that they are relative (in the sense implied by standard relativism). I argue that, given the traditional

metaethical methodology, this gives us *prima facie* reasons to doubt both relativism and absolutism: or at least, to defend either of these views one has to argue that there is a theory of meaning that (i) is plausible for moral terms, and (ii) is such that the strong intuitions opposing the view in question do not say anything about how we should analyse the meaning of moral judgements.

Chapters 6 and 7 look at different such theories of meaning. I argue that, as long as we stay within the traditional methodology, none of them can serve to ground either standard relativism or absolutism as an analysis of everyone's moral judgements. The only way of avoiding this conclusion is to adopt a methodology that allows what I call radically revisionist analyses: analyses of moral judgments that conflicts with what some people are disposed to think can or cannot count as moral properties.

The negative conclusion, then, is that certain theories come out as false if metaethical discussion is pursued in the traditional manner. Chapter 8 considers the positive consequence of this conclusion, still within the scope of the traditional methodology. What follows then is that we should give up what I have called the "single analysis assumption", the idea that one analysis holds for moral judgements whomever they are made by. Or, in other words, it follows that a form of moral analysis pluralism is true. I argue that this is a coherent and plausible position. More specifically, the thesis I argue for is that some people's moral judgements should be given an absolutist analysis, while a standard relativist analysis holds for judgements made by others. In this context I also return to the conflict between cognitivism and non-cognitivism; I argue that analysis pluralism gives a way to account for the features of moral discourse that non-cognitivism captures, while it remains a version of cognitivism. The conclusion, then, is that even though standard relativism cannot be upheld, an analysis pluralist relativism can.



PART 1

ARGUMENTS FOR  
AND AGAINST  
STANDARD RELATIVISM



## Chapter 2

### First Road to Relativism: Emotions and Motivation

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

Our moral judgements are intimately connected to our emotions and desires. Much of the philosophical discussion about this matter focuses on the connection between moral judgements and motivation. One of the most salient features of moral practice is the role moral judgements play in affecting our actions. When someone thinks that some specific course of action is morally obligatory in a situation, we normally expect her moral opinion to have at least some weight in her practical reasoning. She might not necessarily act on her moral conviction, perhaps because there are other things at stake in the situation that matter to her personally, but she will weigh her moral standpoint against those other considerations. In short, she will be more prone to do the thing she holds to be morally obligatory, than if she had not accepted that moral judgement.

As we saw in chapter 1, the common variants of speaker relativism hold that the content of a moral judgement depends on the speaker's morality, where her morality consists of a sub-set of her non-cognitive attitudes, such as emotions, desire-like attitudes or motivational states. It has been argued that the special connection such theories see between moral judgements and moralities can explain why moral judgements motivate.



I will separate two different issues concerning how moral judgements are connected to motivation and emotions. The first issue concerns the *contingent* connection between moral judgements and emotions and motivation. No doubt, moral judgements are often accompanied by motivation and emotions. In section 2.2 I discuss if speaker relativism can gain support from its ability to explain this. But it is also often held that there is a *necessary* or *conceptual* connection between moral judgements and motivation: moral judgements are (at least in normal cases) necessarily accompanied by motivation. This is the issue that the discussion about motivational internalism and externalism concerns. The remaining sections discuss whether speaker relativism can be argued for on basis of the view that there is such a necessary connection. I argue that it can't: speaker relativism has no *special* ability to explain this. Relativists plausibly can deliver such explanations; but so can absolutists.

## 2.2 CONTINGENT CONNECTION TO EMOTIONS AND MOTIVATION

It might seem obvious enough that there is an intimate connection between accepting a moral judgement and having certain emotions or being motivated, but there is also more robust evidence for this in empirical studies. Jesse Prinz uses results from such studies to argue for a form of speaker relativism. In this section I argue that, as it stands, this line of argument fails. Depending on which view one takes on what determines the content of moral judgements, absolutists can accommodate the results as well.

Prinz puts forward different theses about how moral judgements are connected to emotions that he thinks are empirically supported. The first thesis is that moral judgements and emotions co-occur. This thesis, Prinz says, is confirmed by several studies showing that when people make moral judgements, areas of their brains that are associated with emotional responses are activated.<sup>26</sup> For example, when the subjects of one study evaluated moral and factual sentences as being right or wrong, it was only when they evaluated the moral sentences that the emotional areas of their brains were activated.<sup>27</sup> As Prinz notes, such "brain scans simply add empirical support to a pre-theoretical intuition that emo-

<sup>26</sup> Prinz, 2006, p. 30.

<sup>27</sup> Moll, Oliveira-Souza and Eslinger, 2003.

tions arise when we respond to a wide range of morally significant events, including rudeness, unfairness, law-breaking, and saving lives.”<sup>28</sup>

Prinz’s second thesis is that emotions influence, and can even be sufficient in the production of, moral judgements. He refers to studies where it is shown that which moral judgement a person makes about a case depends on that person’s emotional state. In the most remarkable experiment, the subjects were hypnotised to feel disgust when they heard the word ‘often’. The subjects were then presented with vignettes containing either the word ‘often’ or a synonym, and asked to give a moral judgement of the character of the people described, which was either a typically reprehensible or admirable character. When the vignettes contained the word ‘often’ the hypnotised subjects judged the morally admirable characters to be morally reprehensible or wrong. This study seems to indicate, not only that having certain emotions can influence the strength of moral judgements or can direct our attention to morally significant properties, but that having these emotions can cause moral judgements that we would not have otherwise had: they can be sufficient to produce moral judgements.

The third thesis Prinz puts forward is that emotions are *necessary* in the production of moral judgements, or necessary for moral development. First, he takes the way we teach children moral rules to be suggestive in this direction. Prinz cites research<sup>29</sup> showing that the three main techniques parents use to convey moral rules all involve eliciting emotions in the child:

One technique is power assertion (physical punishment or threat of punishment), which elicits fear. Another technique is called induction, which elicits distress by orienting a child to some harm she has caused in another person (‘Look, you made your little brother cry!’). The third technique is love withdrawal, which elicits sadness through social ostracism (‘If you behave like that, I’m not going to play with you!’). Each technique conditions the child to experience negative emotions in conjunction with misdeeds.<sup>30</sup>

Second, Prinz takes research on psychopaths as evidence that certain emotions are necessary for moral development. One part of the evidence is provided by studies indicating that psychopaths do not make a distinction between moral rules and conventional rules, which suggests that they do not make genuine moral judgements. The other part is that

<sup>28</sup> Prinz, 2006, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Hoffman, 1983.

<sup>30</sup> Prinz, 2006, p. 32.

psychopaths suffer from deficits in negative emotions. Taken together, this suggests that it is the deficit in negative emotions that explains their inability to make moral judgements.

Prinz also argues for a stronger claim; that having certain emotions is not only causally necessary to develop moral judgements, but that it is necessary “in a synchronic sense”. To accept a moral judgement that it is wrong to kill one must be disposed to have negative emotions towards killing. For this thesis Prinz has no empirical evidence, however. It is based on conceptual intuitions to the effect that someone who says that it is wrong to kill without having the appropriate emotions is either insincere or confused.<sup>31</sup>

Prinz takes the empirical evidence to support a form of speaker relativism.<sup>32</sup> According to Prinz’s theory, to have a moral belief is to have a sentiment of approbation or disapprobation. Such sentiments are dispositions to have certain positive and negative emotions. So, for example, to believe that oneself has acted wrongly is to have a disposition to feel shame or guilt, and to think that someone else behaves immorally is to be disposed to feel anger, contempt, disgust, annoyance or indignation. This might sound suspiciously similar to some forms of expressivism, but this is not the intended interpretation:

When I say that moral judgments express sentiments, I do not mean to imply that moral judgments are merely expressive. I am not endorsing expressivism here. I prefer sensibility theories, according to which moral concepts refer to response-dependent properties [...]. Moral judgments express sentiments, and sentiments refer to the property of causing certain reactions in us. The reactions in question are emotions [...].<sup>33</sup>

When I say or think that killing is wrong, then, I ascribe to killing the property of causing negative emotions in me. This is a form of speaker relativism.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> It is not very clear how strong evidence he takes it to be; sometimes he seems to subscribe only to the weak claim that his form of relativism is one of many competing theories that can explain the data (Ibid., p. 33), but sometimes he makes the much stronger claim that it provides the best explanation of the data (Prinz, 2006, p. 41). What I discuss below is whether the data gives us reason to believe in speaker relativism rather than absolutism: if, in the end, Prinz does not think that it does, my objection does not concern his argument.

<sup>33</sup> Prinz, 2006, p. 34.

<sup>34</sup> I will not try to sort out how the two descriptions of the theory – (i) moral beliefs are dispositions to have emotions, and (ii) moral beliefs refer to the property of causing these emotions in us – fit together. I will simply focus on the latter, clearly speaker

Do Prinz's arguments succeed in supporting this relativist position? First, part of Prinz's reasoning can be put to one side here. Remember, the purpose of this section is to discuss whether the *contingent* relation between moral judgements and emotions provides reason to accept speaker relativism. It seems to me that it is just such contingent relations that the *empirical* work Prinz presents can demonstrate. Prinz's claim that it is evidence that moral judgements are necessarily connected to emotions seems wrong. The research on moral upbringing says something about how parents often actually go about the task of teaching children moral rules, but it cannot rule out that moral judgements can come about in other ways. And even though Prinz's considerations about psychopaths are partly empirical (the part that psychopaths suffer from emotional deficits), they also include a conceptual part: that judgements made by psychopaths are not *moral* judgements. This might be a plausible conceptual claim, but it is still a conceptual and not an empirical claim. Thus it will be treated in the following sections.

With this said, I think that we should acknowledge that empirical evidence of the sort Prinz puts forward can serve as *prima facie* reasons to think that emotions play a role in the nature or content of moral judgements in the way non-cognitivist and speaker relativists claim. Considered in isolation, the fact that emotions co-occur with and can cause moral judgements, and that they play important roles in moral upbringing, seems to make this a good working hypothesis. If one wants to argue that emotions are not involved in the nature or content of moral judgements, one has to point to considerations that disprove this hypothesis.

The problem for Prinz's argumentation is that such considerations are not hard to come by. We can begin to make this point by looking at a response to Prinz's article by Karen Jones.<sup>35</sup> Jones argues that even if it were the case that (certain) emotions are sufficient to *produce* moral judgements, this would not show that having (certain) emotions is sufficient to have moral judgements. On her view, genuine moral judgements must be reason-responsive. So for P's J to be a moral judgement, P has to let J respond to reasons, and give up J if she thinks there are no good reasons to accept it. Thus, for P's J to be a moral judgement, Jones argues, P has to be willing to retract J if P finds out that she has J only because she is hypnotised to feel disgust when she reads the word 'often'. If

relativist, formulation and discuss if this is supported by the empirical data.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, 2006.

P does not give up J on this ground, this would show that P is willing to accept J knowing that there is no good reason to accept it.<sup>36</sup>

We do not have to accept Jones' specific view about what it takes to be a moral judgement to appreciate the general idea behind her objection to Prinz: what a moral judgement is caused by is one thing, the content of the judgement is another, and the first does not have to say much about the latter. More specifically, that moral judgements are caused by emotions does not have to say much about what moral judgements are about.<sup>37</sup>

This point is made also by Shaun Nichols. Like Prinz, Nichols cites empirical studies to argue that moral judgements are influenced by emotions or sentiments:

On the account of moral judgment I have suggested, if we had lacked sentiments such as reactive distress and concern, we would likely have exhibited a much different pattern of judgment about what we currently regard as the moral domain. Thus, there is some empirical support for the first Humean premise, that creatures who lacked certain emotions would not make the moral judgments we do.<sup>38</sup>

Nichols, however, is more cautious in drawing metaethical conclusions from such empirical results. He specifically argues that we cannot conclude that some form of speaker relativism is true. Nichols points to empirical evidence that "moral objectivity is a default setting on commonsense metaethics"<sup>39</sup>; that is, children and many adults (college students) think of moral properties as being objective or absolute, rather

<sup>36</sup> Or that P takes being hypnotised to feel disgust when she reads the word 'often' to be a good reason to accept J. But then J is not a moral judgement, according to Jones, since there are limits on what reasons one can give for J if J is to count as a moral judgement: "Moral judgements are answerable to relatively significant human interests, or to considerations of equality, respect, flourishing (including perhaps non-human flourishing) and their ilk [...]" (Ibid., pp. 49-50).

<sup>37</sup> Moore appreciated this point. When he discusses the objection to speaker relativism that it implies that we never disagree over moral matters (which I consider in chapter 4), he writes: "It seems to me that this argument proves conclusively that, whatever we do mean, when we say that an action is right, we certainly do not mean merely that we ourselves have a certain feeling towards it. But it is important to distinguish carefully between exactly what it *does* prove, and what it does *not* prove. It does *not* prove, at all, that it may not be the case, that, whenever any man judges an action to be right, he always, in fact, *has* a certain feeling towards it, and even that he makes the judgement only *because* he has that feeling. It only proves that, even if this be so, *what* he is judging is not merely *that* he has the feeling." (Moore, 1912, pp. 64-65).

<sup>38</sup> Nichols, 2004 187.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., p. 189.

than relative.<sup>40</sup> (I will not describe these experiments here since this is not needed to make the point I want to make.) What is the relevance of this to the question we are discussing here: whether the alleged fact that moral judgements are caused by emotions is an argument in favour of speaker relativism? As Nichols notes, some philosophers take the presupposition that moral properties are objective to be built into our moral concepts.<sup>41</sup> The best-known example is John Mackie, who argues on this basis that our moral concepts are concepts of objective moral properties, but since there are no objective moral properties, error-theory is true: all positive moral judgements are false. The possibility that the presupposition that moral properties are objective or absolute is built into our moral concepts, means that even if it might be the case that moral judgements causally originate in emotions, this need not have any relativist implication about the contents of these judgements.<sup>42</sup>

As Nichols notes, other philosophers (such as Harman) argue that even though many people think of moral properties as objective, since there are no objective moral properties we can and should interpret their moral judgements as being about relative moral properties. On this view, then, the absolutist presupposition is not built into our moral concepts.

Which of these views is correct? This depends on two things; first, what is the exact nature of the objectivist presuppositions; second, what it is that makes a concept (and the words used to express it) have a certain content. If the correct view about content determination implies that the objectivist presuppositions are built into our moral concepts, then Prinz's argument fails. This means that before we have investigated these two matters, the empirical evidence that moral judgements co-occur and are caused by emotions provides no reason to prefer some form of speaker relativism to absolutism.

I will not discuss these questions further here. In part 2, however, this matter will be in focus, and I will argue that given certain methodological choices, it is plausible to hold that the absolutist presuppositions

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173-76.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>42</sup> The example of Mackie is not intended to suggest that only error-theorists can use such an argument. If the absolutist intuition is built into moral concepts, then whether any moral judgements are true depends on two things; first, the exact nature of the absolutist intuitions, what kind of absolute properties are moral judgements about; second, which kind of absolute properties that are instantiated in the world.

entertained by at least some people make it the case that they have absolutist moral concepts. This, then, is consistent with the strong but contingent relations between moral judgements and emotions and motivation that we have pointed to in this section: absolutism can acknowledge that moral judgements are often affected by emotions, and even that they often and perhaps always arise from emotions.

The contingent but strong relations between moral judgements and emotions, then, do not necessarily threaten absolutism. Before I close this section, let me argue briefly that absolutism is consistent also with plausible and common explanations of why moral judgements stand in these relations to emotions. On one level, the explanation lies in the ways we teach children moral rules referred to above. Considering how we teach our children moral language it is not very surprising that there is a strong connection between accepting certain moral judgements and having certain emotions and being motivated in certain ways.<sup>43</sup>

The fact that we teach children moral thinking and language in this way does not, of course, tell us why we do this. One way to approach this issue is through the question of why human beings have acquired and maintained the faculty of making moral judgements. Why do we have a moral practice? A widely accepted story is that the evolutionary function of moral practice is that having the ability to think and talk about moral questions facilitates cooperation within a group of people, which, in turn, gives evolutionary advantages. Thus, Allan Gibbard writes:

The chief biological function of normative discussion is to coordinate. Normative discussion allows for common enterprises and adjusts terms of reciprocity – both the friendly give-and-take of cooperative schemes and hostile standoffs with their threats and mutual restraint.<sup>44</sup>

Now, for moral judgements to have this function of coordinating behaviour, they need to motivate the person who has them. Gibbard continues the passage above:

For such a mechanism to work, two things are needed: tendencies toward consensus, and *normative governance*. Normative discussion must tend toward

<sup>43</sup> This is congenial to Copp's claim that "The chief reason that we teach our children our moral values, and that we want our fellow citizens to share our moral values, is surely that we want them to govern their behavior accordingly. Our aim is not primarily that people simply agree with us in their judgments." (Copp, 2001, p. 31).

<sup>44</sup> Gibbard, 1990, p. 76.

all accepting the same norms, and acceptance of norms must *tend to guide action*.<sup>45</sup>

A bit later he writes:

there are great gains to be had from coordinating one's actions and expectations with those of others. This coordination is fostered if one accepts the norms accepted by others, and acts on those norms.<sup>46</sup>

If we were not motivated to follow the moral judgements we come to accept, having these judgements would not affect our actions, and could therefore not serve to coordinate our behaviour. This, then, could explain why, when we teach our children our moral values and norms, we are not content with them coming to accept these values and norms without any tendency to act in accordance with them.

These two explanations of why we tend to be motivated in accordance with our moral judgements are equally compatible with absolutism as with speaker relativism (and non-cognitivism). Absolutists can either say that both function as explanations of why moral judgements, even though they are beliefs (that are not caused by emotions), are most often attended by motivation. We are simply brought up to care about and act in accordance with beliefs of that kind. And the evolutionary function of morality explains why parents bring up their children this way (and perhaps also why children are sensitive to this kind of upbringing). Alternatively, they can adopt the approach above and argue that these explanations might make it plausible that the productions of moral beliefs often involve emotions and motivating attitudes, but that this is consistent with absolutist views about the content of these beliefs.

### 2.3 NECESSARY CONNECTION TO EMOTIONS AND MOTIVATION: MOTIVATIONAL INTERNALISM

It is a common view that the motivational feature of moral judgements couples more easily with non-cognitivist theories than with cognitivist theories. This is a common view because it is thought that moral judgements are not only accompanied by motivation most of the time, which is what the explanations above can account for; they are also necessarily accompanied by motivation. This is the view of motivational internal-

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., my italics.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 76-77.



ists, according to whom it holds that, if an agent judges that she is morally obligated to perform an action, she will necessarily be motivated to perform the action.<sup>47</sup> Non-cognitivist theories are often designed to handle this necessary condition. According to at least some of these theories, moral opinions *are* motivational states of some kind.

According to cognitivists, on the other hand, moral opinions are beliefs. Given the traditional Humean picture that tells us that the relation between beliefs and motivation is contingent on the existence of desires, cognitivism is often thought to be more readily combined with motivational externalism than with motivational internalism. Motivational externalism denies that there is a necessary connection between moral judgements and motivation. The reason that we are most often motivated in accordance with our moral judgements, on this view, is that most of the time, most of us want to do the right thing (and avoid to do the wrong thing). (An alternative externalist explanation of why most of the time we are motivated in accordance with our moral judgement would make use of the idea put forward in the previous section: that even though moral judgements are beliefs, in standard cases they *arise* from emotions. On this view, the moral judgements themselves would play no role in motivating us; it would be the emotions that cause the moral judgements to exist that motivate the judge to act.)

The question in this chapter is whether speaker relativism (or certain forms of it) has some special or unique means – means that absolutist cognitivism lacks – to explain the way moral judgements are connected to motivation. For speaker relativism to have an advantage of this sort over absolutist forms of cognitivism, it seems that motivational internalism has to be correct. Externalist explanations of the motivational force of moral opinions are open to cognitivists of all sorts. Thus, if

<sup>47</sup> Motivational internalism is sometimes understood as a view about the connection between motivation and moral judgements understood as utterances, and sometimes as a view about the connection between motivation and moral judgements as mental states. Most of the time, I will speak about the connection between moral beliefs (that is mental states) and motivation. It is plausible to think that this idea is more basic: the connection there is between moral statements and motivation is due to the connection between moral mental states and motivation and the fact that moral statements are expressions of moral mental states. In general it is therefore also plausible to think that the connection between moral utterances and motivation is weaker than that between moral mental states and motivation. Even if moral mental states are intimately connected to motivation, moral utterances can be made in the absence of moral mental states, due to for example insincerity or lack of knowledge of one's own moral mental states. (Cf, e.g. Eriksson, 2006 and Joyce, 2002).

motivational externalism is true, speaker relativism is not in a superior position to explain the connection. In most part of the rest of this chapter I will therefore assume that internalism is correct, and ask whether this gives us any reason to accept speaker relativism. We will return to this assumption at the end of the chapter.

Forms of internalism can be classified depending on how strong a connection they posit between moral judgements and motivation. According to the strongest form of motivational internalism, moral judgements necessarily lead to a decision to act: if one judges that an action is morally obligatory one will necessarily decide to perform that act.<sup>48</sup> However, it is widely agreed that the connection is in fact not that strong. Other motivations can trump the motivation springing from the moral judgement. A more modest form of internalism states that the necessary connection pertains between moral judgements and motivation (not action). An agent who holds that an action is morally obligatory need not be enough motivated to decide to perform that action, but she will necessarily be motivated to some extent.

Nowadays it is, perhaps with a few exceptions<sup>49</sup>, also standardly acknowledged that *if* we are to accept motivational internalism, we should not say that moral judgements necessarily *and unconditionally* are accompanied by motivation. That is, we should accept that in special cases, let us call them exception cases, no motivation to do what we judge to be right, arises at all. The reason generally given for why we should accept this is that it seems that there are, or at least could be, amoralists; people who are not motivated in accordance with their moral opinions. The most commonly discussed cases are cases where something is psychologically wrong with the agent, for instance that she is depressed. Michael Stocker introduces this kind of cases in the article “Desiring the Bad: An Essay in Moral Psychology”:

Through spiritual or physical tiredness, through accidie, through weakness of body, through illness, through general apathy, through despair, through inability to concentrate, through a feeling of uselessness or futility, and so on, one may feel less and less motivated to seek what is good. One’s lessened desire need not signal, much less be the product of, the fact that, or one’s belief that, there is less good to be obtained or produced [...]. Indeed, a frequent added

<sup>48</sup> Hare, 1952 seems to come close to this position.

<sup>49</sup> See e.g. Lenman, 1999.

defect of being in such “depressions” is that one sees all the good to be won or saved and one lacks the will, interest, desire, or strength.<sup>50</sup>

Stocker gives the following example:

Recently, I read a story of what might be taken as typical of one course of life. It was said of this political figure that, in his youth, he cared a lot about the suffering of people in all parts of the world and devoted himself to making their lives better. But now he concerns himself only with the lives and fortunes of his close family and friends. He remembers his past, and he knows that there is still a lot he could do to help others. But he no longer has any desire so to do.<sup>51</sup>

Stocker’s point is that it is perfectly conceivable that this politician still thinks that it would be right to devote himself to relieve “the suffering of people in all parts of the world”, but that he, due to, say, feelings of futility, simply cannot bring himself to desire to do so. Stocker’s example and reasoning seems convincing enough. As John Eriksson notes:

Indeed, it does seem conceivable that one may reach a point where any of the conditions mentioned by Stocker saps one’s motivation to do what one thinks right entirely. Some of us may even have personal experiences of this happening. When this happens we do not temporarily lose our values. Rather, we temporarily just cannot bring ourselves to care about them. Although I judge that I now ought to x, it seems possible that I remain wholly unmotivated to x due to e.g., severe depression.<sup>52</sup>

In my discussion I will take for granted that amoralist cases of the kind that Stocker presents are plausible exception cases, and that speaker relativists (and others) who seek to explain the phenomenon of moral motivation should be able to account for them.<sup>53</sup> In other words, I will assume that some form of *conditional internalism* is correct: moral judg-

<sup>50</sup> Stocker, 1979, p. 744.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 741.

<sup>52</sup> Eriksson, 2006, p. 33.

<sup>53</sup> I will not take a stand on exactly which exceptions we should accept. For example, Dreier also accepts a second kind of case where moral judgements do not motivate, what he calls sadists: “The Sadists are a group of people who recognize what sorts of actions, states of affairs, characters, their society call “morally good.” They recognize them, but they hate them. They find those things repulsive and avoid them at all costs. In general they are not in the slightest motivated to perform those actions. Here is the way they put it: “We despise what is good because it is good. We believe the things you say are good are in fact, and we are never motivated to promote those things. Quite the opposite!” That is what the sadists say, and it seems as though it might be true.” (Dreier, 1990, p. 11) I’m not as convinced that this is a plausible exception case. It seems to me that it is at least as plausible to say that the sadists simply lack moral beliefs. This, however, is not something I will argue.

ments are necessarily accompanied by motivation *under certain favourable conditions*, such that the judge is not depressed.<sup>54</sup> There are several reasons to assume here that some form of conditional internalism, rather than a stronger form, is true. First, it is the kind of internalism most philosophers, including speaker relativists, accept and which I find most plausible myself. Second, it is the view on moral motivation that makes the strongest case for speaker relativism. Conditional internalism has been argued to be hard to explain for both cognitivists and non-cognitivists (and anti-humean cognitivists). The former seems incapable of explaining the internalist part, that moral judgements necessarily motivate given certain conditions. Non-cognitivism (and anti-humean cognitivism), on the other hand, it has seemed to many, is wedded to the non-conditional forms of internalism. If moral judgements were desires (or desire-like states), would we then not always be motivated in accordance with them?<sup>55</sup> If speaker relativism can find a way to avoid both of these problems and accurately account for conditional internalism this counts in favour of the theory.

In what follows I discuss possible speaker relativist explanations of conditional internalism; I discuss the question if any form of speaker relativism can explain conditional internalism, and in such case which forms this holds for. In this discussion it is helpful to distinguish between what we can call *actual system speaker relativism* and *ideal system speaker relativism*. According to actual system speaker relativism, the truth-values of moral statements and beliefs vary directly with the morality of the speaker or believer. Roughly, “A is right” is true when spoken (or believed) by P, only if P’s actual morality is in favour of A. Ideal system speaker relativism tells us that the truth-value of moral statements and beliefs depends on the morality the speaker would have if her

<sup>54</sup> It might seem that the conditional element makes it unclear what distinguishes conditional internalism from externalism: externalists will also say that moral judgements necessarily motivate given certain conditions, e.g. given that the judge has a desire to act morally. I think we should say that what characterises conditional internalism is the following claim: there is a necessary connection under conditions C, where C is such that ordinary non-moral beliefs are not necessarily accompanied by motivation under C. I will not try to specify what conditions can count as C, but it seems clear that it fits the depression cases. A view according to which moral judgements necessarily motivate barring depression (and similar conditions) counts as a version conditional internalism, since ordinary non-moral beliefs are not *necessarily* accompanied by motivation to act in a certain way even when the believer is not depressed (or in a similar condition).

<sup>55</sup> See e.g. Smith, 1994, Smith, 1996.

actual morality were somehow corrected. On this view, “A is right” is true when spoken by someone whose corrected morality would be in favour of A.

These two forms of relativism offer different ways to explain why moral judgements motivate. In what follows we will consider them in turn.

## 2.4 ACTUAL SYSTEM SPEAKER RELATIVISM AND MOTIVATION

### 2.4.1 *Dreier’s argument from motivation*

James Dreier argues that speaker relativism gains support from motivational internalism. The intuitive idea is explained in the following simple argument:

Moral goodness is such that sincere judgment about it intrinsically motivates.  
But, which properties motivate depends on the psychology of the judging agent.  
So, which properties are the moral ones depends on the psychology of the agent.<sup>56</sup>

Not all beliefs motivate the way moral beliefs about, say, rightness do. So they must have a special content; they must ascribe some property to actions that motivates us to perform the actions. But different people are motivated to do acts with different properties. Consequently, beliefs about moral rightness had by different people must ascribe different properties to actions.

The mystery of intrinsic motivation is eliminated, the relativist points out, if only we will understand that each person judges morally according to *her own* moral standards. And, having moral standards is, at least in part, caring about things in a certain way.<sup>57</sup>

Let us look closer at the form of speaker relativism Dreier claims can demystify the intrinsic motivation of moral judgements. According to this view, moral terms are indexicals. Dreier handles such terms in accordance with Kaplan’s theory of indexicals.<sup>58</sup> According to this theory the meaning of an indexical term is not to be identified with its content since the content varies with the context of the utterance. The content of,

<sup>56</sup> Dreier, 2006, p. 259.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., pp. 259-60.

<sup>58</sup> Kaplan, 1989.

say, “it is cold here” uttered by someone in London is different from the content of an utterance of the same sentence by someone in New York. What is it then that makes ‘here’ have the same meaning in the two utterances? According to Kaplan, what they share is a character. A character is a function from the context of the utterance to the content of the utterance. The character of ‘here’ decides what content a statement involving ‘here’ has in a certain context. It will, given the context, pick out a certain location, namely (in most cases) the location of the speaker. According to Dreier, what moral terms have in common when uttered by different people is their motivational character.

If a term in some alien language has the character of “good” we can sensibly translate it as “good”. The alien community may not have the same motivations as we have, so the term we translate as “good” may not have the content of “good” as we use it. The character – what stays the same between one context and another – determines the content in a context, and then the content determines the truth conditions of the sentences in which the term occurs.<sup>59</sup>

The character of moral terms, according to this view, is a function from the context of the utterance, of which the motivational system of the speaker is the relevant part, to the content of the utterance. The character of ‘good’ decides which content a statement involving ‘good’ has in a certain context. It will, given the context, pick out a certain property, namely a property that motivates the speaker in a certain way. Since different people have different motivations – different desires – the content of utterances of moral expressions will vary from person to person.

The idea, then, is that when some speaker says, “A is morally right”, the reference of ‘morally right’ is a property of actions such that the speaker is motivated to perform actions that she believes to have that property. Suppose, for example, that the only property of actions that makes Torbjörn motivated to perform them is the property of maximizing wellbeing. When Torbjörn says “Eating meat is morally right”, ‘morally right’ refers to the property of maximizing wellbeing. The content of the sentence in that context of utterance, that is, uttered by a speaker with such a motivational setup, is that eating meat maximizes wellbeing. When uttered by a speaker with different desires, the reference of the moral terms will be different properties, such as being performed from a good intent.

<sup>59</sup> Dreier, 1990, p. 8.

Moral *beliefs* are connected to motivation in a corresponding manner, on Dreier's view. When Torbjörn believes that eating meat is morally right, the content of his belief is that eating meat maximizes wellbeing. But the content is not all there is to the belief; it also has a character. Here is Dreier's example:

On a given occasion of use, "good" has a content equivalent to a certain descriptive, naturalistic predicate. Suppose Max thinks, "to do A would be to do an act which is such and such," where "such and such" is coextensive [...] with "good" relative to the given context. That he has that thought has no logical connection to any action; for any belief with that sort of content, reason for action seems to come only with an accompanying desire. Suppose Max now comes to believe "to do A would be to do an act which is good."<sup>60</sup>

Internalism tells us that when Max has this belief, he will necessarily be motivated to do A (unless the situation is in some way non-normal). But how can this be so, given that 'good' in the context has the same content as an ordinary descriptive predicate? Dreier's suggestion is the following:

[...] we should think [...] that Max came to believe the proposition in a new way. Perry distinguishes "the sense entertained" by a person in a certain psychological state from "the thought apprehended." The latter designates a proposition, an object of belief. The former designates a way of believing, a mode of presentation. [...] When Max comes to believe, "A is good," he is in a psychological state which explains why he decides to pursue A. But "A is good" denotes no new object of belief, no new thought apprehended. Rather, Max comes to "entertain a new sense," in Perry's terms; he has a thought with a new character, in Kaplan's.<sup>61</sup>

It is the character of moral beliefs, the way in which they are believed, and not their content, which explains their connection to motivation. Just like the character of the belief "it is hot here" makes it pick out a place through the location of the speaker, the character of moral beliefs makes them pick out a descriptive property through the motivational system of the speaker.

The simple indexical relativism described thus far is a form of *actual* system speaker relativism. On this view there is a very close connection between believing an act to be morally obligatory and being motivated. So it might seem that it can give us the wanted explanation of internalism. Dreier thinks, however, that the kind of internalism this form of

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

speaker relativism implies is too strong. Relativistic theories of this kind seem committed to the view that our moral beliefs always motivate us (unless we are wrong about our own motivational states), that is, to non-conditional internalism.

Since Dreier accepts a form of conditional internalism he rejects the simple form of indexical relativism, but argues that it can be modified to have the right implications regarding motivation. The solution is to be found in the fact that indexicals in general have complex characters. One example is the term 'here'.

Why not let "here" refer always to the position of the speaker at the time and world of utterance? But things are not so simple. Imagine that we are looking through a pile of papers for a train schedule. "It just isn't here," I say. "It's here, it's here," you reply, "we just aren't looking carefully." Now, if the content of "here" were the location of the speaker, then, since we obviously have different locations, the theory of indexicals would have to tell us that we are not really disagreeing. But it is clear that there is a disagreement. So indexicals must function in a more subtle and complicated way than the simplest indexical account would allow.<sup>62</sup>

Dreier continues:

The point is that it is not merely ad hoc to introduce complexities into indexical semantics for moral terms. Natural language is not designed by logicians, and we should not suppose it will be simple and well behaved.<sup>63</sup>

Indexicals in general have complex characters, that is, complex functions from the context of the utterance to the content. Thus, we should expect the same from moral terms, if they are indexicals. In what way does this help indexical relativism accommodate the fact that moral beliefs sometimes motivate and sometimes don't? The idea is simple. The character of a moral term is such that sometimes, in the normal cases, it uses the motivational system of the speaker to pick out a property, and in other cases, the abnormal ones, it uses some other system to pick out the referent. In depression cases, the motivational system is one that the depressed person has when he is not depressed. There is no reason to expect moral terms to behave simpler or more uniformly than this, since indexical terms in general don't. Since the ensuing view claims that the truth-values of moral sentences are sometimes relative to the actual morality of the speaker and sometimes to an idealised version of it (e.g.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.



as it would be if the person was not depressed), I will refer to it as *mixed* or *complex* system speaker relativism,

At this point, before we go on to discuss Dreier's view, it might be helpful to remind ourselves that what we are doing in this chapter is to assess the ability of speaker relativism to explain conditional internalism. Many of us, I think, intuitively find the idea of moral terms as indexicals obviously erroneous. We don't *intend* the content of our moral statements to depend on our own context in the way we do when we use indexicals. For example, if I say, "Abortion is morally permitted", I feel opposed to someone else who says, "Abortion is not morally permitted" in a way I do not when I say, "I am a philosopher" and someone else replies, "I am not a philosopher". For sure, this mismatch with our intuitions is something every form of speaker relativism has to handle. We will return to this problem in chapter 4. What we can note now is that this should not directly disqualify the view; as noted in chapter 1, every hitherto suggested analysis of moral terms has implications that at least some find counterintuitive, and thus has some explaining to do. What we do in this chapter is to ask if a certain argument for speaker relativism works. If some form of speaker relativism can explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation in a good way, this seems enough for it to be a serious contender.

I think that something like Dreier's indexical relativism can indeed provide a plausible explanation of conditional internalism. If the characters of moral terms make their content depend on the speaker's motivation (in normal cases), then we will (normally) be motivated by our moral judgements. It seems to me that the view has to be slightly modified to avoid certain problematic implications about moral motivation, however. Let's turn to that.

#### 2.4.2 *Modification of Dreier's view*

Ordinary indexicals, like 'I', 'me' 'here' and 'now', have characters that make the content of sentences that contain any of them relative to the context of the utterance. If I say, "I am a philosopher", 'I' thus refers to Ragnar Francén, the speaker in the context of utterance. Such indexicals also keep their character when they are placed in an intentional context, such as in a belief clause. So, if I say, "Mika believes that I am a philoso-

pher”, ‘I’ refers to Ragnar Francén, the speaker in the context of utterance (and not to Mika).<sup>64</sup>

It seems that a consequence of this is that any view that understands moral terms to be indexicals has counterintuitive implications when moral terms are used in intentional contexts. Streiffer describes the problem as follows:

[...] if Speaker Relativism is true, then the proposition expressed by

(S) Lying is immoral

in a context will be, in part, about the morality of the speaker of that context, and this will remain true even if (S) occurs as part of a belief ascription. So Speaker Relativism implies that when (S) is embedded into a belief ascription such as

(S<sub>↓</sub>) Bertrand believes that lying is immoral

the proposition that (S<sub>↓</sub>) expresses in a context will be, in part, about the speaker’s morality. Thus, Speaker Relativism implies that when a speaker asserts (S<sub>↓</sub>), the speaker thereby ascribes a belief, viz., the belief that Bertrand believes that lying is immoral relative to the speaker’s morality, to Bertrand that is in part about the speaker’s morality. But that seems manifestly false. Intuitively, a speaker’s assertion of (S<sub>↓</sub>) could be true even if Bertrand had no beliefs about the speaker’s morality.<sup>65</sup>

This result is indeed counterintuitive. When I say or think that someone else has a certain moral belief, this is not a statement or thought for which my own morality plays any role whatsoever in determining the content.

Not only is the result counterintuitive: it also means that indexical relativism gets the connection to motivation wrong. This connection can be stated in two similar, but slightly different, ways.

1. If Bertrand believes that lying is wrong, then he is motivated to avoid lying (at least in normal circumstances).
2. If my belief or statement that Bertrand believes that lying is wrong is true, then Bertrand is motivated to avoid lying (at least in normal circumstances).

<sup>64</sup> See for example Kaplan, 1989.

<sup>65</sup> Streiffer, 1999, p. 17.

Dreier's speaker relativism is designed to handle the first statement. However, as it stands, it cannot explain the second statement. On Dreier's account, my utterance of the sentence

(1) Bertrand believes that A is wrong,

is true just in case

(2) Bertrand believes that A has properties that make *me* want to avoid it,

is true. But if this were the correct analysis of my statement, the truth of that statement would not in any way ensure that Bertrand is motivated to avoid lying. To get the right result (1) should be analysed so that it is true only if:

(3) Bertrand believes that A has properties that make *him* want to avoid it.

That is, 'wrong' in (1) has to refer to a property of actions that makes *Bertrand*, not me, want to do the action. It seems that to get the right result, moral terms would have to function as indexicals in non-intentional contexts and as anaphors<sup>66</sup> in intentional contexts.

Consequently we should reject any analysis of moral terms which construes them as directly analogous to ordinary indexicals. However, contrary to Streiffer, I do not think that it shows that we should reject indexical relativism altogether. Dreier emphasizes in several places that indexical expressions are more complex than they are often made out to be. And even though Dreier does not use this idea to handle the problem at hand here, I think this can be done. There are other, more complex or flexible, indexical expressions than the standard examples, on which we can model moral terms. Consider the following sentences:

(4) Majornas krog is a local pub.

<sup>66</sup> Whereas indexicals have their reference determined by the context of use, anaphors inherit their reference from an antecedent. In (3), for example, 'him' is used as an anaphoric pronoun and inherits its reference from 'Bertrand'.

(5) These shoes are comfortable.

At least in many contexts, ‘local’ in (4) refers to the property of being located in an area close to the speaker. Similarly, at least when (5) is uttered in certain contexts, ‘comfortable’ seems to refer to the property of feeling good to wear for a person, namely the speaker in the context of utterance. ‘Local’ and ‘comfortable’ thus seem to function like indexicals in such contexts. Now, consider the following sentences where these expressions figure in an intentional construction.

(6) Niklas thinks that Majornas krog is a local pub.

(7) Joakim thinks that these shoes are comfortable.

At least on one natural reading, (6) ascribes to Niklas the belief that Majornas krog is a pub that lies close to him (not close to the speaker or believer of (6)). And (7) can express that Joakim thinks that the shoes feel good to wear for him (not for the speaker or believer of (7)). (The latter is perhaps even clearer in a sentence like, “Joakim hopes that his new shoes are comfortable”.) Thus, these terms seem to function like indexicals in (at least some) non-intentional contexts and like anaphors in (at least some) intentional contexts.<sup>67</sup>

My point is not that moral terms function exactly like ‘local’ or ‘comfortable’. The point, rather, is that many indexical expressions are more flexible than the standard examples, like ‘I’ and ‘here’. This means that there is room for indexical relativists to get the right result, both intuitively and regarding the connection to motivation. (The relativist could further offer an explanation of why moral terms display exactly the mix of indexical and anaphoric traits it does. Such an explanation would say, roughly, that the social and evolutionary function of moral terms demand that motivation is connected to the believer of the moral claim:

<sup>67</sup> When Dreier illustrates the complexity of indexical terms he uses “nearby” as an example (Dreier, 1990, p. 23), a term that is similar to “local”. Dreier does not, however, use this term’s specific features as a model for how to handle moral terms in belief clauses, but to exemplify the fact that indexicals in general do not always pick out their reference through the context of the *speaker*, which, as we have seen, is what allows him to say that his speaker relativism can explain *conditional* internalism.

not, for example, to someone who believes that someone else has a moral belief.)<sup>68</sup>

There are also forms of speaker relativism that do not treat any of the terms in moral sentences as indexicals that fit our intuitions about moral expressions in belief clauses. In his early characterisations, Harman sometimes describes his speaker relativism as a theory about the logical form of moral judgements: though the speaker and her motivations are not referred to by any of the terms explicitly mentioned in moral statements, in saying for example that A ought to do X the speaker says that she has certain motivational attitudes.<sup>69</sup> One possible way to understand this idea is to compare moral sentences to a context-dependent expression like ‘it’s raining’. On most occasions when someone says, “it’s raining”, though no term used in the sentence refers to a location, what she wants to say is that it is raining at her location. When we say, “Malin thinks that it is raining” often the place implicitly referred to is the place of Malin and not our own location.<sup>70</sup>

The modification of Dreier’s view also allows speaker relativists to give what intuitively seems to be a correct statement of their view:

When people say or think that an action is right, they say or think different things; each of them says or thinks that the action is such that her own morality (motivational system) allows it.

<sup>68</sup> Such a flexible view on context-dependence might also help speaker relativists reply the possible complaint that they cannot handle moral questions. Suppose that A asks B, (1) “would it be wrong of me to X?”. It might be thought that speaker relativists are committed to the view that A asks B whether X is forbidden by A’s morality. This would be a strange result. But speaker relativists can reply. First, sometimes such questions are used interchangeably with, (2) “do you think it would be wrong for me to X?”. In those cases, speaker relativists can use the idea that moral terms work differently in intentional contexts to get the wanted result. Second, it seems that we seriously ask someone questions like (1) (when we are not merely after (2)), only when we expect that the other person has a morality that substantially overlaps our own (at least when it comes to cases that are similar to the specific action or action-type at hand). For we ask such questions (in that serious way) only when we expect that the other person can give us advice that we would find acceptable.

<sup>69</sup> Harman, 1975, pp. 8-11.

<sup>70</sup> There is a large discussion about how we should understand expressions like “it is raining” and “local”. The debate basically concerns to which extent the contextual dependence is a semantic or a pragmatic phenomenon. We need not go into this matter here. For some contributions to the debate, see, Perry, 2001, Cappelen and Lepore, 2005a, Cappelen and Lepore, 2005b, Recanati, 2002, Recanati, 2005, Stanley, 2000.

On Dreier's original position, this would make as little sense as:

When people say or think that I am a philosopher, they say and think different things; each of them says and thinks that she herself is a philosopher.

On our modified indexical analysis, on the other hand, it is as reasonable as:

When people say or think that X is a local bar, they say or think different things; each of them says or thinks that X is close to herself.

Or:

When people say or think that a pair of shoes is comfortable, they say or think different things; each of them says or thinks that the pair of shoes feels good for herself to wear.

The modified version of speaker relativism thus seems better fitted to account for the way moral statements and beliefs function. I think that it also provides a better understanding of Dreier's way of handling the cases where moral beliefs are not accompanied by motivation. Let us again compare moral terms to 'comfortable'. Suppose a sales clerk in a shoe store says, "these are our most comfortable shoes". You look at the sales clerk's shoes and say, "But why don't you wear them yourself, then?". "I would" she replies, "if I didn't have exceptionally wide feet". 'Comfortable', in the clerk's first statement, should plausibly not be taken to mean "feels good to wear for me", "feels good to wear for us" or "feels good to wear for everyone". Rather, it means something like, "feels good to wear for people with normally built feet". This is analogous to Dreier's claim about moral terms. In normal situations, situations where the speaker is not affected by depression or the like, "A is right" means roughly "A has properties that makes me want to do it". But when the speaker is affected by depression or the like, she can use "A is right" to mean roughly "A has properties that would make me want to do it, if I did have normally functioning motivational mechanisms".

In this subsection I have argued that if speaker relativism models moral terms on ordinary indexicals, it is unable to handle moral terms

in intentional contexts. I suggested a way of solving this problem. I also argued that modifying speaker relativism in the manner proposed, improves our understanding of Dreier's way to explain the cases where moral judgements do not motivate.

In the two following subsections I will argue that the kind of explanation Dreier's indexical relativism gives of conditional internalism works equally well for certain other forms of speaker relativism.

#### 2.4.3 *Subjectivism will do as well*

Dreier argues that the way his indexical relativism accounts for the connection between moral judgements and motivation, cannot be used by the forms of speaker relativism often referred to as "subjectivism". If this is so, it puts a restriction on which forms of speaker relativism that can be supported by an argument from motivation. However, I will argue that it is not so.

According to the form of subjectivism Dreier considers, which he calls *Moral Sense Theory*, "x is good" means "x is such as to be approved of by those who share our moral viewpoint under suitable conditions". Dreier objects to relativist theories of this kind that they cannot explain why we are motivated in accordance with our false moral beliefs as well as in accordance with our true ones. This indeed seems problematic; intuitively it is having a moral belief that makes one motivated to act, not that the belief is true. The reason that this problem is attached with any such theory, according to Dreier, is that since "it makes moral beliefs about our motivations, so it should allow that where the belief is false we lose the connection to motive."<sup>71</sup> If my believing that A is right is the same as my believing that I desire A, then if my belief is false, this is because I don't desire A. And in that case, I will not be motivated to do A.

According to Dreier, his indexical relativism does not have this consequence. The idea seems to be the following. On his account, the reason that moral beliefs are accompanied by motivation is not that these beliefs have certain contents. The reason is, rather, the special way in which we believe them, their character. And since false moral beliefs have the same character as true ones, they are connected to motivation in the same way.

<sup>71</sup> Dreier, 1990, p. 16.

I will argue contrary to this that at least some forms of subjectivism and Dreier's indexical relativism can handle the connection to motivation equally well. Let us first distinguish between two forms of subjectivism.

*Action-subjectivism:* For P to believe that X is right is for P to believe: P desires X.

*Property-subjectivism:* For P to believe that A is right is for P to believe: A has a property that P desires actions to have.

These are forms of subjectivism, and not forms of indexical relativism, since they make "moral beliefs about our motivations". It is not clear whether "Moral Sense Theory", as described above, is a form of action-subjectivism or a form of property-subjectivism. (The differences between these forms of subjectivism and Moral Sense Theory – that the latter makes moral judgements about the desires or approval of *those who share our moral viewpoint*, and that it adds the clause "under suitable conditions" – are irrelevant to the question we are now considering.) In what follows, when I argue that Dreier fails to establish a difference between subjectivism and indexical relativism, I will handle the two forms of subjectivism in turn and then return to Dreier's indexical relativism.

Action-subjectivism does indeed have the counterintuitive consequence that all false moral judgements are disconnected from motivation. Yet, it is not at all clear that Dreier's argument against this form of subjectivism succeeds. What is clear is that action-subjectivism has counterintuitive implications about which beliefs are true and which are not. Normally when we are engaged in a moral discussion we do not think of people's moral judgements as false on the ground that they conflict with the speaker's own morality. Rather, it seems, intuitively we tend to see other speakers' moral statements as mistaken or false when the statement is not in line with *our own morality*, since this is the morality we take to be correct. This is something subjectivists have to explain in order to defend their view. Now, suppose subjectivists *can* explain away the intuitions in question. If so, they will be able to say that even though, on the correct analysis of moral judgements, it is true that false moral beliefs are not accompanied by motivation, *intuitively* false moral beliefs are accompanied by motivation just like intuitively true moral beliefs are. The real challenge to subjectivism in play here then, lies in



the counterintuitive implications it has for true and false moral beliefs. Matters like this will be in focus in chapter 4. The main point here is that, if subjectivists can handle them, the connection between false moral beliefs and motivation poses no extra or independent problem. (It might seem that one problem remains though: on subjectivism, moral beliefs that are due to false beliefs about our own motivation will not motivate. As we will see, this is one way to understand Dreier's objection. I will return to this in a moment.)

Let us turn to property-subjectivism. Theories of this kind do not imply that every false moral belief is disconnected from motivation. On these theories, moral beliefs will sometimes be unaccompanied by motivation because the believer is mistaken about her desires. This will be so in situations that have the following features:

- (i) P believes that an action, A, has some properties, E<sub>1</sub>, E<sub>2</sub> and E<sub>3</sub>, and does not believe that it has any other properties.
- (ii) P believes that she desires actions to have at least one of these properties.
- (iii) But, as a matter of fact, she does not have any such desire.

Since P believes that she desires that actions have some of the properties she as a matter of fact believes action A to have ((i) and (ii)), she will believe that A is right. But she does not have any such desire ((iii)), so she will not be motivated to do A. Whether her non-motivating moral belief is true or not, depends on whether A actually has some property that P actually desires actions to have. If A has some property, E<sub>4</sub>, that P desires actions to have, then her moral belief is true. If A does not have some such property, it is false. It is not the case, however, that all false moral beliefs fail to motivate on this form of subjectivism. My false moral beliefs can be a result of my ignorance of the actual properties of the action in question. Even though I actually desire that actions have the properties I take A to have, A in fact lacks these properties. In this case, I will be motivated to perform A. The problematic cases, then, if they are indeed problematic, are not false moral beliefs but moral beliefs that are based on false beliefs about motivation.

Furthermore, the same is true about Dreier's indexical relativism. Suppose that I am wrong about my desires as specified by (i) through (iii): I believe that I desire that actions have one of the properties I take A to have; but actually, I don't have any such desire. Since I know how to

use moral terms according to their character (and how to form the corresponding moral beliefs), I will say (and believe) that A is right. But since I actually don't desire actions to have any of the properties I take A to have, I will not be motivated to do A. (And whether my belief is true or not depends on whether A has any of the properties I desire actions to have.) So, also Dreier's indexical relativism implies that *some* moral beliefs will not motivate because they are based on false beliefs about our desires.

Here is an example. Peter's moral standards (the motivational states that the truth-values of his moral beliefs are relative to) are such that they motivate him to perform actions if and only if he thinks that they maximize wellbeing. Peter is aware of this. Now, along comes an evil hypnotist and makes Peter believe for one hour that he (Peter) has a Kantian moral standard. Peter now falsely believes that his moral standards are such that they motivate him to perform an action if and only if it is a way of treating people as an end and not as a mere means. During this hour Peter's actions are still guided by his utilitarian moral standards. Now suppose that Peter is thinking about whether to tell a lie or not. On indexical relativism and subjectivism, since he takes lying to be in conflict with the Kantian morality he believes that he has, he will think that it would be wrong of him to tell the lie. (Much like I, when I believe that I am in Paris but actually am in Gothenburg, hold true the sentence "The Eiffel Tower is here, in this town". We form utterances and beliefs involving indexicals on basis of the context we take ourselves to be in.) However, since he takes the lie to have good consequences, he will not have any motivation to avoid this lying (at least not any motivation that comes from his actual, utilitarian moral standards). Consequently this is a case where indexical relativism, as well as subjectivism, implies that the believer is not motivated in line with his moral belief, because he has based the moral belief on a false view about his own motivation.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>72</sup> It might be thought that something must be wrong with my description of this case. Since the content of 'wrong' is determined by the speaker's actual morality, the content of Peter's moral belief that telling the lie would be wrong is that telling the lie would not maximize wellbeing. This, we have now supposed, is a claim that Peter rejects. This is how it should be, however. When we use indexicals and are wrong about the relevant aspects of the context of utterance, this is the result we get. The content of my belief that the Eiffel Tower is here, for example, is that the Eiffel Tower is in Gothenburg.

The conclusion I wish to stress here is that the ability to explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation does not distinguish Dreier's indexical relativism from subjectivism, at least not from property-subjectivism. That is, if one of these theories gains support from its ability to explain internalism, the other does so as well.

It is another question whether the fact that these theories have the implication pointed to above – that the moral beliefs we have because we are mistaken about our motivation are not accompanied by motivation – is something that counts against the theories. There are several reasons to doubt that this is a serious problem, though. First, the marginal cases where moral beliefs are based on false beliefs about our own motivation are rare enough to escape our attention: the reason that we do not intuitively allow for this kind of unmotivating moral beliefs could be that they practically never occur. Second, I doubt that we have clear enough intuitions about these cases to ground a strong argument. Thirdly, the question of how to describe our beliefs *in moral terms* in such marginal cases (e.g. does Peter believe that telling the lie would be wrong or that it would be right?) might not even have a determinate answer. There seems to be little reason to think that we have had any interest to develop and use a concept of moral beliefs that is definite in this respect. Indexical relativism could be construed as the idea that *in non-marginal cases* where the speaker or believer is not mistaken about her morality or motivation, moral terms function like indexicals of some sort.

Even though these short remarks hardly settles the question, they suggest that the objection under consideration, as it stands, gives us no reason to doubt that indexical relativism and subjectivism can give satisfactory accounts of motivational internalism.

#### 2.4.4 Simple actual system relativism might do as well

As we saw, Dreier abandons *simple* actual system relativism because he believes that this view implies a too strong connection between moral beliefs and motivation. If the contents of all moral beliefs are relative to our actual desires we would always (unless mistaken about our own desires) be motivated in accordance with our moral beliefs. This is also a standard objection to non-cognitivism. It seems that the view that moral judgements *are* motivational states of some kind cannot account

for the exception cases where moral judgements are not accompanied by motivation.<sup>73</sup>

But perhaps this is not so. At least some non-cognitivists seem to be conditional internalists. That is, they accept that moral judgements are desires, or motivational mental states of some other kind, but still think that there are cases where moral judgements do not motivate, for example due to depression.<sup>74</sup>

How can this be so? If moral judgements are desires, and not all moral judgements motivate, the idea must involve the claim that desires do not necessarily motivate. Here is one idea about how this could be.<sup>75</sup> According to a common idea, desires are dispositions to be motivated. This might be thought to imply that non-cognitivism does not allow for exception cases. This need not be so, however. For example, the fragility of a glass is not accurately captured by the simple conditional that the glass will break if struck: there will be loads of exceptions to this, for example, the glass might not break if it is wrapped in a towel.

If this is how it is with dispositions in general the same can be expected to hold for desires. For me to have the desire to drink a cup of coffee, according to this idea, is for me to be motivated to drink x if I think x is a cup of coffee, *under normal conditions* (that is, if I am not depressed or similar). The desire is a motivational state of mind, but certain conditions, such as depressions, can prevent that motivational state of mind from actually leading to motivation.

If we think of desires and other motivational states in this way, there is no longer an obvious conflict between non-cognitivism and cases where people are not motivated by their moral opinions. Recall Stocker's example with the politician who is no longer motivated to help suffering people though he still judges this to be the right thing to do. The idea we are considering now allows non-cognitivists to say that the politician's depression prevents his moral opinion, which is a motivational state of mind, from actually motivating him.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> See Shafer-Landau, 2003, Smith, 1994, p. 137, Smith, 1996, p. 73.

<sup>74</sup> See Blackburn, 1984, Blackburn, 1998, Gibbard, 1993, pp. 318-19.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Eriksson, 2006, pp. 172-85 and Björnsson, 2002.

<sup>76</sup> We might see one worry with this account. The way Stocker describes the politician, he no longer has the desire to help others. And there seems to be something to this description of the case. Intuitively the politician can truthfully say that he still really thinks that it would be right of him to dedicate himself to helping others. But if he said that he still really desires or wants to do this, we would be more sceptical. The upshot seems to be that moral opinions cannot be desires. I will argue later however (in footnote

Gunnar Björnsson gives the following argument for this view on moral judgements:

A moral optation is a state that affects action in specific ways under ‘normal’ or ‘ideal’ conditions for affecting action, and listlessness is hardly such a condition. Listlessness and depression are general motivational disorders that lower energy levels and one’s motivation to do anything, including mischief. This generality suggests that it is not *particular* optations that are lacking in the listless or depressed, but general means for their enactment.<sup>77</sup>

If it is not specific motivational states (or “optations”) that are missing in the depressed (or people suffering from similar conditions), then the fact that depressed individuals are not motivated in accordance with their moral judgments is no threat to the view that moral judgments are to be identified with motivational states of some sort. So if this is the correct view of the connection between depression and motivational states, this can be used by actual system speaker relativists as well as by expressivists to make their position consistent with *conditional* internalism. Instead of saying, as Dreier does, that terms have complex characters picking out the referent in different ways in normal and non-normal (e.g. depression) cases respectively, the relativist might say that moral terms always pick out their referent through the actual moral motivational states, but that in the non-normal cases, these do not lead to motivation in the judge.

Let us sum up what has been said about relativism and moral motivation so far. I have argued that Dreier’s form of mixed system speaker relativism, if amended in the right manner, can provide an explanation of conditional internalism. I have also argued that this seems to hold also for certain forms of subjectivism, and suggested that it might hold for actual system speaker relativism. We will now turn to ideal system forms of speaker relativism.

## 2.5 IDEAL SYSTEM SPEAKER RELATIVISM AND MOTIVATION

### 2.5.1 *Ideal system speaker relativism*

According to ideal system speaker relativism the truth-values of moral utterances and beliefs depend on how the speaker or believer’s morality

90), that this need not be a problem.

<sup>77</sup> Björnsson, 2002, p. 336.

would be if it were corrected to become more coherent. My belief that an action is wrong is true if my system of attitudes *would* contain a negative attitude towards the action *if* the system were corrected.

Both Harman and Wong defend such forms of relativism. According to Harman, the truth-conditions of moral judgements are relative to a moral framework that is determined by the judge's values.<sup>78</sup> Harman makes clear that we are not to understand this so that the moral framework,

that is determined by a person's own values [is] in general [...] identified with all and only exactly those very values. Otherwise a person could never be mistaken about moral issues [...] except by being mistaken about his or her own values"<sup>79</sup>.

Instead moral frameworks are sets of *corrected* values. A person's corrected values are,

values that would result if the person were rationally to revise his or her values in the light of the facts, adjusting the values in order to make them more coherent with each other and with the facts.<sup>80</sup>

Now, according to Harman the process of rationally changing one's values is a conservative business. This means that the values which result from such a process depends on the values we start out with. This is why different people's moral frameworks can be different, and consequently why Harman's theory is a form of relativism. (Wong's form of ideal system relativism is described in section 3.3.1.)

According to theories of this kind there is no direct link between the content of a moral belief and the actual motivation of the believer: it is not the *actual* motivational states that determine the content. It is therefore less obvious how such theories could help explain that someone who has a moral belief *actually* is motivated in accordance with that belief, rather than just explain that she would be motivated if she were

<sup>78</sup> Actually, Harman's statement of relativism is more complex than this. His idea is not that the truth-conditions of moral judgements *are* relative, but that this is how they have to be understood for the purpose of assigning truth conditions: "For the purpose of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D*. Similarly for other moral judgments." (Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 4) This complexity will not matter in this chapter, however. I return to the issue of how to interpret Harman's relativism in chapter 3 and 7.

<sup>79</sup> Harman, in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>80</sup> Harman, in *Ibid.*, p. 14.

more rational. This might be why neither Harman nor Wong uses the motivational feature of moral judgements as an argument for their respective forms of relativism. Indeed, I know of no ideal system relativist who does this.

But ideal system relativism shares the idea of an *ideal system analysis* of moral language and thought with some forms of absolutism and it has been argued that such theories can account for the connection between moral judgements and motivation. Let us consider an argument to this effect given by Michael Smith, and see how speaker relativists can use this.

### 2.5.2 *Smith's explanation of conditional internalism*

Smith offers an ideal system analysis and argues that it implies a version of conditional internalism. According to Smith, moral beliefs are beliefs about moral reasons and beliefs about moral reasons are one kind of beliefs about normative reasons. Judgements about normative reasons, according to his analysis, are judgements about what fully rational people would desire that we, less than fully rational people, do. His ideal system analysis reads as follows:

ISA: For P to believe that she has a normative reason to perform a certain action, A, under some specific circumstances, C, is for P to believe that if she were fully rational she would desire that she performs A in C.<sup>81</sup>

Roughly (and there is no reason to give a closer description here), according to Smith, a fully rational person has no false beliefs, all relevant true beliefs, a maximally coherent set of desires and is practically rational (deliberates correctly in forming new desires).

<sup>81</sup> Notice that, according to this analysis, my beliefs about what I have normative reason to do are beliefs about what I would, if rational, want myself to do given that I am *not* fully rational. They are not about what I would, if rational, want myself to do given that I *am* fully rational. If we let 'P' refer to 'P as he actually is', and 'P+' refer to 'P if fully rational', then the analysis states that if P believes that she has a normative reason to do A, then P believes that P+ would desire that P (not P+) does A. Another way of putting this is to say, with Smith, that the normative beliefs we have in this world, call it 'the evaluated world', are beliefs about what we in the evaluating world, the world where we are fully rational, desire that we do in the evaluated world.

Smith argues that this analysis can explain conditional internalism. He dubs his preferred version of internalism ‘the practicality requirement on moral judgement’:

If P believes that she has normative reason to do A in C, then either it is true that P is motivated to do A in C, or that P is practically irrational.

This is certainly intuitively plausible. Not to be moved by one’s normative beliefs seems to be a kind of practical irrationality.

Smith argues that his analysis of moral judgements can explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation as specified by the practicality requirement. It can, because

Failing to desire to do x in C, while believing that one’s ideal self would desire that one do x in C, is a form of incoherence that signals practical irrationality.<sup>82</sup>

To bring forth the intuitive appeal of this idea, he asks us to

suppose we believe that we would desire to x if we were fully rational and yet fail to desire to x. Are we irrational? We most certainly are. And by our own lights. For we fail to have a desire that we believe it is rational for us to have.<sup>83</sup>

### 2.5.3 *Smith’s explanation and speaker relativism*

Smith’s analysis (ISA) as characterised above is neutral between relativism and absolutism. It says nothing about whether all people would desire the same things if rational. Smith argues to the effect that people’s desires would converge if they were rational, but what is the consequence if this is not so? In fact, ISA has to be completed if we are to answer this question. The analysis as it stands concerns only moral beliefs about the believer’s own actions. It could be completed to also say something about other-concerning beliefs in two different ways:

ISA’: For P to believe that Q has a normative reason to perform a certain action, A, under some specific circumstances, C, is for P to believe that if P were fully rational she would desire that Q performs A in C.

<sup>82</sup> Smith, 2001, p. 257.

<sup>83</sup> Smith, 1994, p. 177.



ISA'': For P to believe that Q has a normative reason to perform a certain action, A, under some specific circumstances, C, is for P to believe that if Q were fully rational she would desire that she performs A in C.

If the desires of fully rational people do not converge, ISA'' implies agent-relativism. What we believe when we believe that some person's action is right is that *that person* would desire to do that action if rational. Thus, each agent's actions would be judged according to her own desires. ISA', on the other hand, results in speaker relativism if the desires of fully rational people do not converge. On this analysis, when I believe that some person's action is right, what I believe is that I, if I were rational, would desire that person to act accordingly. If your desires and my desires about P's actions would be different if we were rational, then our utterances (and beliefs) of the sentence "it was right of P to do A" could have different truth-values.<sup>84</sup>

This means that speaker relativism is consistent with ISA. One consequence of this is that speaker relativists can use Smith's explanation of conditional internalism: motivational internalism concerns self-regarding beliefs and ISA' (and ISA'') is equivalent to the original ISA when it comes to these beliefs.

Smith's view and argument that it can explain conditional internalism has been much discussed and criticized.<sup>85</sup> We need not get into this discussion here, however. The purpose of this chapter is to examine whether speaker relativism can gain support from its ability to explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation. And it should be obvious that it cannot do that through adopting Smith's strategy, since absolutists of Smith's kind can use this kind of explanation of conditional internalism as well.

Let us sum up what we have said so far. In the previous section I argued that actual-system relativist explanations have a large chance of

<sup>84</sup> We will see in chapter 6 that Smith argues that, if it is indeed a fact that the desires of fully rational people do not converge, then there are no moral facts at all. In other words, in such case, an error-theory is correct. This means that ISA is not a fully adequate presentation of Smith's analysis of moral judgements. The analysis should instead read as follows: For P to believe that she has a normative reason to perform a certain action, A, under some specific circumstances, C, is for P to believe that if she were fully rational she would desire that she performs A in C *and that every other fully rational person would desire so as well.*

<sup>85</sup> See e.g. Arpaly, 2000, Dreier, 1996, Sayre-McCord, 1997b, Shafer-Landau, 1999.

working. In this section I have argued that even if it turns out that ideal-system relativist explanations work, this gives no reason to accept speaker relativism, since the explanation works for Smith's form of absolutism as well. In next section I will argue for the latter conclusion more generally; the ability to account for motivational internalism is no reason to accept speaker relativism, since absolutist theories (not just Smith's view) have this ability as well.

## 2.6 ABSOLUTISTS CAN DO IT TOO - DE DICTO INTERNALISM

Why is motivational internalism thought to be hard to explain for cognitivists? As we have seen, (humean) cognitivists, as well as non-cognitivists (and anti-humean cognitivists) can explain why moral judgements are accompanied by motivation most of the time. They can refer to the fact that when we teach our children moral vocabulary, we do this at the same time as we teach them certain moral norms and try to influence them to act in accordance with these moral norms. This makes it plausible that even if moral judgements are beliefs, it is only natural that they are often accompanied by motivation, simply because parents more or less succeed in their moral upbringing.

But, internalists say, we have the intuition that moral judgements are necessarily accompanied by motivation. This is a problem for cognitivism since ordinary beliefs are not necessarily accompanied by motivation, not even in normal cases. Therefore, it is generally thought that in order to account for these internalist intuitions, cognitivists have to argue that moral beliefs are special in some sense: either that their content or character is special (this is what Smith and Dreier argues) or that they are a special kind of beliefs that can also motivate (thus becoming anti-humeans). In line with this, motivational internalism is often thought of as the idea that it is either due to the nature or content (or character) of moral mental states, that these necessarily (at least in normal cases) are connected to motivation.

If these are the only ways to account for motivational internalism, then it seems that cognitivists of many sorts cannot do that: the content they ascribe to moral beliefs is not sufficient to yield such a necessary connection. But this is *not* the only way to think of the necessary connection. In his article "De Dicto Internalist Cognitivism" Jon Tresan argues

extensively to this effect.<sup>86</sup> He introduces the idea through the following analogy:

*De dicto necessity about planets:* Necessarily, planets are accompanied by stars.

*De re necessity about planets:* Planets are necessarily accompanied by stars.

De dicto necessity about planets is the claim that if something is a planet, it orbits a star. That is, for any object that actually is a planet, it is impossible that it *actually* does not orbit a star. This seems to follow from the concept of a planet. De re necessity about planets is the claim that if something is a planet it could not have failed to orbit a star. This, on the other hand, seems false. For any object that actually is a planet, that object could have not orbited a star (in which case, of course, it would not have been a planet). That is, for any object that actually is a planet and therefore actually orbits a star, there is a possible world where that object does not orbit a star.

De dicto necessity without de re necessity is not a rare phenomenon. For example, a skin condition must *actually* be caused by solar radiation to count as an instance of sunburn, but any such instance could have been caused by something else, in which case it would not have been a sunburn. And firing of a gun has to actually have certain consequences (a death) to count as a killing, but that firing of a gun could have not caused a death, in which case it would not have been a killing. (If you think that a killing consists both of the act that causes the death and the death, then this example will not work for you; think of *a killing shot* instead.)

The necessity in motivational internalism can also be understood either as a de dicto or as a de re necessity.

*De dicto internalism:* Necessarily, moral beliefs are accompanied by motivation.

*De re internalism:* Moral beliefs are necessarily accompanied by motivation.<sup>87</sup>

<sup>86</sup> Tresan, 2006.

De re internalism is the claim that if something is a moral belief, then that belief could not have been unaccompanied by motivation. De dicto internalism, on the other hand, is the claim that if something is a moral belief, then that belief *actually* has to be accompanied by motivation. This claim allows for the possibility that the belief that actually is a moral belief, could have been unaccompanied by motivation, in which case it would not have been a moral belief.

It is de re internalism that seems, at least prima facie, hard for cognitivists to explain. According to cognitivism, moral beliefs are regular beliefs. It is, for sure, possible for any ordinary belief to be accompanied by motivation, but the problem is that, since beliefs are not motivating mental states, any such belief could have been unaccompanied by motivation. Thus, de re internalism seems difficult to account for cognitivism.

How about de dicto internalism? It seems that any form of cognitivism can accept this position. Whatever the cognitivist says is the content (or character) of a moral belief (say, the belief that an action is morally obligatory) she can say that for a belief to be a moral belief it does not suffice that it has that content (or character); in addition, it has to be accompanied by motivation (in normal cases). Tresan further explains this idea. He describes cognitivism as the view that moral judgements are representations of certain properties.

But, for all de dicto Internalist Cognitivism says, we can represent those properties without having the conations. It just tells us that, then, the representations would not be moral beliefs. Just for instance, de dicto Internalism is consistent with the property of rightness being a perfectly natural property—e.g. optimificity. That property is clearly not intrinsically action-guiding: representations of it can exist unaccompanied by the relevant pro-attitudes. De dicto Internalism tells us not that such representations are impossible, but that they aren't moral beliefs. Likewise, wishful beliefs require conations but are about modally uninspiring properties. Those properties could be represented without the relevant conations, though such representations would not be wishful beliefs.<sup>88</sup>

De dicto internalism thus tells us that the reason that there is a necessary connection between moral beliefs and motivation does not have to be that moral beliefs have a special content (or character) or are of a

<sup>87</sup> Where I describe internalism as the view that moral beliefs (or judgements) are accompanied by *motivation*, Tresan describes internalism as the view that moral beliefs are accompanied by *conations*.

<sup>88</sup> Tresan, 2006, p. 147.

special nature; the reason can be that our concept of moral beliefs demand of any moral belief to actually be accompanied by motivation. A belief does not count as a moral belief if it is not accompanied by motivation. This is analogous to the planet example. The reason that there is a necessary connection between being a planet and orbiting a star is not that planets have some special properties that make them orbit stars; rather, the reason is that our concept of planet is such that something that does not actually orbit a star is not a planet.<sup>89</sup>

What de dicto internalist cognitivists say, in effect, is that to have a moral belief is to have a *motivation-accompanied-belief that x is the case*, where what x stands for depends on what the preferred form of cognitivism says is the content of moral beliefs. A belief that x can be unaccompanied by motivation; but of course, a motivation-accompanied-belief that x cannot actually be unaccompanied by motivation.<sup>90</sup>

It should be noted that de dicto internalism can take the form of conditional internalism, as well as non-conditional internalism. One

<sup>89</sup> Frank Jackson seems to suggest something like de dicto internalism in a brief comment. He says that cognitivists can accommodate internalism “by refusing to call something a *moral belief* unless it is accompanied by the relevant pro-attitude”. (Jackson, 1998a, p. 161)

<sup>90</sup> It seems that also non-cognitivists (and actual-system relativists) can use that same approach to avoid a problem we touched upon before. In the previous section we considered a non-cognitivist position according to which moral judgements express motivational attitudes (desires) such that having an attitude of this kind does not guarantee that motivation actually arises. We pointed to a potential problem with this view in footnote 76. In at least some of these cases where people are not motivated in accordance with their moral judgements we intuitively think that the agent does not have a desire, even though we want to say that she has a moral judgement. If we are sceptical about saying that moral judgements constitute a special kind of motivational attitudes, distinct from desires, how can someone have a moral judgement without having a desire? Here is one solution along the lines of de dicto internalism. Suppose we think that both desires and moral judgements are motivational states, and that motivational states are dispositions to be motivated that allows for a range of exception cases, that is, cases where they lead to no actual motivation. The idea, then, would be that the concept of moral judgements can explain why moral judgements allow for exactly the exception cases it does. And the concept of desires can explain that desires allow for exactly the exception cases they do. The different limits built into the concepts of moral judgements and desires respectively (and more basically: what we have needed these concepts for) could thus explain why, even though they are the same kind of motivational states, it is possible that Stocker’s politician does not desire to help the suffering while he thinks that it would be right to do so. The motivational state he has is correctly classified as a moral judgement but not as a desire because of the differences between the concept of desires and the concept of moral judgements.

way to get this result would be to say that the conditional element is built into the concept of moral judgements. Another way is through arguing that the concept of moral beliefs is such that necessarily, moral beliefs are accompanied by desires, and in addition accept the dispositional view on desires discussed in 2.4.4.

I argued in the beginning of this chapter that, at least given certain views of what gives a judgement its content, it need not be a threat to absolutist views about the content of moral judgments that they often co-occur with and are caused by motivational states like emotions. So, absolutists can accept that there is a strong contingent relation between moral judgements and motivation. The *de dicto* internalist idea allows absolutists to make an additional move. They can hold that our concept of moral judgements is such that those beliefs with the relevant absolutist content that are not accompanied by motivation do not count as moral judgments.

It also seems to make sense that we would come to have such a concept of moral beliefs. We tend to use concepts that have extensions that are salient or interesting for us in some sense, and which it is therefore important for us to be able to refer to. Tresan makes this point through an analogy to other concepts that give rise to *de dicto* necessities:

Some people have kids, others don't; to us, that's a very salient relation; so it's no surprise that the concept parent has the currency it does (even if few other concepts further entail kids). Some large rocks are in independent orbit around a star, others aren't; to us, that's a salient relation; so it's no surprise that the concept planet has the currency it does (again, even if few other concepts further entail stars). If we turn to moral beliefs, the explanation to expect, at the broadest level, is that moral beliefs' conative relations are many orders of magnitude more salient to us than the conative relations of nonmoral beliefs.

Intuitively that's true. Even Externalists grant it; indeed, they are apt to call upon it to explain (away) Internalist intuitions (the Internalist incautiously posits a necessity when, in fact, there is only a strong contingency). Internalists should begin by considering the actual relations moral beliefs bear – relations posited even by Externalists – and there find the explanation of the salience, which in turn explains why our standard concepts of these representations, but not others, are further entailers.<sup>91</sup>

One of the fundamental functions of moral beliefs is to motivate us. So we are more interested in the class of such beliefs that are accompanied by motivation than in beliefs that are in other respects exactly like these (that is their character and content) but are not accompanied by motiva-

<sup>91</sup> Tresan, 2006, pp. 159-60.

tion. Thus it is not strange that our concept of moral beliefs has come to have that class as its extension.

Now, the purpose of this discussion in the present chapter is to examine the relative merits of speaker relativism's ability to explain motivation. In the previous section I argued that ideal system relativism cannot gain support from its ability to explain internalism, since ideal system absolutism can use the same explanation. What is of most interest here, then, is how the actual system relativist explanations (such as Dreier's) stand in comparison to absolutist explanations. Let us therefore compare *de dicto* internalism to these speaker relativist explanations of internalism.

### 2.6.1 *De dicto* internalism compared to Dreier's internalism

Interestingly, *de dicto* internalism has large similarities with Dreier's internalism. Also on Dreier's internalism, "we can represent [the properties we represent through moral beliefs] without having the conations. It just tells us that, then, the representations would not be moral beliefs."<sup>92</sup> On both views the necessary connection is guaranteed because it is not only the content that makes a belief a moral belief; it also has to be connected to the speaker's motivation in a certain way.

The difference between the theories lies in the *how* the necessary connection is ensured. According to *de dicto* internalism it is ensured by the concept of moral beliefs. On Dreier's view it is guaranteed by the character of moral terms. On *de dicto* internalism, then, it is neither the content nor the character (how they are believed) of moral beliefs that gives the connection to motivation. On indexical relativism it is the latter but not the former. This actually makes it unclear whether the internalism implied by Dreier's view is a form of *de re* or *de dicto* internalism. Regarding indexical beliefs, 'same belief' can be understood either as 'belief with same content' or 'belief with same character':

*De dicto understanding:* P, who has a moral belief, could have had the same belief (same content) without motivation (under normal situations), but then it would not have been a moral belief.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

*De re understanding:* P, who has a moral belief, could not have had the same belief (same character) without motivation (under normal conditions).

The difference between Tresan's de dicto internalism and Dreier's relativism, then, is that the latter makes an extra claim. (For simplicity I will continue to refer to Tresan's view as 'de dicto internalism', even though Dreier's view can be given a de dicto understanding.) De dicto internalism makes it a sufficient condition that a belief with the right kind of content is accompanied by motivation for it to count as a moral belief. Dreier's internalism doesn't. According to the latter view, they must be accompanied by motivation because of one of their internal traits, their motivational character. This is why the internalism implied by Dreier's view can be given a de re understanding. What we should ask then, is whether the fact that de dicto internalism does not make this extra claim is an advantage or a disadvantage of the view.

It is not a disadvantage. Tresan argues convincingly that the intuitions used to support motivational internalism do not promote de re internalism over de dicto internalism. If we want to test (a conditional form of) de dicto internalism, we should ask whether some belief can be both a moral belief and unaccompanied by motivation (in a normal case) at the same possible world. If there can be such beliefs, then de dicto internalism is false; if there cannot, it is true. To test de re internalism, on the other hand, we would have to ask whether some belief that is a moral belief in a certain possible world (say, the actual) could be unaccompanied by motivation in some other possible world. But it is the former test, and not the latter, that describes the thought experiments actually used to test motivational internalism in metaethical literature:

When we consider Patrick [the amoralist] we consider only whether he has states which are, *at that world*, moral beliefs. Nowhere in the literature is the possibility even *considered* whether some amoralist like Patrick might have states which, though not moral beliefs *at that world*, are moral beliefs in the actual world. It is because we don't consider whether such states are present, but only whether there are states which are at that world moral beliefs, that our intuitions can at best favor de dicto Internalism. The strong tradition of Internalist intuitions about amoralists, then, supports only de dicto Internalism.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., p. 149.



The internalist intuitions about amoralists give no support to the extra and stronger *de re* internalist claim that a belief that is a moral belief could not have been a non-moral belief in which case it might not have been accompanied by motivation. Therefore, it is at least no disadvantage of *de dicto* internalism that it does not make this claim.

On the contrary, I think it could count as an advantage. From the philosophical discussion on moral motivation, it is clear that different people have different intuitions about the matter, e.g. about amoralist cases. Those with non-conditional internalist intuitions think that a judgement cannot count as a moral judgement if it is not accompanied by motivation even if the lack of motivation is due to some non-normal condition such as practical irrationality. Others, who have conditional internalist intuitions, think that such judgements can count as moral judgements, but not judgements unaccompanied by motivation even under normal conditions. And those with externalist intuitions think that even judgements of the latter kind can count as moral judgements. The traditional versions of internalism (and externalism) according to which moral judgements necessarily motivate (do not necessarily motivate) as a consequence of their special nature, content or character, have to explain away some of these intuitions as being mistaken. The *de dicto* approach, according to which the necessary connection is ensured by the concept of moral judgements, need not do that. Instead we can say that the conclusion to draw is that different people have slightly different concepts of moral beliefs (the extension class of the term ‘moral belief’ is slightly different when different people use it). In the “borderline cases” that the amoralist examples point to, some concepts of moral beliefs do count the beliefs as being moral beliefs while other concepts don’t.

This is an advantage of *de dicto* approach. For other forms of internalism (and externalism), the divergence of people’s intuitions about amoralist cases is an irritation that makes the views unstable. At least this is so when these forms of internalism and externalism are, as they often are, founded on intuitions about such cases to begin with; when they are, the fact that some people don’t share these intuitions is a reason to reject the theories. By contrast, the *de dicto* approach allows that the connection between moral judgements and motivation might be differently strong given different concepts of moral beliefs. The fact that people have different intuitions simply supports the idea that they have different concepts of moral beliefs, and the fact that many of us have unstable and unclear intuitions about some amoralist cases, supports

the idea that our concepts of moral beliefs is vague in this respect. This means that the de dicto approach can explain, not only why a certain connection between moral judgements and motivations that some people find intuitive holds, it might also explain why people have different intuitions. It allows us to not *explain away* certain people's intuitions about the connection, and instead explain them in a straightforward way. (The divergence in intuitions also seems to be what we should expect. There has been no pressure for us to develop clear and precise concepts of moral beliefs regarding the connection to motivation, and there has been no pressure to reach an exact convergence between different people's concepts of moral beliefs.) This ability to account also for the difference between people's intuitions through the claim that people have slightly different concepts of moral judgements in this respect, then, is an advantage for de dicto internalism over Dreier's speaker relativism.

#### 2.6.2 *A conflict with the way we talk about moral judgements*

One further thing should be noted before we leave the subject of de dicto internalism. De dicto internalism goes against the appearance of moral beliefs and statements – that is, the way we talk about and express moral beliefs – in a certain way. The surface form of the expressions we use to refer to moral statements and beliefs suggests that these statements and beliefs are characterised solely by having a certain content. We say, for example, “that is a statement/belief *about* moral rightness”, or “that is a statement/belief *that* it is morally wrong to lie”. The entire specification of what kind of judgements we are after comes after *about* and *that* (in contrast to the surface form of e.g. “*wishful* belief that I will finish my dissertation in time” or “*motivation-accompanied-belief* that if I hit you you will feel pain”). However, de dicto internalism implies that moral beliefs, e.g. the belief that it is morally wrong to lie, are not characterised solely by what follows after ‘that’: it is not characterised only by being a belief with a special content (or character). In order to be the belief that it is morally wrong to lie, a belief also has to be accompanied by motivation. What is special about, say, the belief that it is wrong to lie, then, is not merely the content or character of the term ‘wrong’ or of the belief.

I find this idea interesting and suggestive about moral practice. I will return to it in chapter 8. There I will argue, not only that having a certain content (or character) is insufficient for being, say, the belief that it is wrong to lie, but also that there is no single content (or character) which it is *necessary* to have to be the belief that it is wrong to lie.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

I have argued that speaker relativism does not gain support from its ability to explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation. This is so since absolutists have the resources to explain it equally well. Ideal system absolutists can explain conditional internalism in the manner ideal system relativists can. And even though I argued that several forms of actual system relativism can explain conditional internalism, I also argued that moral absolutism can explain it as well, through the idea of *de dicto* internalism. Through connecting motivation to the concept of moral beliefs (rather than to the content or character of them as relativists do) absolutists can give explanations that are very similar to, and seem to be as good as, the ones relativists can give.

The conclusion of this is that relativists need something other than motivational internalism to support the view that the truth-values of moral statements and beliefs are relative to our own motivations or moralities. We now turn to such an argument: the argument that relativism best explains that people's moral opinions diverge in the way they do.

# Chapter 3

## Second Road to Relativism: Explaining Diversity

### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

It is not hard to see how speaker relativists come to accept the view that among all the many different moralities there are, none is the single correct one. After all, we clearly see that people have different values and accept different moral principles, but we have no clear idea how to show that one of these combinations of values and principles is *the* correct one. I think that this – the obvious and large divergence of people’s moral opinions in combination with the difficulty of seeing how to settle such moral conflicts – is the intuitive foundation for the view of most speaker relativists. It is also the starting point of the most common arguments for speaker relativism in the philosophical literature.

Arguments that use the diversity between people’s moral opinions as a premise have not only been used to support speaker relativism but also more generally as arguments to the effect that moral realism is false and that some form of anti-realism, such as non-cognitivism, error-theory or speaker relativism, is true. In a common form, the conclusion of the argument is that there are no absolute moral facts.

What we are interested in here, however, is whether considerations about moral diversity support speaker relativism specifically. In this chapter I will discuss two arguments to this effect. The most straightforward argument makes use of the plausible idea that if two speakers

use a term sufficiently differently from one another, it is reasonable to say that they use the term to refer to different things. The idea, then, is that the nature of moral disagreements is such that this conclusion is warranted for moral terms. We may call arguments of this sort, *semantic arguments from diversity* for speaker relativism. In the second kind of argument, diversity plays a different role. According to this argument, the nature of moral diversity forces the absolutist into a dilemma. She has to accept either that there are no moral facts (error-theory) or that there are moral facts but that these are unknowable. Both positions are implausible and therefore, given cognitivism, relativism is the only alternative. Instead of directly making relativism plausible, diversity makes absolutism implausible.

In what follows I will first describe the specific idea about the nature of moral disagreements that both of these arguments rely on: the idea of radical moral disagreements. After that I discuss the semantic argument and the dilemma argument from diversity in turn. I will argue that even if we grant that moral disagreements are radical – a claim I will not take a stand on here – these arguments are not convincing.

Before we enter this discussion, it should be emphasized again that the discussion here concerns whether to accept an absolutist or a relativist form of cognitivism. The arguments from diversity we consider are supposed to give us reason to prefer the latter. Arguments from diversity should not be seen as giving us reason to prefer speaker relativism to non-cognitivism, and to my knowledge no one has proposed this. Theories of the latter kind seem equally fit to explain the fact that people's moral opinions diverge. The arguments are meant to support speaker relativism given that we have independent reasons to believe in cognitivism.

### 3.2 RADICAL MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

No doubt, there is much disagreement over moral matters. Arguments from diversity for speaker relativism (or other forms of moral anti-realism) standardly take off by giving examples of this. Harman, for instance, starts by giving a number of examples of disagreements between different societies:

Members of different cultures often have very different beliefs about right and wrong and often act quite differently on their beliefs. [...] In some [societies], a man is permitted to have several wives, in others bigamy is forbidden. More generally, the moral status of women varies greatly from one society to

another in many different ways. Some societies allow slavery, some have caste systems, which they take to be morally satisfactory, others reject both slavery and caste systems as grossly unjust.<sup>94</sup>

After giving a few more examples, Harman moves on to consider moral disagreements that exist also within societies; about vegetarianism, euthanasia, abortion, the relative value of artefacts compared to human life, killing and letting die, liberty versus equality, moral egoism etc.<sup>95</sup> Other writers have their own favourite examples. Often it is not specific moral disagreements that are described, but clashes between the moral opinions or moralities of different groups, such as; utilitarians and Kantians<sup>96</sup>, utilitarians and priests<sup>97</sup>, rights-centred and virtue-centred moralities, Nozick and Rawls<sup>98</sup>, etc.

Now, the mere existence of disagreements over some issue does not imply that there is no absolute truth about who is right.<sup>99</sup> Consider the following case:

John: Peter is in Gothenburg.

Sarah: No, Peter is still in London.

Disagreements like this are common. And we do not take this to show that there are no absolute truths about the whereabouts of people. Why? Because we think that we can explain each such disagreement in one of the two following ways.

First, John and Sarah might talk about two different people named Peter. In that case, what we have is a merely apparent disagreement: when the misunderstanding is sorted out, it would be wrong to say that they disagree about where Peter is. Furthermore, if John and Sarah find out that they have two different Peters in mind, they will stop seeing themselves as being in disagreement. This apparent disagreement is not in conflict with there being absolute truths about who is in Gothenburg or London: as it turned out, John and Sarah made distinct but not contradicting claims about the same realm of absolute facts.

<sup>94</sup> Harman, in his part of Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 8.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>96</sup> Tersman, 2006, p. 85.

<sup>97</sup> Blackburn, 1984, p. 168.

<sup>98</sup> The two last examples are from Wong, 1984, pp.160-75 and pp. 146-53 respectively.

<sup>99</sup> Philosophers who employ some sort of argument from diversity standardly acknowledge this. See e.g. Mackie, 1977, p. 36, and Harman in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 18.

Second, it might be that either John or Sarah is wrong about where Peter is (or that both are). Perhaps John has not read Peter's email saying that he postponed his trip to Gothenburg. Or maybe he mistook someone else for Peter in a dark nightclub. If so, this explains why the disagreement arises in a way that is compatible with there being an absolute fact about where Peter is. The explanation is that at least one of the disagreeing parties has formed her belief from a less than optimal cognitive position or that she has a "cognitive shortcoming"<sup>100</sup>. She might have formed it on basis of false background beliefs, malfunctioning perception processes, bad reasoning, or wishful thinking etc. Let us call any such factor that can stand in the way of someone's getting true beliefs a *distorting* factor. The presence of *any* distorting factor, then, makes the cognitive position less than optimal.

If all moral disagreements could be explained in the same ways as the disagreement over Peter's whereabouts – if they are, that is, always either the effect of that differing moral opinions are judgements about different aspects of the same realm of absolute moral facts or the effects of distorting factors – considerations about moral disagreement could not be used to object to moral realism, the idea that there are absolute true answers to moral questions. However, if none of the two explanations can be given for disagreements in some area – such as morality, aesthetics, religion or matters of taste – this has been thought to spell trouble for realism about that area. In the subsequent sections we will see more in detail *how* it is thought to be problematic for realists, and especially how speaker relativists have taken it to support their view. In this section we shall consider the claim that moral disagreements cannot be fully explained in the two ways outlined above.

Can some moral disagreements be explained in the first way? This would be the case if what seems to be two conflicting moral judgements really are two different but consistent judgements about the same realm of absolute moral facts. It is sometimes claimed that some apparent moral disagreements are like this; they are, it is held, the effects of applying one and the same general moral principle differently under different conditions. We can call this 'non-fundamental disagreements'. Here is an example from Edvard Westermarck:

[...] differences of ideas may arise from different situations and external conditions of life, which consequently influence moral opinion. We find, for in-

<sup>100</sup> Wright, 2001 introduced this notion. See also, Tersman, 2006.

stance, among many peoples the custom of killing or abandoning parents worn out with age or disease. It prevails among a large number of savage tribes and occurred formerly among many Asiatic and European nations, including the Vedic people and peoples of Teutonic extraction; there is an old English tradition of “the Holy Mawle, which they fancy hung behind the church door, which when the father was seaventie, the sonne might fetch to knock his father in the head, as effete and of no more use.” This custom is particularly common among the nomadic hunting tribes, owing to the hardships of life and the inability of decrepit persons to keep up in the march. In times when the food-supply is insufficient to support all the members of a community it also seems more reasonable that the old and useless should have to perish than the young and vigorous. [...] What appears to most of us as an atrocious practice may really be an act of kindness, and is commonly approved of, or even insisted upon, by the old people themselves.<sup>101</sup>

The idea is that a general moral rule, when put into practice in different societies, can manifest itself differently, both in action and in the derived moral principles that are accepted. To the extent that the existing differences of moral opinion can be explained in this way, such differences do not, of course, count against there being general moral principles that everyone accepts. In that case, the existing disagreements would give us as little reason to doubt that there are absolute true answers about what is morally right and wrong in every specific circumstance, as the merely apparent disagreement over Peter’s whereabouts gives us reason to doubt that there is a true answer about where any specific person named Peter is located.

However, it seems unlikely that all differences can be explained in this way. Many moral disagreements exist within societies, that is, between people that live under what seems to be relevantly similar circumstances. Furthermore, it is not clear to which extent this kind of explanation works even in the cases where it seems most plausible. Take Westermarck’s example: in which sense do we accept the same fundamental moral rules as the nomadic people who think that it is right to kill one’s old parents? Many people in our society would, I suppose, say that the moral rule against killing applies also to killing one’s parents in nomadic societies. It is a fact that people do criticize acts performed in other cultures and societies from a moral standpoint: we think that they act wrong even though they do not appreciate this themselves. This means that different people accept moralities that give different verdicts *in the same circumstances*. Considerations of the same sort makes it

<sup>101</sup> Westermarck, 1970, pp. 184-85.



highly unlikely that there is one underlying moral principle accepted by all forms of Utilitarians, Kantians, Virtue-ethicists and by Rawls and Nozick. Proponents of these views generally extend their principles to all possible circumstances. Consequently we cannot say that they start in the same general moral rule, but arrive at different derived rules as a result of having different circumstances in mind when applying the general rule. For sure, some moral disagreements may turn out to be mere misunderstandings, say, where the disagreeing parties talked about the moral status of killing in different circumstances. But the majority of moral disagreements are fundamental disagreements in the sense that they are not merely different applications of the same underlying principle.

The crucial point, then, is whether the remaining majority of moral disagreements can be explained in the second way outlined above. That is, do they arise when and because at least one of the disputing parties is in a less than optimal cognitive position in relation to absolute moral facts? Is it plausible to think that they would disappear if all distorting factors were removed from the disagreeing parties? If this is the case, all diversities of moral opinion can be fully accounted for by there being distorting factors for at least one of the disputants, stopping her from seeing the absolute moral facts, and there is no friction between these diversities and that moral judgements are about absolute moral facts. All moral disagreements would be resolvable at least in principle, even though it might be difficult in practice to remove all distorting factors in every case.

Do we have reason to think that this is how it is? Some philosophers think not. They believe that many moral disagreements are “radical disagreements”, that is, disagreements that would survive even if the disagreeing parties were in perfect cognitive positions. Thus, after enumerating his examples of moral disagreements, Harman concludes that, “It is hard to see how to account for all moral disagreements in terms of differences in situation or beliefs about nonmoral facts”<sup>102</sup>. The idea is that intuitively, it is simply hard to see that all disagreements between vegetarians and non-vegetarians, utilitarians and Kantians, cannibals and missionaries, people with right-based moralities and people with virtue-based moralities, etc, would disappear if everyone just acquired correct background beliefs, made their moralities consistent and had

<sup>102</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 11.

perfect moral perceptual mechanisms. Moral disagreements are persistent – they survive extensive discussion and argumentation – in a way that makes it implausible to think that they can be explained by there being a true answer to them that the disputants are unable to see due to distortions of their moral judgements. What is special about moral disagreements on this view, then, is that many such disagreements would not be solved even if we removed all distorting factors. As I noted, this view on moral disagreements has been used to argue against moral realism, and in the following section we will consider arguments of this sort.

Moral realists are typically more inclined to deny that moral disagreements are radical.<sup>103</sup> They argue that moral disagreements are effects of irrational distortions of our ways of getting true moral beliefs, e.g. influence of religion and other social and cultural factors on moral thought.<sup>104</sup> Realists have also developed strategies to explain how it can be that moral thought is so much influenced by such irrational factors.<sup>105</sup>

I am sympathetic to the view that it remains to be shown whether there are any successful realist explanations of disagreements of this sort. Realists have not conclusively shown that there are (but rather pointed to theoretical strategies that might be developed into such explanations), and anti-realists have not shown that there aren't.<sup>106/107</sup> In any case, I will not take a stand on whether there are any radical moral dis-

<sup>103</sup> At least that *most* moral disagreements are not radical, see footnote 132.

<sup>104</sup> See, e.g. Boyd, 1988, pp. 212-13, Smith, 1994, pp. 188-89.

<sup>105</sup> For example the idea that observations in general are theory laden. See Loeb, 1998 for a good exposition of such realist explanatory strategies.

<sup>106</sup> See *Ibid.* for an extensive argumentation to this effect.

<sup>107</sup> One reason to remain agnostic about the existence of radical moral disagreement is that the issue seems to hinge on other unsettled matters. Consider for example the intuitionist view on moral knowledge associated with moral non-naturalism. On this account, (some) moral truths are self-evident and we gain knowledge of them through appreciating their truth through intuition. (See for example, Ewing, 1947, Moore, 1903, Moore, 1912, Ross, 1930; for more recent treatments, see the papers in Stratton-Lake, 2002) It seems that in order to hold radical disagreement against intuitionists, one has to show that it is not the case that on every occasion when two people differ in moral views, one of them has failed in her ability to intuit self-evident truths. This is hard to show as long as we do not have a precise picture of the mechanism involved in moral intuition and an independent way of testing whether someone's mechanism falters on some occasion. Before we have taken a stand on the possibility of giving a precise description of this kind, both the intuitionist view itself and the idea of radical moral disagreements remain uncertain.

agreements. In the following sections I will argue that the arguments from diversity for speaker relativism building on the idea of radical moral disagreements fail even if we assume that there are such disagreements.

### 3.3 SEMANTIC ARGUMENTS FROM DIVERSITY

According to one line of reasoning, the existence of radical moral disagreements implies that people use moral terms so differently from one another that we should conclude that they use moral terms to refer to different things.<sup>108</sup> We can call this the *semantic argument from diversity* for speaker relativism. The most elaborate argument of this kind has been given by David Wong. In this section I will first consider his specific form of the argument and then discuss arguments of this kind more generally.

#### 3.3.1 *Wong's semantic argument from diversity*

Wong's semantic argument from diversity starts in his analysis of moral judgements. In this analysis the notion of rules is central. Rules, on Wong's view, can be the content of various imperatives or intentions, and are expressed on the form "A is to do X" (simple rules) or "If C then A is to do X" (conditional rules).

A morality, or moral system, is a system of such rules. To accept a moral system is to accept the rules it contains, which in turn is to have the desires or intentions for which the rules specify the content.<sup>109</sup>

According to Wong, when people first began to formulate and recommend ways of acting to each other, this was done by means of simple rules. When people became more "sophisticated and reflective about the use of their rules"<sup>110</sup> they started formulating and using conditional rules and more general rules applying not only to actions of specific individuals but to everyone. People wanted to be able to say things like,

<sup>108</sup> In the next chapter we will discuss the objection to speaker relativism that it implies that moral disputes are not real disagreements at all, since people talk past each other. In light of this objection one might think that if speaker relativism is true, there can't be radical moral *disagreements*. Perhaps, then, it would be better to speak of radical moral *diversity* in this context. I will stick to the standard terminology, however, and speak of radical disagreement.

<sup>109</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 75.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

“That person breaks some general rule given the conditions that obtain”. This, roughly, is the function of “A ought to do X” statements.

Now, societies develop rules for many different purposes. The distinguishing characteristic of moral systems is that they contain rules that are for “resolving internal conflicts of requirements (stemming from an individual’s different needs, desires, and goals) that affect others and for resolving interpersonal conflicts of interest in general”.<sup>111</sup>

However, this is not yet sufficient to ground an analysis of moral judgements according to Wong. On his view, what we do when we make an “A ought to do X” statement is not merely to say that X is in line with any system of moral rules, however incoherent or influenced by false beliefs it may be. Rather, we say that it is in line with, or recommended by, an *adequate* moral system. The idea is that we not only have moral rules for action, but also standards for systems of such rules. Standards for moral systems are of the form “M is to be F” where M is a moral system and F a property of moral systems. When we accept a moral system we accept it with the implicit presupposition that it is adequate. Thus, to be true, a moral “A ought to do X” statement has to be in line with some moral system that is adequate with respect to an ideal of moralities.

From these considerations, Wong analyses moral “A ought to do X” statements as follows:

By not doing X under actual conditions C, A will be breaking a rule of an adequate moral system.<sup>112</sup>

This analysis is not in itself speaker relativistic. If there is only one adequate moral system, every person who utters or believes “A ought to do X” will refer to the rules of that system. However, Wong argues that this is not so. What opens up for the possibility of speaker relativism, according to Wong, is that, “[t]he extension of ‘adequate moral system’ could vary, as the term is used in different groups and societies”.<sup>113</sup>

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>112</sup> Actually, Wong adds another clause to his analysis. The complete statement of the analysis reads: “By not doing X under actual conditions C, A will be breaking a rule of an adequate moral system *applying to him or her*”. (Ibid., p. 40, my italics) The “applying to him or her”-part serves to open up for agent relativism. We can leave this out, since we are here only interested in Wong’s theory as a form of speaker relativism.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., p. 44. It should be noticed that Wong does not think that people in general use the expression ‘adequate moral system’. He writes that, “the term is a modest

A speaker B may say of A that he ought to do X under conditions C. A speaker D may say of A that he ought not to do X under the same conditions C. If 'adequate moral system' has different extensions in the idiolects of B and D, both statements may be true, and there is no conflict between the statements generated by their truth-conditions.<sup>114</sup>

Wong proceeds to try to show that this is the case; that different speakers refer to different systems of moral rules by 'adequate moral system'. The basic idea is that some of the descriptions that speakers associate with 'adequate moral system' are more basic or stronger than other such descriptions. These strong descriptions are reference-fixing descriptions. And, since people associate different reference-fixing descriptions with 'adequate moral system', the term will refer to different moral systems when different people use it.

The following example serves to illustrate the idea. "Early Christians", Wong writes, "laid down at the core of their conceptions of the moral ideal rule that all human beings are to be treated as beings with worth and dignity."<sup>115</sup> However, this has not always kept Christians from holding slaves.

There is inconsistency here, and those who desired to maintain slavery tried to justify its existence in various ways. There were the claims about the natural inferiority of enslaved races that are still made to this day. In the southern United States, there was an attempt to justify slavery as a form of paternalism. Involuntary labor was transformed into legitimate return for the protection and direction of masters. It was claimed that slaves acquiesced to their faith, that they willingly became part of the "family" of which the white master was the father.<sup>116</sup>

The moral systems of Christians who justify slave holding in these ways contain at least two rules. First, there is the rule that all human beings, irrespective of race and skin colour, are to be treated as beings with dignity. Second, there is the rule that permits holding certain people as slaves. There is an important difference between these rules in the system: the first is more basic. This is displayed in the fact that the second rule is measured against, or justified in light of, the first: the various justifications of slave holding in the quote above make it clear that, in

idealization of in the sense that I have chosen it as a more explicit rendering of what people have in mind when they use terms such as 'the right moral rules'." (Wong, 1984, p. 40).

<sup>114</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 45.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

order to defend the second rule, the Christian slave-holders thought that they had to show that holding slaves is consistent with the rule that all human beings are to be treated as beings with dignity. Thus, they implicitly acknowledged that they would have to give up the rule permitting slavery, if any of the, mainly empirical, beliefs used to justify it turned out to be false. They are thus willing to admit that there are circumstances under which that rule would not be in an adequate moral system. This, however, Wong argues, is not true of the more basic rule against treating people differently only on basis of their skin colour.

[...] there are substantive moral beliefs that we cannot conceive to be false. Do we doubt that a person's skin color (in and of itself) is irrelevant to how we ought to treat him or her? This indubitability is explained by saying that we have a reference-fixing description that connects the adequacy of a moral system with a consideration of the interests of human beings regardless of their skin color.<sup>117</sup>

Our actual moral systems contain a bunch of moral rules. Some of these rules we would be prepared to give up if we were informed (or misinformed) that certain non-moral beliefs we have are false; it can be beliefs either about the consequences of certain actions, or beliefs that link the rules to more basic rules. Other rules we are not prepared to give up. The latter serve as reference-fixing descriptions of 'adequate moral system'.

This is where radical disagreement comes into the argument. One way of spelling out the idea that there are radical disagreements about moral questions is to say that some differences between people's moral opinions are such that their moral opinions would not converge even if we were to remove all distorting factors, such as false non-moral beliefs and incoherencies. In other words, people have different moral beliefs that they are not prepared to give up. Now, given Wong's view on reference fixing, this implies that people associate different reference-fixing descriptions with 'adequate moral system', and therefore that people refer to different moral systems when they use this term. Since Wong analyses moral judgements as judgements about which actions are allowed and not allowed by rules in an adequate moral system, the result is that people refer to different things when they make moral judgements. In other words, the result is speaker relativism.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 59.

Is this a good argument? I think that it can be questioned in a rather simple way. The argument hinges on that Wong's analysis of moral judgements is correct and that it allows for the possibility of speaker relativism. But many people have absolutist intuitions that go against the analysis. "Insofar as we refer to, or intend to refer to, adequate moral systems at all when we make moral judgements" they will say, "we refer to, or intend to refer to, *the only* adequate moral system". In effect, an analysis that fit the intentions of such people better is the following.

By not doing X under actual conditions C, A will be breaking a rule of *the only* adequate moral system.

But if we analyse "A ought to do X" statements in this way, it seems that speaker relativism is no longer a viable option. Or at least, more has to be said to argue that it is. The problem, then, with Wong's argument for speaker relativism and against absolutism is that it presupposes a non-absolutist analysis of moral judgements.

Wong has one argument that might seem to question that we, or some of us, really have such absolutist intentions. The moralities that are accepted in societies, he notices, are not constant but change constantly. He writes that in light of this, "it is not plausible to say that members of a moral tradition simply resolve to use a term such as 'adequate moral system' or 'the right moral rules' with the intention of preserving the reference of the past"<sup>118</sup>. I think that this argument misses its target. It is a good argument against the claim that we intend to refer to the moralities others *accept or think of as being the correct morality*, either in the past or now, because we know that others have accepted moralities that we do not. But it does nothing to threaten the idea that we, or some of us, intend to refer to the morality that others *refer* to, and everyone refers to, namely the single true morality. We can do this because we can think that others have referred to the absolute moral facts we take ourselves to refer to even though they have had many false beliefs about these facts and thus have accepted other moralities as being true.

Another speaker relativist, Gilbert Harman, is more responsive to the absolutist intentions some speakers have. Harman draws the conclusion that;

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

[...] moral relativism is not by itself a claim about meaning. It does not say that speakers always *intend* their moral judgments to be relational in this respect. It is clear that many speakers do not.<sup>119</sup>

I will return, both in this chapter and later, to discuss how we can understand Harman's claim that relativism can and should be understood as something other than a thesis about meaning. My point here is not that the absolutist intentions of some speakers finally precludes that speaker relativism is true as a theory about the meaning of moral terms, or even that it precludes Wong's argument for it. In my opinion, Harman draws this conclusion too swiftly. My point is that the speaker relativist cannot ignore the absolutist intentions many of us have in using moral terms and the descriptions we associate with them. This is a potential problem for their view. As a consequence I think that Wong's argument is less straightforward than he appreciates. Especially so since Wong himself builds his argument for speaker relativism to a large extent on the intentions speakers have in using a term ('adequate moral system') and the descriptions they associate with it.

### 3.3.2 *A more direct semantic argument from diversity*

We saw that Wong's argument is problematic because it presupposes that a certain controversial analysis of moral judgements is correct. What the relativist needs then, it might seem, is an argument from diversity that does not presuppose a specific and controversial analysis of moral judgements. To my knowledge, no speaker relativist has used a direct semantic argument like this. But it has been suggested that they could do so.<sup>120</sup> And more commonly, non-cognitivists have used it to show that cognitivists are committed to speaker relativism, which, in turn, with the additional premise that speaker relativism for some reason is implausible, has been intended to show that cognitivism is false. However, speaker relativists of course reject this additional premise, and think that they have good reason to do so. If they are right about this, there is no reason to think the direct semantic argument could not be used to support speaker relativism.

The argument, at least when properly worked out, is very similar to Wong's argument, with the exception that it does not presuppose any specific analysis of moral judgements. The best-known presentation of

<sup>119</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>120</sup> Loeb, 1998, p. 292.



the argument is given by Richard Hare, in his famous thought experiment where a missionary comes to an island inhabited by cannibals. Coincidentally, the cannibals use the same moral terms as we do, and the terms have the same function in their language; ‘good’, for example, is used as “the most general adjective of commendation”. However, the missionary and the cannibals apply the word ‘good’ to totally different things.

The only thing they [the cannibals] find odd is that he [the missionary] applies it to such unexpected people, people who are meek and gentle and do not collect large quantities of scalps; whereas they themselves are accustomed to commend people who are bold and burly and collect more scalps than the average.<sup>121</sup>

Hare draws the conclusion that, insofar as ‘good’ (and other moral terms) has a descriptive meaning, this meaning is not the same for the cannibals and the missionary. Being a non-cognitivist, Hare then moves on to argue for the further conclusion that moral terms must also have a different kind of meaning than a descriptive one. Since the descriptive meaning varies, this part of the meaning cannot account for the fact that there is a genuine disagreement between the parties of moral disagreements, such as the cannibals and the missionary. (We will return to this argument against speaker relativism in the next chapter.) Other non-cognitivists have used basically the same kind of examples to argue for the same conclusion; that cognitivism is bound to speaker relativism, and then, of course, further argued that this is a reason to believe in non-cognitivism.<sup>122</sup> As I said above, however, this further step is not necessary, and the first part of the argument, that cognitivism is committed to speaker relativism, could thus be held in favour of speaker relativism.

Let us examine the argument closer. One way to spell it out is in terms of the principle of charity. Loeb puts it loosely as follows:

If people have widely differing beliefs about a number of moral questions, perhaps charity requires that we interpret them as referring to *different* properties, or using moral language in some entirely different, non-referring way (as non-cognitivists contend). That way, at least, we could avoid holding that people are so often in error about what morality requires.<sup>123</sup>

<sup>121</sup> Hare, 1952, p. 148.

<sup>122</sup> See, e.g. Blackburn, 1984, p. 168, Stevenson, 1963, pp. 48-51.

<sup>123</sup> Loeb, 1998, p. 292.

However, a reasonable principle of charity does not let us conclude that two people refer to different properties by the term 'E' directly from the fact they apply 'E' differently. As we have seen, in many cases divergences of this sort are results of that it was less than perfect cognitive processes that produced the belief of at least one of the parties, such as false background beliefs, bad reasoning or malfunctioning perception. If that is the case, we have no reason to conclude that the parties use the term to refer to different things. Suppose you say, "that's a goat" and I say, "no, that's not a goat, it's a chair". If this can be explained by the fact that you have taken some hallucinogenic drug that makes you see goats where there are none (a case of malfunctioning perception), our diverse applications of the term 'goat' does not indicate that we use it to refer to different things. Or if I say, "that's a bottle of wine" and you say "that is not a bottle of wine" this need not indicate that we use 'bottle of wine' (or 'that') to refer to different things, it might simply be that I am unaware of the fact that someone has replaced the wine with water. If such explanations are at hand, we cannot conclude from the divergence that the parties refer differently by the term in question. The parties diverge regarding about which objects they say "that object is E", but they might agree exactly on what it takes for something to have property E, under which conditions it is correct to apply the term 'E'.<sup>124</sup>

This is why, just like in Wong's argument, the question of whether there are radical moral disagreements is relevant to the direct semantic argument. It seems that it is only if there are radical moral disagreements – cases where two speakers apply moral terms differently and where this cannot be explained by any cognitive shortcoming of any of the parties – that we can draw the conclusion that the parties use moral terms to refer to different properties.

I will soon argue that this argument fails to establish speaker relativism. First, however, let me say something about the form of speaker relativism that emerges from this argument. It is both similar to and different from the form Wong defends. It is similar in that what a speaker refers to when she uses moral terms depends on her morality, and that the relevant morality is determined by the speaker's strong moral beliefs. Thus, according to the form of speaker relativism under discussion here, "X is right" can be analysed roughly as, "X is allowed by the norms in (the corrected version) of my moral system".

<sup>124</sup> Cf. Tersman, 2006, p. 91.

On the other hand, it differs from Wong's view in that we do not arrive at the analysis from the content of intentions of the speakers. Speakers do not, or at least need not, intend to talk about their own morality or a morality at all. Different speakers have different referential intentions, in the sense that their uses of moral terms are ultimately governed by different considerations, i.e., that the speakers apply the terms to different kinds of acts and would do so even if they were rid of all cognitive shortcomings. It is consistent with this that they believe that they refer to the same properties as everyone does, and believe that there is one unique true answer to every specific moral question. This is what I mean when I say that the analysis is not a description of the content of the intentions or intuitions that speakers have when they use moral terms. (Depending on which theory about meaning we accept, this view might be taken to further imply that moral terms have different meanings when different speakers use them. If we say this, then the relativist analysis would not capture the meaning of moral judgements either.) Rather, it is a way of formulating truth-conditions of moral judgements in a general form that holds for every speaker's moral judgements. Since according to this form of speaker relativism, the relativist analysis does not emerge from a common relativist feature of people's use of moral terms, but from people's divergent use, we can call it *divergence relativism*.

This is congenial to some of the ways Harman describes his view. As we saw above, according to Harman, speaker relativism should not be understood as a claim about the meaning of moral terms, since many speakers have absolutist intentions. Rather, Harman writes, the relativist analysis is a way of spelling out how a moral judgement has to be understood "for the purposes of assigning truth conditions"<sup>125</sup>. This seems to fit the form of speaker relativist analysis we are currently considering.<sup>126</sup>

Is this argument more successful than Wong's? In the previous section I argued that Wong's argument is problematic since it presupposes an analysis of moral judgements that seems to be in conflict with the absolutist intuitions of many speakers. The direct argument does not

<sup>125</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996.

<sup>126</sup> In chapter 7 we will see that there are other ways in which Harman describes his theory that fit less well with this form of speaker relativism. However, since Harman's view is quite underdescribed, the current form can be seen as one of several possible interpretations.

presuppose such an analysis. Instead the relativist (and thus non-absolutist) analysis is the conclusion of the argument. I think that this argument is also problematic, however.

Let us make a comparison. Alexander uses the word ‘witch’ about all people wearing a hat and only about people with hat. Joakim uses the word about all people with a moustache and only about people with a moustache. Does this mean that they refer to different properties by the word? No. Both agree that someone is a witch if and only if he or she has magical powers. They agree (i) that if there are no people with magical powers, then there are no witches (even if there are people with hats and moustaches), and (ii) if all and only people with hats have magical powers then people with hats are the witches and if all and only people with moustache have magical powers, then it is people with moustache who are witches. If this is the case, we do not want to say that they refer to different properties by the word ‘witch’. Their belief that someone is a witch if and only if he or she has magical powers is stronger than their beliefs that it is people with hats or moustaches that are witches. Since they share the former and stronger belief, the reasonable conclusion to draw is that they refer to the same property.

Can it be like this in the case of moral disagreements as well? Let us take an example. We have a utilitarian who think that an action is morally right if and only if it maximizes well-being. And we have a Kantian who maintains that many acts that do not maximize well-being are morally right. Can we conclude that they refer to different properties by ‘right’? Not so fast. Many of us have strong absolutist intuitions about moral properties. We think that an action is morally right only if it has an objective or absolute reason-giving property. (I will expand more on how to spell out and understand this intuition in chapter 5 and 6.)

Assume that the utilitarian above has this intuition or belief. He has two beliefs about what it takes for an act to be morally right:

- (i) An action is right only if it maximizes well-being.
- (ii) An action is morally right only if it has an absolute reason-giving property.

Assume further that for our utilitarian the second belief is stronger than the first. He thinks (i) that if no actions have absolute reason-giving properties, then no actions are right, even if they maximize well-being (a la Mackie’s error-theory), and (ii) that if the absolute reason-giving facts

there are, are Kantian in nature, then actions can be morally right even if they do not maximize well-being. Then it seems that our utilitarian is not using ‘morally right’ as co-extensive with ‘maximizes well-being’ after all: there are scenarios in which he is ready to separate his use of ‘is right’ from his use of ‘maximizes well-being’.

Assume furthermore that the Kantian has the corresponding beliefs. Then the situation is structurally identical to Alexander’s and Joakim’s beliefs about witches. Now it does not seem plausible to say that their beliefs in utilitarianism and Kantianism fix the referents of ‘morally right’ as they use it respectively. So their disagreement is no evidence of speaker relativism.<sup>127</sup>

The argument here is to the effect that, even if we assume that sufficiently divergent use is evidence of difference in extension, radical disagreement need not indicate sufficiently divergent use. Whether or not the disagreement between the utilitarian and the Kantian is radical depends on whether it would be solved if they were deprived of all cognitive shortcomings. If removing all cognitive shortcomings would make them see the nature of absolute moral facts, then it is not a radical disagreement. If it would not, this means that their moral controversy is cognitively irresolvable. But, and this is my point, they would still agree about the possible scenarios as described above.

My point here is not that the absolutist intuitions or beliefs of people like our utilitarian above *do* serve to determine the meaning or reference of their moral judgements (even though I will argue that they do in part 2). Rather, the point is that even *given* the assumption behind the semantic argument from diversity – that people’s strong beliefs can serve to determine the meaning or reference of their moral judgements – we cannot conclude that divergence in people’s normative moral beliefs implies speaker relativism; this move would ignore the possibility that people’s absolutist beliefs about moral properties are stronger than their normative views. To deal with this issue, speaker relativists have to address meaning theoretical questions and argue from them that the absolutist intentions are indecisive. We will consider different possible ways for speaker relativists to argue along this line in part 2.<sup>128</sup>

<sup>127</sup> The corresponding holds for Wong’s argument from diversity. That is, Wong’s argument is questionable not only because it presupposes a non-absolutist analysis of moral expressions, but also because the absolutist intentions that many speakers have make it unclear what their divergent use of moral terms imply.

<sup>128</sup> In “Moral Relativism and the Argument from Disagreement” James Ryan purports

Neither is my point that every speaker would respond to the scenario like the imagined utilitarian in the example above. But some, perhaps many, would. And this is a problem for the direct semantic argument from diversity, since it is supposed to be an argument for a general speaker relativism, according to which the truth-value of *every* speaker's moral judgements depends on which morality she accepts.

#### 3.4 ABSOLUTISM'S DILEMMA

I have argued that the fact that many speakers have absolutist intentions when making moral judgements is a problem for the semantic arguments from diversity for speaker relativism. This, however, does not mean that considerations about the diversity of moral opinions do not tell against absolutism. If they do, this constitutes an indirect argument for speaker relativism.

According to the argumentative line against absolutism we will consider in this section, the existence of radical moral disagreements presents moral absolutism with a dilemma. The absolutist will have to accept either an implausible form of realism or error-theory.

Consider first the consequence of radical moral disagreements for realism. The existence of such disagreements would not directly demonstrate the falsity of moral realism. However, it would commit the realist to the view that there is no method or mechanism for getting in contact with the moral facts there are, the use of which would make it more probable that one acquires true moral beliefs. If there is such a method or mechanism, even though the use of it does not guarantee true belief, there will be conditions under which it leads to true belief. These are cognitively optimal conditions. Thus, if there is such a method, then there are no radical moral disagreements – disagreements will either be the effect of that at least one of the disputants lack the method or fail to apply it under cognitively optimal conditions.<sup>129</sup> The existence of radical

to give another direct semantic argument for moral relativism. However, in Ryan's discussion "moral relativism" alters between being a speaker relativist and an agent relativist position. In formulations such as, "When I say, "Communism is wrong," I mean, "Communism violates the (largest and most coherent set of) standards of my society." (Ryan, 2003, p. 381), it sounds like a form of speaker relativism is under discussion. The conclusion of his argument, however, is agent relativism: "The conclusion of the argument is that *it is possible for an act to be morally permissible in one society while an act of the same kind would be morally impermissible in another society*". (Ryan, 2003, p. 383).

<sup>129</sup> I am assuming determinism here: if indeterminism is true, then a method that gives

moral disagreements thus commits moral realists to the position that there is no method to reach the moral facts there are.<sup>130</sup> This is a position realists generally do not want to hold. And the position does indeed seem problematic: why posit the existence of moral facts that we have no reliable way of tracking?

This line of reasoning is no doubt too short and rough to establish that the existence of radical disagreements would constitute a real threat to realism.<sup>131</sup> But in what follows I will simply assume that it is not a viable option for realists to accept that there are radical moral disagreements.<sup>132</sup> And I will argue that even if this is so, and even if we assume that there are radical moral disagreements, this does not threaten absolutism. It doesn't since the objection against error-theory in the second horn of the dilemma can be answered, at least given premises that speaker relativists need to grant. So let us turn to this second horn of the dilemma.

If absolutists cannot be realists, since there are radical moral disagreements (which I assume for the sake of argument), the only alternative for them is to accept an error-theory; that absolute facts of the kind moral judgements are about do not exist. And most people find error-theory very counterintuitive. Wong writes as follows about Mackie's error-theory:

rise to true moral beliefs with high probability, might fail to do so in situations that are just like the situations where it succeeds.

<sup>130</sup> Whether radical moral disagreements also commit realists to the view that moral facts are *unknowable* seems to depend on which view of epistemic justification one has. It does not, for example, preclude that someone has true moral beliefs that fit nicely together in a coherent system. It does, however, preclude that this coherence is a method of getting in touch with moral truths: if it were, under cognitively optimal conditions it would lead to true moral beliefs.

<sup>131</sup> I can see two possible ways to defend realism from the threat of radical disagreement. First, one could argue that radical disagreements do not imply that there is no method to get in contact with moral facts. Or second, one could argue that there is no such method, but that it is still possible to justify the idea that there are facts of the kind we have no method to reach.

<sup>132</sup> It has been argued that realists can accept a certain amount of radical moral disagreements since they can hold that some moral propositions are vague so that some moral questions have indeterminate answers. (See for example Brink, 1984, Shafer-Landau, 1994, Sturgeon, 1994 and Tersman, 2006, p. 66) It is not clear, however, that reference to indeterminacy or vagueness can help realists. Loeb puts this doubt as follows: "If we continue to disagree a great deal about borderline cases, rather than recognize that they are irresolvable *because* they are indeterminate, then we still have genuine disagreement of the sort that threatens moral realism." (Loeb, 1998, p. 291).

Mackie's explanation of why people err in believing in a single true morality has a severe cost. He has built into the meaning of 'good' and 'ought' a false presupposition that makes all moral statements containing these terms false [...].<sup>133</sup>

The cost of error-theory, Wong seems to think, is that it makes all moral judgements come out false. It cannot be denied that this is a deeply counterintuitive consequence of error-theory – that every positive moral judgement, saying that an action is morally right or wrong or that a person or event is morally good or bad, is false. This is, as Dreier puts it, “violently contrary to common sense”<sup>134</sup>. One way to spell this counterintuitivity out in philosophical terms is to refer to some principle of charity. Is it not very uncharitable and therefore implausible to say that beliefs constituting a large sub-set of our belief system, beliefs that every one of us have every day, are all false without exception? Is it not more reasonable to assume that those beliefs have some other content that makes at least some of them come out as true?

Why does it seem so implausible that all positive moral beliefs are false? One way to bring out what seems mysterious about this is that, if it is true, we form our moral beliefs on grounds that are totally irrelevant. If we do not observe or stand in some other contact with moral properties, which we cannot since they are not there, why do we believe that they exist? Why would we form our moral judgements from considerations that give no support to them? Or, in other words, if moral judgements were beliefs about a kind of facts that do not exist, could we not rather expect that we did not have positive moral beliefs, or at least that such beliefs were not had by more or less everyone? If error-theorists cannot answer these questions, this casts doubt on the absolutist analysis they accept. If, on the other hand, they can answer the questions, they have explained why we come to believe that actions have properties such as moral rightness and wrongness when in fact they do not. This would be a way to rid the claim that all positive moral beliefs are false from the implausibility it initially seems to have.

<sup>133</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 78 In full length the last sentence in the quote reads: “He has built into the meaning of ‘good’ and ‘ought’ a false presupposition that makes all moral statements containing these terms false *or without truth-values*.” (My italics.) However, the view that moral statements lack truth-value is part of non-cognitivism and not error-theory.

<sup>134</sup> Dreier, 2006, p. 241.



I will not argue here that error-theorists can answer the questions above. Instead I will argue that what error-theorists need to say in order to make their theory plausible in light of these considerations, is something that speaker relativists also need to say. If I am right about this, the objection to error-theory at hand is not an objection speaker relativists can use.

Let us, for the sake of argument, assume with speaker relativists that what guides people in making the specific moral judgements they make is not that they observe absolute moral facts, but rather the moralities they have somehow acquired (the set of values, principles, desires, motivations, or something similar that they have), together, of course, with their beliefs about the properties of the actions they evaluate. Speaker relativists have to hold that this does not exclude that people also have absolutist intuitions and beliefs about what these moral judgements are, intuitions to the effect that they are beliefs about absolute moral properties. They have to accept this since many people actually do have such an absolutist understanding of moral judgements. They also have to accept that people do keep forming moral judgements, even though (i) people think that moral facts are absolute moral facts and (ii) there are no such facts. Suppose now that these absolutist intuitions about moral properties came to have a central enough place in the system of beliefs that these people have to actually fix the reference of their moral beliefs, so that the beliefs concern absolute moral properties. Why would this fact make it harder to explain that people with these intuitions keep forming moral judgements?

The potential problem for error theory we are considering is that it seems strange that people have moral beliefs if all of them are false. But: if people can maintain their belief that moral properties are absolute properties and still form moral judgements even though there are no absolute moral properties (which obviously they can if speaker relativism is correct) why would they not be able to do that if the absolutist belief was reference-fixing? There should be no difference with respect to this: plausibly, it is the mere presence of the belief that our moral judgements are beliefs about absolute moral properties that would make it strange that we actually accept moral judgements in light of the fact that there are no such absolute moral properties, not that it is reference-fixing. The upshot is the following: since also speaker relativists have to accept the claim that people keep having moral beliefs even though that which they take these beliefs to be about does not exist, they

cannot object to error-theory on the ground that this claim is implausible.

This argument can be further supplemented by the following reasoning. The fact that the assumed inexistence of absolute moral facts is a non-transparent fact (which it must be since people who think that moral facts are absolute keep forming moral beliefs), means that the evolutionary pressure to accept moral judgements has more of a free scope to exercise its force on us. In the previous chapter I introduced the idea that at least part of the social and evolutionary function of moral thought and language is to make it easier to cooperate and co-ordinate actions in groups of people. For moral judgements to have this function, people must let their moral opinions guide their actions. This means, of course, that people also must *have* moral opinions; if they do not, there is nothing for them to be guided by. This function of moral thinking has formed us into the moral thinkers we are. If this is true, we can expect that people form moral judgements in much the way we do, at least as long as they do not come to think that there is good reason to believe that moral thinking is in some way flawed. The inexistence of absolute moral properties, together with the intuition that moral judgements concern absolute moral properties, could perhaps have constituted a good reason to think that moral thinking is flawed; *had it not been for the non-transparency of this inexistence*. So, given this non-transparency, we should expect exactly that people continue to have moral beliefs, even if error-theory is correct.

(There is one possible objection to the argument: could people's beliefs in moral absolutism really serve to fix the reference of their moral beliefs in such a way that they refer to absolute moral properties? I will argue that they can and sometimes do in chapter 6-7.)

The conclusion is that the dilemma argument against absolutism fails. Even if considerations about moral diversity push the realist into an infeasible position – a claim I have not taken a stand on – absolutist error-theory remains a viable option. At least, the objection to absolutist error-theory discussed in this section – that it is implausible to ascribe so much error – cannot be used by speaker relativists.

### 3.5 CONCLUSION

I have argued that there is no simple argument from the existence of moral diversity to speaker relativism. First, the semantic arguments from diversity for speaker relativism are problematic due to the abso-

lutist intentions of many speakers. Second, as we have just seen, the argument that aims to make speaker relativism plausible through forcing absolutism into a dilemma fails, since it is possible to argue that error-theoretical absolutism can find a way out of the dilemma on premises that speaker relativists need to accept. This means that something else is needed to decide between speaker relativism and absolutism.

In the previous chapter we also saw that the argument from motivation for speaker relativism fails, because absolutists can explain the connection between moral judgements and motivation. The conclusion so far, is that the decision between speaker relativism and absolutism has to be settled on other grounds. In the next chapter we will discuss one such argument, the most common argument *against* speaker relativism: that this theory cannot account for the fact that in many moral disputes, the parties are in genuine disagreement and are not merely speaking past each other.

# Chapter 4

## Trouble for Relativism: Explaining Disagreement

### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

If speaker relativism is true, moral terms have different extensions when speakers with relevantly different moralities use them. One consequence of this seems to be that in situations where one person says about an action, “it is right” and another says about that action, “it is not right” they need not disagree. If ‘right’ in the two statements have different extension, as might be the case on speaker relativism, it is fully possible that both statements are true. The action might fall within one of the extensions, but not within the other.

In large parts of the metaethical literature, this consequence is taken as decisive evidence that speaker relativism is false. Obviously, it is thought, when two people make claims like those above, there is a disagreement. Consequently, any theory that implies that there isn’t must be wrong.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss this objection. In the following section we will look closer at it. After that, we consider replies to the effect that relativism does indeed imply that there are moral disagreements in the sense that the objection presupposes. First I consider speaker relativist attempts to use this kind of reply and argue that these fail. But recently a new form of truth-value relativism, which I call asses-

*mor relativism*, has been suggested to do better in this respect. I argue that it doesn't.

This, however, need not be a large problem for relativists, if they can explain why we have these intuitions about moral disagreement even though they are false; or alternatively, if they can argue that these are not the intuitions we have about moral disagreements. I argue that it is plausible to think that explanations of these two sorts are available.

#### 4.2 SPEAKER RELATIVISM AND MORAL DISAGREEMENT

As we have seen in previous chapters, speaker relativism is motivated by what we might call subjective features of morality: the connection between having a moral opinion and being motivated, and the large differences between different people's moral opinions. Speaker relativists take these features to be indicators that moral terms refer to different things when used by different speakers. What the many philosophers who use the objection from disagreement against speaker relativism point to, is that we have intuitions that morality is not subjective in this way. More specifically, we have intuitions to the effect that when people are involved in moral disputes they disagree in a way that is consistent with moral absolutism but not with relativism.

The objection to speaker relativism that the theory has counterintuitive implications about moral disagreements has been on the metaethical scene at least since G. E. Moore:

If, when one man says, 'This action is right', and another answers, 'No, it is not right', each of them is always merely making an assertion about *his own* feelings, it plainly follows that there is never really any difference of opinion between them: the one of them is never really contradicting what the other is asserting. They are no more contradicting one another than if, when one said, 'I like sugar', the other had answered, 'I *don't* like sugar'. In such a case, there is, of course, no conflict of opinion, no contradiction of one by the other: for it may perfectly well be the case that what each asserts is equally true; it might quite well be the case that the one man does like sugar, and the other really does *not* like it. The one, therefore, is *never* denying what the other is asserting. And what the view we are considering involves is that when one man holds an action to be right, and another holds it to be wrong or not right, here also the one is *never* denying what the other is asserting. It involves, therefore, the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong. And surely the fact that it involves this consequence is sufficient to condemn it. It is surely plain matter of fact that when I assert an action to be wrong, and another man asserts it to be right, there

sometimes is a real difference of opinion between us: he sometimes is denying the very thing which I am asserting.<sup>135</sup>

More modern writers make the same point. Crispin Wright complains about indexical relativism that

it seems destined to misrepresent the manner in which, at least as ordinarily understood, the contents in question embed under operations like the conditional and negation. If it were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclination and the ‘dispute’ between one who says ‘I am tired’ and her companion who replies, ‘Well, I am not’. [...] There are the materials here, perhaps, for a (further) disagreement but no disagreement has yet been expressed. But ordinary understanding already hears a disagreement between one who asserts that hurt-free infidelity is acceptable and one who asserts that it is not.<sup>136</sup>

And Mark Timmons:

[...] it is clear that some modes of discourse are properly understood as involving terms and concepts for which a relativist treatment is entirely plausible. However, let us say that a version of relativism, for a certain class of terms and concepts, is chauvinistic just in case it entails that in cases where two individuals or groups really do seem to be thinking or uttering contradictory judgments employing those terms and concepts, the judgments in question are not really contradictory at all. Typically, an important source of evidence that some version of relativism is chauvinistic is when there is a mismatch between what the theory says about certain cases on the one hand and what pre-theoretic common sense says about those cases on the other. In particular, we have evidence of chauvinism when common sense says that certain judgments really are contradictory and we have a genuine case of disagreement, whereas the theory says that there is a lack of genuine disagreement [...].

Now I submit that relativistic treatments of moral terms and concepts are chauvinistic and thus we have reason (defeasible, of course) to reject versions of moral relativism.<sup>137</sup>

These are just a small selection of more or less similar formulations of the objection from the metaethical literature.<sup>138</sup> I will call this objection to speaker relativism ‘the objection from intuitive disagreement’. The charge it holds against speaker relativism is that the theory implies that

<sup>135</sup> Moore, 1912, pp. 63-64.

<sup>136</sup> Wright, 2001, p. 51.

<sup>137</sup> Timmons, 2003, pp. 406-07.

<sup>138</sup> For a few other examples, see: Horgan and Timmons, 2000, Horgan and Timmons, Forthcoming, Kölbel, 2002, Smith, 1994, pp. 34-35, Streiffer, 1999 and Brink, 1989, pp. 29-35. As noted in the previous chapter, non-cognitivists have used this kind of argument to argue against cognitivism generally, after arguing that cognitivists are committed to some form of relativism; see footnotes 121 and 122.

people who are involved in moral disputes of the kind exemplified in the quotes above, are not disagreeing with each other in a way that we *intuitively* think that they are disagreeing. Timmons refers to this intuition as ‘commons sense’ and Wright as ‘ordinary understanding’.

There are also other ways to put basically the same objection. One is Max Kölbel’s claim that the theory faces a problem regarding denials of moral utterances.<sup>139</sup> We can use a simple version of speaker relativism to illustrate: “X is wrong” has the same meaning as “My morality forbids X”. Now, assume that we have a moral dispute between a Kantian, we can call him Kant, and a utilitarian, Smart:

Kant: (S<sub>1</sub>) It is wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

Smart: (S<sub>2</sub>) No, that’s not true.

Now, on the one hand we expect Smart’s statement to be equivalent to

(S<sub>3</sub>) No, punishing innocent Irwin is not wrong

and therefore, on the relativist picture, equivalent to

(S<sub>4</sub>) No, *my* morality does not forbid punishing innocent Irwin

On the other hand we expect it to be a denial of Kant’s statement, that is, a denial of that Kant’s morality forbids punishing innocent Irwin, and therefore equivalent to

(S<sub>5</sub>) No, *your* morality does not forbid punishing innocent Irwin

Speaker relativism faces a dilemma. If the speaker relativist says that (S<sub>2</sub>) is equivalent to (S<sub>5</sub>) she will in effect implausibly maintain that denials of moral statements (such as (S<sub>2</sub>)) are not moral statements themselves. According to speaker relativism, moral statements are statements about the speaker’s own morality, not about other people’s moralities.

On the other hand, it would be equally implausible for speaker relativists to say that (S<sub>2</sub>) is equivalent to (S<sub>4</sub>). This would commit them to the view that moral denials or negations work differently than denials

<sup>139</sup> Kölbel, 2002.

or negations in other cases: “the move involves a separate treatment of the denial of indexical utterances when matters of taste are involved. Normally denials of indexical utterances function differently. In order to appreciate the absurdity of the special rule in non-taste cases, consider a situation where I say ‘Hello, my name is Max.’, addressing Paul. It would be very strange indeed if Paul were to answer ‘No, it’s Paul.’ – unless he wanted to accuse me of pretending to be someone I am not.”<sup>140</sup>

I think that the power of the dilemma argument basically comes from the objection that moral relativism clashes with our intuitions about moral disagreement. The implausibility of the first horn of the dilemma pushes the relativist into the second horn, which in its most plausible form should be interpreted as a version of the intuitive disagreement objection. It is not the fact that the word ‘no’ is used in moral disagreements that make it implausible to say that (S<sub>2</sub>) is equivalent to (S<sub>4</sub>). This word is regularly used to indicate our own negative attitude to someone else’s desires or intentions. For example: when your only friend at a boring party says to you “I want to leave now” and you say “No, please can’t you stay a bit longer”, you don’t use ‘no’ to negate what your friend has said; you use it to emphasize your dislike or disapproval of her intention. What is implausible about interpreting (S<sub>2</sub>) as (S<sub>4</sub>) is that we have the intuition that there really is a genuine disagreement, in the sense that (S<sub>2</sub>) is used to negate (S<sub>1</sub>).

Before we turn to relativist replies to the objection from intuitive disagreements, we can note that different forms of speaker relativism have slightly different implications for disagreement. We saw that Moore objected to the variant of speaker relativism he considers that it involves “the very curious consequence that no two men can ever differ in opinion as to whether an action is right or wrong”. The claim that speaker relativism has the consequence that people can *never* disagree over moral matters is true for some forms of relativism but not others. The form of speaker relativism Moore discusses, a version of subjectivism, does have this consequence. It does because it says that moral judgments are *about* the speaker’s morality. If different speakers always talk about different moralities, they will always speak past each other rather than disagree (or agree). There are other forms of speaker relativism, however, that imply that two individuals can disagree (and agree) if their moralities are sufficiently alike but not otherwise. According to

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., p. 40.



Dreier's speaker relativism, for example, which as we have seen treats moral terms as indexicals, moral terms refer (roughly) to natural properties that the speaker likes or dislikes. If two speakers share the relevant likings and dislikings they can therefore refer to the same properties, and as a consequence they can disagree (and agree) on moral matters. If their likings and dislikings are not similar in this way, however, it is true that they cannot disagree (or agree). It should be clear that this is enough for the objection from intuitive disagreement to get a hold: our intuitions that people who are involved in moral disputes actually disagree is equally strong when the two parties do not share morality or likings, as the example with Kant and Smart shows.

#### 4.3 WAYS OF ANSWERING THE OBJECTION

The objection we are considering is that speaker relativism clashes with our intuitions about moral disagreement. This means that it can be replied in two different ways. One kind of reply is to admit that the preferred relativist theory clashes with our intuitions about disagreements, but that it is the intuitions that are flawed and that we can explain why we have them. That is, we can *explain away* our intuitions about disagreement.

Replies of the other kind deny that the preferred relativist theory, when properly specified, clashes with our intuitions about disagreement. The theory implies that people do disagree in the way we intuitively think they do. If this is true, we can say that the theory in question *confirms* our intuitions about disagreement.

Replies to the objection might also involve another move. Consider the following dispute:

Kant: It is wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

Smart: It is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

We intuitively think that Kant and Smart disagree. This intuition seems to constitute a threat to speaker relativism since this view implies that the propositions expressed by Kant's and Smart's respective statements are consistent with each other. One way for speaker relativists to counter the objection would be to question the interpretation of the disagreement intuitions that this objection presupposes: our intuitions, it might be claimed, are not to the effect that Kant and Smart express inconsistent propositions.

In what follows I will first, in 4.4 and 4.5, consider the perhaps most straightforward kind of relativist replies: replies according to which relativism can *confirm* our disagreement intuitions, and that it can do this even if the intuitions are not reinterpreted. After that I discuss replies that involve reinterpreting the intuitions or explaining them away.

#### 4.4 DISAGREEMENT ABOUT A COMMON MORALITY

We saw in chapter 2 that Dreier accepts a form of speaker relativism according to which moral terms are indexicals which pick out different properties depending on the morality of the speaker. We also saw that Dreier points to the fact that the ways in which indexicals depend on the context often are quite complex. The point is that this can be used to handle some problems a more crude view on moral terms as indexicals would have. Dreier thinks that the objection from genuine disagreement is one such problem. Imagine again a situation where one person says, “X is right”, and another says, “No, X is not right”.

In brief, the reply is that in contexts like the one imagined, two speakers who we think are disagreeing are assuming that there is a substantial area of overlap between their moral systems. The situation, I believe, is parallel to one in which you and I are together looking through a pile of papers looking for an important document. You say, “It just isn’t here,” and I say, “Yes, it must be here.” If we took a crude view of ‘here’, thinking it referred directly to the place of the speaker, we’d have to admit that we were not really disagreeing. But in fact, our uses of the indexical ‘here’ should be taken to refer to a common area of overlap between us. Just so with the moral indexicals, or so I would argue.<sup>141</sup>

There are two ideas in this passage. One is that there actually is a substantial area of overlap between the moral systems of any two parties to a moral dispute. Their respective moralities, we have to suppose, are such that an action cannot have the property one refers to by ‘right’ unless it has the property the other refers to by that term (for example that the term refers to the same property when used by each of the two speakers). If speaker relativism is true, however, this idea is false. Speaker relativism implies that the same moral sentence can be true when uttered by one speaker and false when uttered by another.

The other idea in the passage is that *the speakers* we think of as disagreeing *assume* that there is a substantial area of overlap between their

<sup>141</sup> Dreier, 1992, p. 31.

moral systems. This could explain why the parties to moral disputes of the kind in question standardly think of themselves as disagreeing. This is similar to one of Harman's replies to the objection from disagreement:

When a relativist makes a simple moral judgment, expressing a moral demand, saying that a certain sort of act is morally wrong, for example, making no explicit reference to one or another morality, the speaker makes this judgment in relation to a morality he or she accepts, presupposing that this morality is also accepted by anyone to whom the judgment is addressed [...].<sup>142</sup>

This response is also problematic, however. First we can notice that it is not a response to the effect that speaker relativism implies that moral disputes actually are disagreements in the intuitive sense, but an explanation of why we falsely have this intuition. Harman recognises this:

They presuppose that they are making these judgments in relation to the same relevant moral demands. Of course, they may be mistaken about that, in which case they really are talking past each other despite their intentions.<sup>143</sup>

Furthermore, the response fails as an explanation of our intuitions as well. In some situations the two disputing parties do not think of themselves as having moral systems that overlap in the relevant sense; they know that the other person has a morality that allows (disallows) some act that their own morality disallows (allows). And even if the idea that the parties to a moral dispute always mistakenly think that there is an overlap could be defended, this would not explain why others who think about their dispute and know that there is no relevant overlap think of it as a disagreement.

In another place Dreier acknowledges these limitations to the response: there are cases where the parties to a moral dispute "may not accept enough of the same norms, and they may even know that they don't."<sup>144</sup> In such cases, Dreier says, there are other ways for the relativist to explain disagreement. We will return to these in 4.6.

The common-morality solution just discussed fails, but there is a similar idea that might seem more promising. Let us first consider the idea as it is put by DeRose.<sup>145</sup> His discussion is focused on what contextualists about knowledge should say about situations where people

<sup>142</sup> Harman, 1978, p. 158.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Dreier, 1999, p. 569.

<sup>145</sup> DeRose, 2004.

with different standards for knowledge are involved in a discussion in which they make seemingly conflicting claims about whether a person knows something. The general idea, though, is applicable to other context-dependent expressions.

DeRose uses David Lewis' influential metaphor of "conversational scorekeeping".<sup>146</sup> On this picture, in any conversation there is a conversational scoreboard that changes depending on the assertions (or "conversational moves") made by any of the speakers. The scores on the board at any moment represent roughly the presuppositions of the conversation at that moment, and it is in light of these that the next assertion is to be interpreted.

DeRose's idea is that this picture can be used to handle disagreements for contextualism. Applied to moral speaker relativism, the idea would be the following. When two people discuss moral matters the reference of the moral terms they use is not determined by the moral systems they accept respectively, but by a common moral standard that in some way depend on the shared scoreboard in that conversation. DeRose discusses various alternative views on how the conversational moves and mental states of the participants to the conversation determine the standard that in turn determines the reference of the context-dependent terms they use. We do not have to go into these details, however. No matter which of these views we choose, as long as the truth-values of both speakers' assertions are determined by the same standard, the speakers will disagree when one says, "x is right" and the other says, "x is not right".

On the present view, even though the truth-values of a moral sentence will not vary within a conversation (at least not as long as the relevant part of the conversational scoreboard has not changed), relativism will still hold between conversations. And the view seems to avoid the problems we saw with Dreier's common-morality solution above: there is room for saying that the morality which determines the truth-values need not be an actual overlap between the speakers' actual moralities.<sup>147</sup>

<sup>146</sup> Lewis, 1979.

<sup>147</sup> The view does not imply that in every dispute between two persons, such as a moral dispute between a Kantian and a Utilitarian, there is a common scoreboard that determines truth-value so that one of them speaks truly and the other falsely. On the specific view DeRose defends, when each of the two disputants refutes the other's presuppositions, there is a gap in the scoreboard, so that the statements that concern cases where there is no overlap lack truth-value. But since the truth-values (or lack thereof) of both speakers' statements are determined relative to the same scoreboard, they will still be disagreeing.

This is actually how one moral relativist, David Phillips, argues that the problem of intuitive disagreement should be handled:

In typical moral conversational contexts, or anyway those that are brought to mind by the objection [from disagreement], the purpose of the parties is to come to practical agreement on an issue. Such agreement will not be forthcoming if moral terms are taken to refer to standards or norms known to be accepted by one party but to be rejected by others. [...] Hence, in such conversational contexts, standards shared by all parties tend to be invoked.<sup>148</sup>

Thus, according to Phillips' form of relativism, "the chief determinant of the standards invoked on a particular occasion", that is, that which determines the system relative to which moral statements get their truth-value", "are the contextually indicated interests and beliefs of the parties and their conversational purposes".<sup>149</sup>

The form of conversational relativism suggested by DeRose and Phillips has the means to explain some of our intuitions about disagreement – those about conflicting utterances within the same conversation. But since these are not the only cases of moral disagreement, the view is still problematic. First, even though the view that the truth-values of utterances of moral sentences vary with a shared conversational scoreboard might have some intuitive plausibility, speaker relativism is a view about the truth-values of moral beliefs as well as utterances. It seems highly implausible that the content of our moral beliefs depends on which conversation we are involved in for the moment. This is a problem since we have the intuition that there is a disagreement between one who believes that *x* is right and another who believes that *x* is not right.

A second problem with applying conversational relativism to moral disputes is that it works at most for assertions made in the same conversation. Phillips seems to suggest that these are the only cases about which we have intuitions about disagreement: "It is in *cases of moral differences without disagreement, where there is no conversational context linking the parties*, that we are much more likely to see utterances of the same moral terms as invoking distinct standards."<sup>150</sup> I think it is obvious, however, that we think that we sometimes disagree over moral matters with people with whom we are not involved in a conversation. For example, I take myself to be in moral disagreement with Hitler, even

<sup>148</sup> Phillips, 1997, p. 403.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404.

though I have never been in a discussion with him.<sup>151</sup> Since the conversational account does not give us this result, it does not, after all, help to make speaker relativism consistent with moral disputes being disagreements in the way they intuitively are.

#### 4.5 ASSESSOR RELATIVISM

This far, the discussion in both in the previous chapters and the present one, has focused on the most common form of moral truth-value relativism, namely moral *speaker* relativism. The idea that speaker-relativism has counterintuitive consequences for moral disagreements has generated new forms of moral truth-value relativism. Speaker relativism builds on the well-known phenomenon that certain expressions, such as sentences containing indexicals, have their contents and (therefore) truth-values determined partly by the context in which they are uttered or used. Moral speaker relativists hold that moral sentences belong to that kind of expressions.

According to the new forms of relativism, the truth-values of certain expressions are context-dependent in another way. On this view, applied to moral expressions, any moral sentence (which does not contain other, non-moral, context-dependent terms) expresses the same proposition no matter who utters it, but the truth-value of moral propositions are relative to the context in which the propositions are assessed or evaluated. More specifically, moral propositions have different truth-values relative to different assessors of the sentences, depending on the morality of the assessor. We can call this view *moral assessor relativism*.

<sup>151</sup> MacFarlane makes this point by exemplifying with other supposedly context-dependent expressions ('delicious' and 'funny'):

"1. When I was ten, I used to go around saying "fish sticks are delicious" (and meaning it!). Now I say "fish sticks are not delicious." It seems to me that I disagree with my past self. But I am not involved in a conversation with my past self.

2. Similarly, when I overhear a group of ten-year-olds chattering about how "funny" certain knocknock jokes are, I may think that they are wrong. These jokes just aren't that funny. But the kids certainly don't think of themselves as involved in a conversation with me—they may not even know I'm there. Nor do I think of myself as conversing with them." (MacFarlane, 2007, p. 20)

It seems to me that the point is stronger in the moral case: I do not have as strong intuitions about disagreement when it comes disputes about taste and humour as I do for moral disputes. See section 4.5.4 for more discussion of this.

It has been argued that assessor relativism can account for genuine disagreements in a way that speaker relativism cannot. In this section I will evaluate this claim.

#### 4.5.1 *Relativizing proposition-truth*

Assessor relativism goes against the traditional picture in a way that might seem puzzling: it claims that what is said by a specific assertion – that is, a specific content or proposition – can have different truth-values relative to different contexts of assessment. Can we make sense of this? Actually, the idea is not that revolutionary. As John MacFarlane puts it, this idea

might not be as wild as it sounds. On standard views, propositions have truth values relative to “circumstances of evaluation.” These are typically taken to be possible worlds, but a minority tradition takes circumstances of evaluation to be world/time pairs.<sup>152</sup>

MacFarlane continues with a quote from Kaplan:

A circumstance will usually include a possible state or history of the world, a time, and perhaps other features as well. The amount of information we require from a circumstance is linked to the degree of specificity of contents, and thus to the kinds of operators in the language.<sup>153</sup>

If we wish to isolate location and regard it as a feature of possible circumstances we can introduce locational operators: ‘Two miles north it is the case that’, etc. ...However, to make such operators interesting we must have contents which are locationally neutral. That is, it must be appropriate to ask if what is said would be true in Pakistan. (For example, ‘It is raining’ seems to be locationally as well as temporally and modally neutral.)<sup>154</sup>

On the standard Kaplanian view, sentences express propositions relative to contexts of use: sentences containing context-dependent expressions such as indexicals express different propositions relative to different contexts of use, and sentences without such expressions express the same propositions relative to every context of use. In turn, the propositions expressed have their truth-values relative to different circumstances of evaluation. The circumstances of evaluation are usually thought to be possible worlds (but, as MacFarlane points out, there are ideas according to which other things, such as times, should be included

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>153</sup> Kaplan, 1989, p. 502.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., p. 504.

here<sup>155</sup>). Thus, every contingent proposition (such as the proposition that there are cars in year 2007) is true relative to some possible worlds (such as our actual one) but not relative to others (worlds where there are no cars in 2007). So already here we have the notion of relative truth-values for propositions: before we can say whether a proposition is true or not, we have to know relative to which circumstance of evaluation, which possible world, we are to evaluate it.

The claim that assessor relativism holds for certain expressions is the claim that the intuitively relevant circumstances of evaluations for the propositions expressed by these expressions are not possible worlds but something more fine-grained (in the sense that they can differ within possible worlds), such as moral standards or standards of taste.

It is important to note one way in which assessor relativism does not, or at least need not, differ from speaker relativism. Though assessor relativism involves the idea that what we say (the proposition we express) when we utter an assessor relative sentence is true relative to some circumstances of evaluation but false relative to others, those who defend this form of relativism accept a non-relative idea about what we should aim at when we utter such sentences: we should aim at asserting sentences that express propositions that are true relative to our own circumstance of evaluation.<sup>156</sup> Exemplifying with relativism about taste, if I don't like the taste of *x* then I should say, "*x* is not delicious", but the right thing to say for someone who likes *x* would be "*x* is delicious". In this regard this view is no different from an ordinary speaker relativism about 'delicious'. Indeed, given the way assessor relativism is analogous to the ordinary relativization of propositions to possible worlds, this idea about what we should assert is what we could expect. You should assert that there are cars in 2007 only if there are cars in 2007 in the possible world where you make the utterance.

Now to the real issue here: can relativism account for our intuitions about disagreement? MacFarlane argues that assessor relativism as it stands cannot, but that it can if complemented in the right way. In what follows I will first argue that MacFarlane is right about non-comple-

<sup>155</sup> For discussions of this topic, see the papers in Jokic and Smith, 2003.

<sup>156</sup> See e.g. Kölbel, 2002, p. 125 and Egan, Hawthorne and Weatherson, 2005. MacFarlane has criticized this formulation of the truth norm (MacFarlane, 2005). However, his objection does not seem to be that the norm is false or does not hold, but that it cannot explain the difference between expressions that are assessment relative and those that are merely use-relative.



mented assessor relativism. Looking at the reason why it fails is relevant because it helps understanding the subsequent discussion of MacFarlane's supplemented version.

#### 4.5.2 *Relative truth of moral propositions and moral disagreement*

One of the most developed accounts of assessor relativism is found in Kölbel's defence of moral relativism.<sup>157</sup> On Kölbel's view, moral sentences express propositions whose truth-values are relative to the morality ("moral perspective") of the person who evaluates or assesses the propositions. Kölbel's main argument for moral assessor relativism is that it is the only theory that can account for the nature of moral disagreements. According to Kölbel, moral disputes often are "faultless disagreements"; it holds both (i) that the disputants are in a disagreement, and (ii) that neither of them has made a mistake. On the one hand, moral realism implies that one of the disputants have made a mistake. On the other hand, expressivism and speaker relativism implies that there is no real disagreement.

How, then, can assessor relativism account for (i), the claim that moral disputes are real disagreements? Kölbel writes as follows on the difference between how speaker relativism, which he calls 'indexical relativism', and assessor relativism, which he calls 'genuine relativism', can account for disagreements:

Another difficulty of indexical relativism was the fact that it had to give a counterintuitive account of moral disagreements. According to SIR [a version of indexical relativism], when I sincerely utter (B) ['Blair ought to go to war'] and you sincerely utter 'It's not the case that Blair ought to go to war', what I said is not incompatible (in the right way) with what you said. I can just come to believe what you said without needing to change my mind. There is no such problem in the case of genuine relativism. However, I shall need to introduce one further, normative aspect of this theory in order to show how this works: every thinker possesses a perspective, and moreover everyone ought not to believe contents that are not true in relation to their own perspective. On this basis, it is clear why I can't come to believe what you said without needing to change my mind: what you have said and what I have said cannot both be true in relation to the same perspective. Thus, given that I ought not to believe something that is not true in relation to my perspective, I should not come to believe what you have said without changing my mind.<sup>158</sup>

<sup>157</sup> See, Kölbel, 2002, Kölbel, 2003, Kölbel, 2004, Kölbel, 2005.

<sup>158</sup> Kölbel, 2004, p. 307.

At other places, Kölbel describes the kind of disagreement assessor relativism implies in terms of the propositions expressed by the parties to a moral dispute:

the two propositions in question are inconsistent in the following straightforward sense: they cannot be true relative to the same perspective. In other words, no *one* person could correctly believe both, for to believe correctly is to believe what is true relative to one's perspective.<sup>159</sup>

So on Kölbel's view there are two ways in which moral disputes can be said to be disagreements. First, one disputant cannot come to accept what the other says without changing her mind. Second, the disputants disagree in the sense that they express (or accept) propositions that cannot both be true relative to the same perspective. Now, is this sufficient to capture the sense in which we intuitively think that they disagree?

It is not. Moral perspectives in Kölbel's theory serve the same purpose as possible worlds in the traditional Kaplanian picture; they are circumstances of evaluation. Two people who have different moralities thus make their moral assertions in different circumstances of evaluation, like we can imagine that ordinary (non-assessor relative) assertions can be made in different possible worlds. MacFarlane illustrates the latter phenomenon as follows:

Consider Jane (who inhabits this world, the actual world) and June, her counterpart in another possible world. Jane asserts that Mars has two moons, and June denies this very proposition. Do they disagree? Not in any real way. Jane's assertion concerns our world, while June's concerns hers. If June lives in a world where Mars has three moons, her denial may be just as correct as Jane's assertion.<sup>160</sup>

The propositions Jane and June express cannot be true relative to the same possible world. But they have not in any way indicated that they have different views about whether Mars has two moons in any specific possible world. For all we know from their utterances, they may very well agree that Mars has two moons in Jane's possible world and that Mars does not have two moons in June's possible world. To really disagree they would have to be in the same circumstance of evaluation, or at least intend their judgements to hold for the same circumstance of evaluation. In MacFarlane's terms, the assertions would have to *concern* the same possible world, the same circumstance of evaluation.

<sup>159</sup> Kölbel, 2007

<sup>160</sup> MacFarlane, 2007, p. 23.

The claim that for some propositions the circumstances of evaluation is something other than possible worlds doesn't change this. Kölbel is right that on his view, when Kant says that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong and Smart says that that this is not so, the propositions they assert cannot both be true at any one circumstance of evaluation (moral perspective). But this does not mean that they disagree. In analogy with Jane's and June's assertions, Smart's and Kant's assertions concern different circumstances of evaluation, different moral perspectives. It might very well be that they agree that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong at Kant's moral perspective and that punishing innocent Irwin is not wrong at Smart's moral perspective.

This is very similar to the problem speaker relativism has with disagreements. The problem for moral speaker relativism is that it makes moral assertions made by speaker's with different moralities *be about* different things (express different propositions), and that they therefore do not disagree in the intuitive sense when they are involved in moral disputes. Kölbel's variant of relativism makes moral assertions made by speakers with different moralities *concern* different moralities.

MacFarlane criticizes assessor relativism on what I take to be the same grounds as I have. (In fact, he does not want to call it 'relativism' at all, since formally it is no different from the traditional Kaplanian view.) I quoted MacFarlane saying that in a situation where the same proposition is asserted by one speaker and rejected by another, the two do not disagree if their assertions concern different circumstances of evaluations. MacFarlane connects this idea of which world an assertion concerns to an idea of when assertions are accurate. (MacFarlane speaks of accurate and inaccurate assertions and utterances instead of true and false ones, since he thinks that assertions and utterances are not the kind of things that can be true. I will follow him in this, without taking a stand on whether assertions or utterances can be true.) For ordinary propositions holds what MacFarlane calls *use-centric accuracy*: an assertion of a proposition is accurate if the proposition is true at the possible world where the assertion is made. Though June rejects the proposition Jane asserts, both the rejection and the assertion are accurate if they are made in possible worlds where the propositions they express are true. The idea seems to be (though MacFarlane does not explicitly say so) that it is the truth-value of the proposition expressed by an assertion at the possible world of the assertion that determines the accuracy of the assertion, *since it is this possible world that the assertion concerns*.

Kölbel's variant of relativism imports this kind of use-centric accuracy though it changes the picture of what are the relevant circumstances of evaluation for the expressions in question. Thus, though Smart asserts a proposition Kant rejects, both the rejection and the assertion can be accurate, since they are made in circumstances of evaluations (moral frameworks) in which the propositions they express are true respectively.

This serves as the basis for MacFarlane's objection to Kölbel-style relativism. A necessary condition for two assertions (such as an assertion and a rejection of the same proposition) to constitute a disagreement, MacFarlane holds, is that both cannot be accurate at the same time. So, since Smart's and Kant's assertions can be accurate at the same time, they do not constitute a disagreement. Thus, this form of assessor relativism does not account for our intuitions about moral disagreements.

#### 4.5.3 *Relativizing assertion accuracy*

MacFarlane argues that assessor relativism can be complemented to handle this problem. Assessor relativism as described above is a view about the truth of propositions; the truth of certain propositions is relative to something more fine-grained than a possible world (such as a moral perspective). What relativists need in order to account for disagreement, MacFarlane argues, is to also relativize the accuracy of assertions to contexts of assessment, and not to contexts of use as on the traditional, use-centric, picture. MacFarlane calls the new idea *perspectival accuracy*. According to this idea an assertion is accurate as assessed from a context of assessment if, and only if, the proposition expressed by the assertion is true *at the circumstance of evaluation of the assessment*.

To illustrate, consider the effect if this view were true for Jane's assertion that Mars has two moons. Jane's assertion is accurate as assessed by (or relative to) Jane and anyone else in her possible world (where Mars has two moons). As assessed by (or relative to) June, on the other hand, who lives in a possible world where Mars does not have two moons, Jane's assertion is inaccurate. Now, this is obviously not the intuitively correct account of the accuracy of this assertion, but MacFarlane argues that for some expressions it can give the wanted result.

Let us apply it to moral relativism. As assessed by (or relative to) Smart, Smart's own assertion that it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin is accurate while Kant's rejection of that proposition is inaccurate. This is so since the proposition in question is true at Smart's moral perspec-

tive, which is the circumstance of evaluation of the assessment. As assessed by Kant, on the other hand, Smart's assertion is inaccurate and Kant's rejection is accurate. On this view, then, we can legitimately evaluate other people's moral assertions as accurate or not accurate on basis of our own moral perspective, and not, as on Kölbel's view, on basis of the speaker's perspective. (Another way to put this view it seems, though MacFarlane does not say so, is that it tells us that which moral perspective moral assertions *concern* is relative to a context of assessment. When Smart assesses Kant's assertion as inaccurate, this is correct since relative to Smart's context of assessment, Kant's assertion concerns Smart's moral perspective.)

How is this supposed to save disagreement? The idea is that as assessed from any context of assessment, it will hold that Smart's and Kant's assertions cannot be accurate at once. Thus, relative to every perspective, we have a disagreement in this sense. MacFarlane illustrates through relativism about matters of taste:

Since no proposition can be both true and false at the same circumstance of evaluation, Abe's acceptance of the proposition that apples are delicious and Ben's rejection of this proposition cannot both be accurate. As assessed from CA [a context of assessment], then, Abe and Ben disagree. It should be clear that this result will hold equally for any choice of CA. Thus, although technically we have made disagreement perspectival, there is little cost to this, as it will never happen that two parties disagree as assessed from one context but not as assessed from another.<sup>161</sup>

We can apply this to Smart and Kant's dispute. MacFarlane's relativism implies that relative to every context where their assertions are assessed, their assertions contradict each other. For any person who considers their assertions it will be correct for her to see it as a disagreement, it seems, since relative to her context of assessment their assertions actually concern her moral perspective and at any moral perspective at most one of the propositions expressed by the two assertions can be true (which means that at most one of the assertions is accurate as assessed from her context of assessment).

I still think this view fails to account for our intuitions about moral disagreements, however. It is true that assessor relativism implies that it is correct for any assessor to see the assertions made by Smart and Kant as conflicting. The view thus accounts for our intuitions that there

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., pp. 26-27.

is disagreement between the assertions in question. But we do not merely think of *the assertions* as conflicting, we also intuitively think that Smart's and Kant's assertions show that *they*, *Smart and Kant*, disagree about whether it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin. Assessor relativism cannot account for this. So, if the relativist analysis was in fact correct and we were aware of this fact, we would not think of moral disputes in this way. On this view, Smart's and Kant's assertions do not indicate in any way that there is a circumstance of evaluation for which they disagree about whether the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin is true at that circumstance. They may indeed agree about the truth-value of that proposition at every circumstance of evaluation. This is not how we experience moral disputes.

Remember that circumstances of evaluations are the "things" at which propositions are true: if for every such thing we agree about the truth of some proposition, such as the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin, then there is no room for us to disagree about the truth of that proposition. Thus, if we knew that moral assessor relativism was true, then we would not see Smart's and Kant's assertions as evidence of a real disagreement between Kant and Smart: we would know that their assertions are fully compatible with the possibility that they agree about the truth-value of the debated proposition at any moral framework, that is, at any circumstance at which it can be evaluated.

Here's another way to put my objection. For ordinary non-relative propositions, the possible worlds that our assertions concern (the worlds that make them accurate or not) are the possible worlds (circumstances of evaluations) we intend our assertions to hold for and think that the propositions they express are true at. When someone sincerely says, "Mars has two moons" she does so because she thinks Mars has two moons in the possible world where she is. This is why there is a disagreement between one person who rejects and another who accepts the same proposition, where the acceptance and rejection concern the same possible world (that is, two people whose assertions cannot both be accurate at the same time): that they do so shows that one of them thinks, and the other thinks not, that the proposition is true at the same possible world. This is not the way things are on the perspectival view on concern and accuracy. On this view, relative to Smart's moral perspective, Kant's assertion that punishing innocent Irwin is wrong concerns Smart's moral perspective (and is accurate if it is wrong to punish Irwin at Smart's moral perspective). So this view licenses Smart to think that at most one of his and Kant's assertions can be accu-

rate (since it licenses him to think that they concern the same (his own) moral perspective). But it does not license Smart to think that there is any real disagreement between him and Kant: for all we know (and for all Smart knows), Kant might very well believe (and know) that Smart's moral perspective is not such that punishing Irwin is wrong at it. So as far as Smart knows from Kant's assertion, Kant and himself may well agree for every circumstance of evaluation (every moral perspective) about the truth-value of the proposition that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin at that circumstance. That is, on the perspectival accuracy view, the fact that two assertions cannot both be accurate (as assessed from some or all contexts of assessment) is no indication of a disagreement between the speakers.

It might seem that my objection must rest on a mistake somewhere. I agree that MacFarlane's relativism implies that any one is correct in seeing Kant's and Smart's assertions as concerning the same circumstance of evaluation, and therefore correct in claiming that at most one of them can be accurate at once. Do I not also have to agree, then, that the view predicts and licenses our experiences of Kant and Smart as disagreeing? No: What I have argued is exactly that the last conclusion is unwarranted. The theory does license us to see the assertions as concerning the same circumstance of evaluation, but it does not license our intuition of the assertions as expressing or displaying a disagreement between the speakers. In order to experience moral disputes as disagreements between people, we would have to think both (i) that the assertions in question concern the same circumstance of evaluation, *and* (ii) that this shows that there is one circumstance of evaluation for which the disputants disagree about whether the disputed proposition is true at that circumstance. MacFarlane's relativism implies (i) but not (ii).

Can the view be salvaged if we change the perspective from assertions to beliefs? MacFarlane's relativism could be construed as a claim about the accuracy of beliefs as well as assertions. Relative to Smart, Kant's belief that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin concerns Smart's moral perspective. So Smart is licensed to think that Kant and himself have conflicting beliefs concerning the same circumstance of evaluation. So, it seems, he (and anyone) is licensed to think of Kant and Smart as disagreeing.

But things are not that simple. It is true that if MacFarlane's relativism is true, then Smart is licensed to think of Kant's belief as concerning his own moral perspective (and as accurate if it is true at that perspec-

tive). But he cannot draw any conclusion from that as to whether Kant believes that the proposition expressed is true at Smart's moral perspective.<sup>162</sup> Kant might very well say, "At Smart's moral perspective it is not wrong to punish Irwin" and have the corresponding belief. And Smart might very well know this. Indeed, the fact that Smart and Kant have their beliefs about the wrongness of punishing Irwin is consistent with the possibility that they agree about the truth of the propositions they express at every circumstance of evaluation. And, again, since circumstances of evaluations are the "things" at which propositions are true, nothing remains for them to disagree about.

#### 4.5.4 *Stable and unstable intuitions about disagreement*

To be fair, when MacFarlane argues that his form of assessor relativism can explain our intuitions about disagreement, he does not discuss *moral* assessor relativism. He applies his view to disagreements about humour and taste. And I think there might be a difference in our intuitions about disagreements about such matters on the one hand, and disagreements about moral matters on the other hand, such that MacFarlane's view is more suited to account for the former. Let us take some examples:

Erica: Jim Carrey is funny.

Jacob: What? He's not funny, he's just annoying.

Erica: This pie is delicious.

Jacob: You think? I think it tasted quite bad. At least it's not delicious.

Intuitively, these small conversations are *disagreements* about who is funny and what is delicious. I think, however, that these intuitions are unstable in the following sense: even though we sense disagreements here, on reflection we (or most of us at least) also think that they really are not disagreements over some matter of fact. We think instead that what is displayed in conversations like these are differences in standards of taste and senses of humour. Jim Carrey amuses Erica but not Jacob. Erica likes the taste of the pie, Jacob doesn't. We think that there is no difference over and above that: the conversations do not signal that

<sup>162</sup> One might think that this suggests that something is wrong with the relative notions of *concern* and *accuracy*, but my aim here is not to criticize this or any other aspect of MacFarlane's relativism, just to object to and problemize the idea that it can account for our intuitions about disagreement.



Erica and Jacob disagree about whether the pie has some property independent of the relation it stands in to their standards of taste; neither does it signal that they disagree about the relation it stands in to their standards of taste respectively. So, we feel on reflection, there is nothing they really disagree about, in the sense of having conflicting beliefs – they merely differ as to what pleases their palates. Suppose, for example, that the conversation above continues as follows:

Erica: What? This is the best pie I have tasted ever, how can you say that it is not delicious?

Jacob: Well, I guess we simply have different tastes. Just as we seem to have different senses of humour.

Erica: You don't see my point, do you? The pie is delicious and you obviously cannot see that. Just as you don't see that Jim Carrey is funny.

I think that most of us find Erica's insistence that the pie really is delicious and that Carrey really is funny (whether or not Jacob can appreciate this) quite silly. Jacob's attitude, on the other hand, seems sensible. What they discovered was that they like different things in comedy and in food. Once this is established there is not much more to be said about that; there is no fact about Carrey or the pie they disagree about. In this sense our intuition that this is a disagreement is unstable.

Our intuitions about moral disagreements are different, however. Consider again the dispute between Kant and Smart:

Kant: It is wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

Smart: No, it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin.

Many of us, at least, are not ready to retract or modify our judgement that there is a disagreement about some property of the act in question, not even on reflection. We know that Kant and Smart have (accept) different moralities, and that the act in question stands in different relations to these moralities respectively. But we do not think that this is the only difference displayed by their conversation; they also disagree about the wrongness of the act. Many of us, then, have stable intuitions that moral disputes are disagreements about some matter of fact. In this sense we experience moral disagreements like disagreements over "objective", non-evaluative, facts. If I think that man has landed on the moon and you think that man has not landed on the moon, then we think of us

as disagreeing about some fact. We do not think on reflection that, when we have established that in my conception of the world man has landed on the moon while in your conception man has not been on the moon, there really is nothing more to quarrel about. The disagreement does not dissolve upon closer inspection. We still think that we disagree about some fact, and this is what we (or many of us) think about Smart and Kant as well.

I think this amounts to a difference in how well MacFarlane's relativism accounts for our intuitions about moral disagreement and our intuitions about disagreement concerning taste and humour. What gives relativism about matters of taste credibility is that on reflection we retract our judgements that taste disputes are signs of any real disagreements between the disputants; they merely have different standards of taste, we think. This is what we should expect if relativism is true. On reflection we should understand that there is no proposition that we disagree about whether it is true at some specific circumstance of evaluation. So even though relativism cannot account for – in the sense of confirming – the intuitions we initially have that people do disagree over matters of taste, it does confirm the way we think on reflection.

As for moral conflicts, many of us are not ready to retract our judgements that Kant and Smart really do disagree about the wrongness of the act in question. Assessor relativism thus cannot account for – or confirm – such stubborn or stable intuitions about disagreement.

#### 4.6 REINTERPRETING OR EXPLAINING AWAY INTUITIONS

In the two previous sections I have considered attempts by moral truth-value relativists to show that such relativism, when properly specified, does indeed imply that we disagree in the sense that the disputants express conflicting propositions. I have argued that these attempts fail. So let us consider other ways to reply to the argument from intuitive disagreement.

There is a sense in which speaker relativists can always claim that people in moral disagreements disagree: they disagree in the sense that their moralities recommend different courses of action. Thus, Smart's morality recommends punishing innocent Irwin, while Kant's morality recommends not punishing him. If moralities are systems of motiva-

tional attitudes, this disagreement will also be of a straightforwardly practical kind: the disputing parties will be motivated to act in opposed ways.<sup>163</sup> This is how Dreier accounts for those disagreements where the parties do not have sufficiently overlapping moralities for it to be a factual disagreement:

the indexical theorist may say just the same thing that the expressivist says, namely, that there is real disagreement in norms, or in attitude.<sup>164</sup>

Is this enough to account for our intuitions about moral disagreements? Not by itself, I think. Most of us, at least, intuitively think that people involved in moral disputes disagree not only in the practical sense. We don't experience these disputes as mere clashes between people's desires. We also think that at most one of the disputing parties (or their statements) can be correct. If what Kant said is correct, then what Smart said is not. In this sense, it seems, we experience moral disagreements just as we experience disagreements over absolute facts. If A says, "Mars has two moons", and B says, "Mars does not have two moons", then they disagree because if what one said is right then what the other said cannot be right: if Mars has two moons it cannot be that Mars does not have two moons. It seems, then, that our moral disagreements are *as if* moral statements made by different people are about the same thing and that therefore both statements in a moral disputes cannot be true at once.<sup>165</sup>

There are things relativists can say to accommodate this, however. First, they can say that when we intuitively think that Kant's and Smart's statements cannot be correct (or right or true) at the same time, we are using 'correct' (or 'right', or 'true') in a minimalist sense. According to minimalism, to say,

<sup>163</sup> And even if moralities are not systems of motivational states, speaker relativists can, as anyone else, use *de dicto* internalism to maintain that moral opinions are necessarily accompanied by motivation (see 2.6), why moral disputes can be claimed to involve motivational clashes.

<sup>164</sup> Dreier, 1999, p. 569.

<sup>165</sup> This seems to be the point Mark Schroeder makes with his distinction between "the hard" and "the shallow" version of "the disagreement problem" for relativism. The shallow problem is that relativism implies that moral disputes are not disagreements. It is to this problem, Schroeder says, that relativists can respond that they are disagreements in attitude (though he does not take a stand on whether it is an adequate response). The hard problem cannot be responded to in this way. This problem is that relativism implies that the parties to a moral dispute must allow that what the other says is true. It is the hard problem I discuss in what follows. (Schroeder, Forthcoming)

"A is morally wrong" is true

is just to say,

A is morally wrong.

And to say,

"A is morally wrong" is not true

is just to say

A is not morally wrong.

The reply to the objection from intuitive disagreement, then, would be that our intuition that, say, Kant's and Smart's assertions cannot both be true, involves such a minimalist sense of true. To think that both Kant's assertion of "it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin" and Smart's assertion of "it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin" are true, would be the same as thinking that it is wrong to punish innocent Irwin and that it is not wrong to punish innocent Irwin. But that cannot be right! So if that is how our intuition is to be interpreted, then speaker relativism has the means to accommodate it. (It should be noted that according to this reply, it is in our spontaneous intuitions about moral statements and disagreements that we make use of the minimalist sense of true. When the speaker relativist describes here metaethical standpoint as the view that the truth of moral statements depends on the speaker's morality, or as implying that two seemingly conflicting moral statements both can be true, she is not using true in this sense.)

This reply involves the following move. The objection from intuitive disagreement assumes that speaker relativism implies that when someone, P, evaluates some speaker's (Q's) statement (or belief) that act A is morally wrong as correct or incorrect, what P does is to evaluate whether A is recommended or not by Q's morality. But according to the present reply, speaker relativists can say that when P evaluates Q's statements, she evaluates whether A is recommended or not by her own, P's, morality. This seems to be Wong's view of how we should explain,

the fact that we criticize as false the morality of another group of language users, even when that morality is a coherent system of moral beliefs very different from ours. When we criticize that morality, we take the group's re-

commendations for action, state them in our moral language, and evaluate them as false according to our standards for the adequacy of moral systems.<sup>166</sup>

This indeed seems to give the intuitively right result: it is clear that when we evaluate other people's moral judgements, we do not take into account how well the judgements fits with the speaker's judgement. And, as we said above, it also gives the intuitive result about disagreement: Kant's and Smart's statements cannot both be right.

It is not enough for speaker relativists to simply say that this is how it works, however. We do not evaluate statements of sentences containing other indexical expressions in this way. Minimalism about truth (or correctness etc.) does typically not hold for such sentences. When Smart says, "Kant's statement of "I am a Kantian" is correct" this is not just another way for Smart to say, "I am a Kantian". For this reason, speaker relativists who use the present reply have to explain why, when it comes to statements of sentences containing *moral* indexicals, we do not evaluate the statements as true or correct based on their content.

I think there are such explanations at hand. We have previously referred to the social and evolutionary function of moral thought and language. This function could also be an essential part of a relativist explanation of our intuitions about moral disagreement. One of Allan Gibbard's main points is that moral discussions must tend towards consensus:

The chief biological function of normative discussion is to coordinate. Normative discussion allows for common enterprises and adjusts terms of reciprocity – both the friendly give-and-take of cooperative schemes and hostile standoffs with their threats and mutual restraint. For such a mechanism to work, two things are needed: *tendencies toward consensus*, and normative governance. Normative discussion *must tend toward all accepting the same norms*, and acceptance of norms must tend to guide action.<sup>167</sup>

Given that tendencies towards consensus is important for the social and evolutionary role of moral practice, I think that relativists can explain our ways of evaluating people's moral judgements. It is central to the purpose of serving this role that we are able to say to others (and that we can think that) they are mistaken in their moral statements and beliefs even if they are correct according to their own moralities. In this way we can put pressure on them to change their opinions, and come closer to

<sup>166</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 73.

<sup>167</sup> Gibbard, 1990, p. 76, my italics.

consensus about what to do and thus be able to coordinate our acts. The important thing is that we reach some form of agreement about how to act in certain situations; so moral discussion should focus on acts and their features. This is, the relativist can say, why we evaluate other people's moral judgements that an act is, say, morally right, through focusing on the act and projecting our own morality on it: if I find that the act is right (i.e. recommended by my morality), then I think that her judgement is correct. She has made the same evaluation of the act as I do, so her judgement is correct. This is how we can expect it to work, since what is important is to reach a (common) conclusion about what to do, not to discuss what to do on this or that morality.

This speaker relativist reply works partly through questioning the construal of our intuitions about moral disagreements assumed by the objection from intuitive disagreement. Even though our intuitions might seem to tell us that moral disputes are like disagreements over absolute matters of fact it is not obvious that they do so; our intuitions might involve a minimalist sense of truth or correctness; and it can be explained why we would think like that about moral expressions even if we do not about other indexical expressions.

The latter step in this reply also opens up for an alternative sort of relativist explanation of our disagreement intuitions. Instead of saying that the social and evolutionary function of moral thought and language makes it reasonable to reinterpret our intuitions, relativists could say that it *explains away* why we (or many of us) have absolutist rather than relativist intuitions about moral matters. As we have noted, minimalism about truth or correctness typically does not apply to context-dependent expressions but to expressions that have the same content in different contexts of use. The fact that we think about moral judgements in this way, even if it can be explained why we do so, might be one explanation of why we have absolutist intuitions. The relativist strategy considered above tries to explain why, when we evaluate other people's moral judgements, we focus on what we think about the act in question and not on what *the other person's* morality says in that matter; if this explanation succeeds, it explains why moral discussion proceeds in a manner *typical* to absolutist discourses and *atypical* to relativist discourses. So it would provide an explanation of why we think that moral practice is an absolutist discourse: that is, that we think of moral judgements as absolutely true, and not true relatively.

This means that relativists have a reply to the objection from intuitive disagreement also if they do not question the interpretation of these

intuitions assumed by the objection. If it can be explained why we intuitively think of moral discourse as an absolutist discourse even if relativism is true, this also explains why we have intuitions that moral disputes are disagreements in absolutist sense even if relativism is true. That is, the intuitions can be explained away. This actually comes close to the explanations some relativists provide. Both Kölbel<sup>168</sup> and Wong<sup>169</sup> refer to Mackie as to why we intuitively think that moral matters ‘have objective validity’:

We need morality to regulate interpersonal relations, to control some of the ways in which people behave towards one another, often in opposition to contrary inclinations. We therefore want our moral judgements to be authoritative for other agents as well as for ourselves: objective validity would give them the authority required.<sup>170</sup>

While Mackie thinks that our intuition that moral judgements are objectively valid goes into their meaning, relativists like Wong and Kölbel obviously deny this. The relativists take Mackie’s explanation to be an explanation of why we *falsely* think of moral matters in this way.

What I have said in this section cannot serve as conclusive evidence that relativist explanations of the sorts presented are correct. It does, however, make it likely that some such relativist explanation can be made plausible. This would mean that the fact, if it is a fact, that moral disputes cannot be disagreements in the sense many of us intuitively think they are if moral truth-value relativism is true, is no major problem for the view. It can be made plausible that we would have these intuitions even if moral truth-value relativism were true.

#### 4.7 CONCLUSION

I have argued that even though relativism implies that we do not disagree in the sense that the objection from intuitive disagreement assumes that we do, relativists have ways of answering the objection. They can either argue that the objection misconstrues our intuitions and that relativism can account for the intuitions we actually have; or they can explain away the intuitions. The objection thus fails to undermine moral truth-value relativism.

<sup>168</sup> Kölbel, 2005, p. 64.

<sup>169</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 78.

<sup>170</sup> Mackie, 1977, p. 43.

More generally, the conclusion in this first part of the book is that neither of the common arguments for or against moral truth-value relativism in contrast to absolutism succeeds. Each view has ways to accommodate the features thought to speak in favour of the other. In chapter 2 I argued that the way moral judgements are connected to motivation cannot decide to the advantage of relativism. There are ways for absolutists to account for this as well. I also argued, in chapter 3, that the argument from divergence of moral opinions does not support speaker relativism, at least not in any simple way. One version of the argument fails because it fails to exclude absolutist error-theory as a viable option. Other versions of the argument have to be complemented by some way of handling strong moral absolutist intuitions.

Where should the discussion go from this? Obviously, other arguments are needed to determine between moral truth-value relativism and absolutism. In part 2 I approach this matter from what I take to be an interesting fact about moral discourse; that different people have so different intuitions about the nature of moral properties. This holds not least regarding the question of whether moral properties are absolute or relative.





PART 2

AGAINST THE  
SINGLE ANALYSIS ASSUMPTION



# Chapter 5

## Semantic Foundations

### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

Metaethics is a highly disputed area. For every theory about the meaning of moral terms, or about how moral judgements should be analysed, there are philosophers who reject it because they have intuitions that go against it. In the previous chapters I have sometimes referred to absolutist intuitions; many people seem to have intuitions that moral facts are absolute and not relative. Part of the job to make relativism plausible consists of explaining how it can be that so many people are mistaken in this way.

At the end of the previous chapter I argued that relativists have a way of doing this. They can hold that even if a relativist analysis holds for our moral judgements, we can be expected to have absolutist intuitions. In order to play the social and evolutionary role to further cooperation, it is important that we conceive of moral practice as having features typical of absolute practices. Accordingly, it is not strange that we think of moral facts as absolute.

But there is one way in which the strong absolutist intuitions can be taken to speak against standard relativism, which cannot be countered like this. It is common to hold that our intuitions help determine, or are indications of what help to determine, what the correct analysis is. Our intuitions about the correct application of a term or concept in different cases are direct reflections of our dispositions to use that term or concept to categorise things in the world. Such dispositions to apply a term

are often seen as relevant to the reference of that term, as used by those people or in that linguistic community. So, for example, we might think that it is, at least partly, the fact that English-speaking people are disposed to apply the term 'cup' to things that we drink from and the term 'coffee' to a substance that we drink, that makes it the case that these terms have their respective referents (and not, say, that 'cup' refers to coffee and 'coffee' to cups). In line with this, strong absolutist intuitions could be taken to be, or be signs of, dispositions to use moral terms that determine their reference. According to this way of thinking, even if it turns out that we have these intuitions or dispositions only because this furthers the function of moral practice, the fact that we have them is enough to make it the case that absolutism is true.

This poses a challenge for relativists, then, to argue that the absolutist intuitions do not determine reference. Not everyone has absolutist intuitions, though; some are prepared to say that relative properties can count as moral properties. And this poses a corresponding challenge for absolutists. In this part of the book I will argue that as a consequence of this difference in intuitions, it is a mistake to think that either one of standard relativism or absolutism is true: the difference amounts to a difference in concepts, a difference in how different people's moral judgements should be analysed. At least this is so given certain common methodological assumptions, a point we will return to later in this chapter and throughout the remaining chapters.

This chapter gives an introduction to the discussion that will proceed in the following chapters. First I clear up some terminology, and after that I say a bit more about the challenge posed by opposite intuitions and how I will approach it in proceeding chapters.

## 5.2 CLARIFICATION OF SOME CENTRAL NOTIONS

Standard relativism, to repeat, is the view that the extension of moral terms and concepts (or the truth-value of moral sentences and beliefs) depends on the morality of the speaker or believer. It is important to see how this view (and its contenders) connects to some notions we will use in the ensuing discussion: *meaning*, *concepts*, *reference*, *extension*, *analyses*, and *properties*. Much of what I will say here is a collection of what has been more or less explicitly said in the previous chapters. But it will be useful to have these things clearly summed up before we move on.

### 5.2.1 *Relativist, absolutist and plural analyses*

I sometimes speak in terms of relativist and absolutist *analyses* of moral judgements; and I have called the view I will argue for in the end “*analysis pluralism*”. So it is important to get clear on my use of ‘analysis’. That a standard relativist analysis holds for a speaker’s moral judgements, means that the truth-values of her moral judgements depend on her morality as it does if some form of standard relativism is true. The claim that a standard relativist analysis holds for moral judgements made by every speaker, then, is equivalent to the claim that standard relativism is true.

Accordingly, the claim that a relativist analysis holds (for judgements made by everyone) is intended to be neutral between the different forms of standard relativism described in the previous chapters. Most crucially, because it might be less than obvious, it is meant to apply also to the views I have classified as *divergence relativism*. These say that moral terms refer to different properties when used by two different speakers if they have different strong moral beliefs, beliefs they are under no circumstances ready to give up. These strong beliefs are considered to be reference-fixing for the moral terms. Thus, when a utilitarian says, “It is wrong to do X” this might simply mean, “doing X does not maximize well-being”; while the same sentence uttered by a Kantian might mean something like, “doing X is a way of using someone merely as a means”. I have said that these forms of standard relativism might be best described as saying that the extensions of moral terms (and concepts) varies between different speakers because moral terms have different meaning and express different concepts when different speakers use them.<sup>171</sup> So on these views, the standard relativist analysis does not hold because people’s moral judgements share a common relativist meaning (or because they share relativist moral concepts), but because the meanings and concepts vary in accordance with standard relativism, that is, varies with the speaker’s morality. In one sense, it might seem that this view implies that there is no common analysis of the moral statements made by the utilitarian and by the Kantian; their judgements simply mean different things. By contrast, if indexical relativism is true moral terms have a common (Kaplanian) character, and on assessor relativism

<sup>171</sup> I will assume here that the meaning of a term is connected to the concept expressed by the term: if the term has a different meaning then a different concept is expressed; if it expresses a different concept, then it has a different meaning.

they even have the same reference.<sup>172</sup> In my terminology, however, a standard relativist analysis holds whichever of these theories is correct. What matters is that all of the theories imply that the truth-values of moral judgements depend on the morality of the speaker or assessor.

In a corresponding way I will say that if absolutism is true, then an absolutist analysis of (all) moral judgements holds. That is, if the truth-value of moral judgements does not vary with the speaker's morality. According to absolutism moral judgements have the same meaning no matter who makes them (and everyone has the same moral concepts).<sup>173</sup>

If standard relativism is true a standard relativist analysis holds for moral judgements no matter who makes them; if absolutism is true, an absolutist analysis holds for moral judgements, no matter who makes them. Analysis pluralism is the view that neither of these are true because an absolutist analysis holds for moral judgements made by some speakers (the truth-value is *not* dependent on the speaker's morality), and a standard relativist analysis holds for moral judgements made by others (the truth-value is dependent on the speaker's morality).

### 5.2.2 *Relative moral properties*

In what follows I will also speak of *relative moral properties*. Just like the claim that a relativist analysis holds is meant only as another way of saying that some form of standard relativism is true, the claim that moral properties are relative moral properties (or that moral terms refer to relative moral properties) is intended only as another way of saying that moral properties are such that standard relativism is true. Correspondingly, I intend the claim that moral properties are absolute properties to be equivalent to the claim that moral properties are such that moral absolutism is true.

Since standard relativism can take a lot of different forms, the claim that moral properties are relative moral properties can be specified in many different ways. Every form of standard relativism implies that the truth-values of moral statements and beliefs depend on some relation

<sup>172</sup> Also classical forms of subjectivism, according to which "x is right" means roughly "I like x", imply that moral expressions have the same meaning regardless who uses them, but a meaning that includes indexical elements.

<sup>173</sup> Since I have defined absolutism as a claim about truth-values or extensions, it is consistent with absolutism that people have different but co-referential moral concepts, as is the case with the concepts of triangular and trilateral. I am ignoring this position, since it is not represented in metaethics.

between the speaker/believer or assessor and the act which is morally evaluated. But this leaves open different possibilities as to what the referents of moral terms and concepts, i.e. the moral properties, are:

(i) If assessor relativism is true, moral properties will be properties that have different extensions relative to different contexts. Everyone refers to the same property when they use, say, the term 'morally wrong' but the extension of that property varies depending on who assesses the statement.

(ii) The situation is different if speaker relativism is true. There are at least two possibilities. The first alternative is that moral words refer to two-place relations between the speaker's morality and the action in question. The second alternative is that they refer to one-place properties picked out by the speaker's morality. According to an indexical relativism such as Dreier's, for example, a moral term refers to a property that the speaker desires actions to have; so, if the speaker is a utilitarian, the property referred to will be the property of maximizing well-being. What is relative about relative moral properties, on these views, is not that they have their extension relative to contexts, but the fact that what is a *moral* property is relative to the context of utterance. On the first alternative, when P makes moral judgements she refers to relations that hold between *her own* morality and actions, not between, say, Q's morality and actions. So a relation that holds between P's morality and an action is a *moral* property only relative to a context of utterance where P is the speaker – not relative to contexts where Q is the speaker. Similarly, on the second alternative, when a Kantian says that an action maximizes well-being she is not making a moral statement; so the property of maximizing well-being is not a moral property relative to contexts of utterances where she is the speaker.<sup>174</sup>

In my terminology, all of these different standard relativist views on the reference of moral terms can be described as the idea that moral

<sup>174</sup> In chapter 1 I said that relativist positions are sometimes characterised as saying that the property in question has more places than on the absolutist picture, so that, for example, truth is a three-place property rather than a two-place property. We can now see that not all forms of moral truth-value relativism can be stated in this manner. Neither assessor relativism nor indexical forms of standard speaker relativism imply that the properties referred to by moral terms have more than one place. Furthermore, it should be obvious that this holds for analysis pluralism as well: it is consistent with this view that moral terms, as used by some or all speakers, refers to one-place properties, as long as different speakers refer to different such properties.



terms refer to relative moral properties, or that moral properties are relative moral properties.

Now we can return to our main theme here: the challenge from opposite intuitions.

### 5.3 THE CHALLENGE AND SEMANTIC FOUNDATIONS

We can formulate the challenge from absolutist intuitions against relativism in terms of relative moral properties: Some people have strong intuitions to the effect that moral properties are not relative. (What this amounts to more exactly will be discussed in the next chapter.) This is a problem for relativism if we take these intuitions, or the dispositions they are signs of, to be reference-fixing. On the other hand, some people are disposed to say that relative facts of certain sorts can count as moral facts. This is a potential problem for absolutists.

These challenges arise given the way in which much metaethical discussion is pursued: on the assumption that the correct analysis should be consistent with our intuitions about the nature of moral properties and moral judgements. In the next chapter we will see that both standard relativists and absolutists often make this assumption.

I will argue that if we take this pursuit seriously, and do not merely assume that everyone shares our own personal understanding of the nature of moral properties and facts, the conclusion is that none of the traditional analyses work: both standard relativism and absolutism are views about how moral judgements should be analysed *no matter who makes the judgement*.

What we have then is a challenge not only for these specific kinds of analyses of moral judgements – relativism and absolutism – but also for what I have called “the single analysis assumption”; that is, the assumption that a general analysis of moral judgements – one that holds for moral judgements no matter who they are made by – is viable.

What would it take to meet the challenge? For both theories it is crucial that a case can be made that the opponents’ intuitions are not reference-fixing. Let us focus for the moment on the challenge to standard relativism posed by the strong absolutist intuitions some people have. What relativists need in order to meet this challenge is a semantic theory – a theory about how the reference of moral terms is determined – that does not take the strong absolutist intuitions some people have as evidence that the relativist analysis does not hold for moral judgements made by those people. I will call this a *semantic foundation* of relativism.

A semantic foundation needs to live up to three desiderata. First, it should not take the strong absolutist intuitions of some people as evidence that an absolutist analysis holds for these people's moral judgments. Second, it should take some features of moral discourse as evidence that a relativist analysis holds for moral sentences. Thirdly, it must be a semantic theory that is plausible for moral terms. That is, it must be reasonable to think that the reference of moral terms is determined along the lines of the semantic theory.

Finding such a semantic foundation would accomplish two things for relativists, corresponding to the two first desiderata. First, by meeting the challenge from opposite intuitions through holding that the absolutist intuitions are not reference-fixing, it would counter the most common objections to the theory, since these are objections of the counter-intuitivity sort. Second, it would give relativists a way to argue in favour of their view. In part 1 I reached the conclusion that the common arguments for and against standard forms of relativism fail. A semantic foundation would provide a new and needed argument.

To those acquainted with modern metaethics and philosophy of language it might seem obvious that there are semantic views that can be used to meet the challenge from opposite intuitions in this way. Meaning and reference, it is usually thought, need not be transparent, and even competent speakers can be mistaken about these things. This is why the open question argument against naturalist analyses generally is considered to fail. So, it seems, relativists should be able to argue that absolutist intuitions are such mistakes, and absolutists ought to be able to argue in a corresponding manner about relativist intuitions.

In chapter 6 I examine the possibility of defending standard relativism (or absolutism) on the basis of semantic internalism, the view that meaning and reference is determined by internal properties of the speaker, such as referential intentions or dispositions to use terms. I state the challenge in more detail given what I take to be the most promising internalist view, and argue that it cannot be answered in the way the open question argument can, that is, through reference to mistakes about the reference or moral terms.

One might think that the obvious solution is to use some form of semantic externalism. In chapter 7 the discussion focuses on the two main forms of semantic externalism: social externalism according to which meaning and reference are not determined individually but by the use of terms in linguistic communities, and causal theories of reference, ac-

ording to which the reference of a term depends on which properties causally governs our use of it.

I argue that neither social nor causal forms of semantic externalism can be used to remove the challenge. The common arguments for externalism, as given by e.g. Saul Kripke and Hilary Putnam, do not take us out of a broadly construed internalist view. Even though they question parts of internalism they do not question the foundation of the internalist picture: that the ultimate criteria of reference hinge on intuitions or dispositions of the speakers or believers. This point about semantic externalism is not a new one<sup>175</sup>, but it is highly relevant here; I argue that it means that the challenge from opposite intuitions cannot be met by a simple reference to semantic externalism.

My argumentation in chapter 6 and 7, then, is to the effect that to avoid the traditional methodology of relying on intuitions in analysing, and thus avoiding the challenge from opposite intuitions, it is not enough to turn to semantic externalism: it takes a more radical departure from traditional methodology. Such departures are indeed possible to make. My claim is that the challenge holds *given certain restrictions on correct analyses*: namely, if we want our analyses to tell us what our terms and concepts refer to given the meaning that is given to them, or is at least constrained, by how we are actually disposed to use the terms and concepts. (This idea will be clarified in the next chapter) There are, for sure, other purposes one might have when analysing moral concepts (and other concepts), and pursuing such analyses might be highly interesting tasks. And given certain such purposes it might be possible to defend either an absolutist or a standard relativist analysis of moral concepts. But all such analyses will be revisionist in a certain sense: they will go against the way many people are disposed to classify acts as being, e.g. morally right and wrong, in such a way that those people are not ready to say that they are analyses of rightness or wrongness.

The fact that I focus almost exclusively on the traditional methodology in chapter 6 and 7, and discuss ways to answer the challenge from opposite intuitions given this, is not to be seen as an implicit valuation from my part that this methodology is to be preferred. In fact, I am sympathetic to a “liberal” view on these matters, like the one David Chalmers calls “the approach of semantic pluralism”. He says that:

<sup>175</sup> Cf. e.g. Chalmers, 2004, Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, Fumerton, 1989, Jackson, 1998a, Lewis, 1984, Millikan, 2005, Searle, 1983.

this approach gives little weight to disputes over whether a given (purported) semantic value is “the” meaning of an expression, or even whether it is truly a “semantic” value at all. Such disputes will be largely terminological, depending on the criteria one takes to be crucial in one’s prior notion of “meaning” or “semantics”. On the pluralist approach, the substantive questions are: can expressions (whether types or tokens) be associated with values that have such-and-such properties? If so, what is the nature of the association and of the values? What aspects of language and thought can this association help us to analyze and explain?<sup>176</sup>

Analyses of moral judgements can be pursued on the basis of many different methodologies, and depending on how they are specified they can help explain aspects of language and thought. The reasons that I pursue an extensive discussion of the possibilities for either standard relativism or absolutism to be defended within a traditional intuition-based methodology are, first, that this is how much metaethical discussion is pursued, and second, that I think that the right conclusion from pursuing metaethics on these conditions has not been appreciated; that we have to give up the single analysis assumption.

What ensues from the discussion in chapter 6 and 7, then, is that we have to make a choice: Either we adopt the traditional approach to analysing moral judgements and give up the traditional picture that one analysis holds for moral judgements made by everyone, or we give up the traditional approach to analysing moral judgements. (Or rather, we do not have to choose, we can do both, but we shouldn’t mix them up.)

Perhaps this could be seen as a *reductio ad absurdum* against the traditional approach to analysing moral judgements: if no single analysis can be defended on this approach we should look for others. In chapter 8 I argue that this is not how we need to see things. I argue that what the discussion about the challenge from opposite intuitions in chapter 6 and 7 suggests, given this methodology, is *analysis pluralism*: that different analyses of moral judgements hold for moral judgements made by different speakers. An absolutist analysis holds for judgements made by some people, while standard relativist analyses might hold for judgements made by others. I argue that this is not only a consistent, but also a plausible position.

<sup>176</sup> Chalmers, 2004, p. 167.

# Chapter 6

## Semantic Internalism and Relativism

### 6.1 INTRODUCTION

Relativist analyses of moral judgements are challenged by the strong absolutist intuitions some people have. This challenge seems most acute on semantic internalist views on meaning and reference according to which such strong intuitions can be taken to be linguistic dispositions that fix the reference of moral terms and concepts. The purpose of this chapter is to formulate the challenge as it arises on such an internalist picture, and see whether standard relativists nonetheless can answer this challenge.

The chapter will proceed as follows. First I sketch something like a traditional view on conceptual analysis, taking our intuitions about, or dispositions to describe, possible cases as evidence about the reference of concepts, and a connected semantic internalist view on how reference is determined. I point out that this view is not only commonly applied in philosophy in general but also used and explicitly defended as a view about what constitutes a correct analysis in metaethics. I then state the challenge as it arises on this view. After that I turn to possible ways of answering the challenge. The internalist view in question allows that we can be mistaken about the correct analysis, which might be taken to suggest that the challenge can be answered by maintaining that the abso-

lutist intuitions some people have are mistaken. I argue that this is not a viable reply to the challenge.

At the end of the chapter I consider objections to the form of semantic internalism I have suggested, and argue that these cannot be used to make the challenge less pressing: even after we take the objections into account, enough of the semantic view remains for the challenge to stand. At least this is so if we are not willing to give up on the idea that analyses of moral judgements should live up to at least a minimal constraint of being consistent with our intuitions about what moral properties can possibly be. (The objections considered in this chapter are not of the kind that question semantic internalism through arguing for some form of externalism; this is the subject of the next chapter.) The conclusion is that the kind of semantic internalism considered here cannot serve as a semantic foundation for standard relativist analyses of moral judgements.

## 6.2 INTUITION-BASED CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

### 6.2.1 *The general idea*

How do we know that a chair need not have four legs to be a chair? One way is to ask ourselves about real or imagined cases of candidates for being chairs with more or less than four legs: is that a chair? When I ask myself that question about my one-legged office chair, my answer is: yes, it is a chair. And I take this to show that chairs do not necessarily have four legs. On the other hand, I would not say that my office chair, or any other chair with one leg, is a four-legged chair. This tells us something about what it takes to be a four-legged chair: one is not a four-legged chair if one has only one leg. This is an intuitive way of getting to know what it takes to be something; we consult our intuitions about whether something that has a certain feature can count as being a certain thing, X, and take that to show something about what it takes to be an X. Or, in other words, it is an intuitive way of doing conceptual analysis: what we find out are things about the reference and extension of our concepts (of chairs or whatever) and of the terms that express these concepts. There is at least one one-legged sitting device in the extension of the concept of a chair, so it refers not only to things with four legs.

On this intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, then, our ways of using terms and concepts to classify things in the world and hypothetical scenarios of how the world might be, tell us something about the

reference of these terms and concepts. Here's how Frank Jackson and David Chalmers describe it:

When given sufficient information about a hypothetical scenario, subjects are frequently in a position to identify the extension of a given concept, on reflection, under the hypothesis that the scenario in question obtains. Analysis of a concept proceeds at least in part through consideration of a concept's extension within hypothetical scenarios, and noting regularities that emerge. This sort of analysis can reveal that certain features of the world are highly relevant to determining the extension of a concept, and that other features are irrelevant.<sup>177</sup>

We learn about the reference of a concept from how we classify things in the world with that concept, as signalled by how we classify things in hypothetical scenarios with the term that expresses the concept. Would we say that this or that is an X? If we would, or would not, this tells us something about the concept we express with the term 'X'.

Conceptual analysis, on this view, is a method of unveiling the way we carve up the world with our concepts and the terms that express them. We are, as Jackson put it,

Extracting a person's theory of what counts as a *K* from intuitions about how to describe possible cases, and taking it to reveal their concept of *K*-hood [...].<sup>178</sup>

The simple point that considering our intuitions about possible cases is a way of extracting or unveiling a pattern of use *that is already there* is important. We can have a concept without ever encountering or thinking about the hypothetical situations that are used to uncover the way we are disposed to use the concept. Even when we do not think about the scenarios, we are *disposed* to react to and describe them in certain ways *if* we were to think about them. These dispositions are what matter to the reference of our terms and concepts, and our intuitions about hypothetical scenarios is a way of laying bare the dispositions.

We could understand the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis as being silent as to what *fixes* the reference of concepts or terms. It would then be a purely methodological view, telling us how we get to know the extension and reference of concepts and terms. However, this methodological view is most plausibly paired up with a certain view on reference-fixing. What fixes the reference of a term or concept, according

<sup>177</sup> Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, p. 322.

<sup>178</sup> Jackson, 1998a, p. 32.

to this view, is how we are disposed to classify things using the term (which expresses the concept).<sup>179</sup> If this is how the reference of our concepts and terms is determined, it makes perfect sense that the intuition-based method of conceptual analysis is a good way of getting to know the reference of terms and concepts. Our intuitions about the applicability of terms and concepts in real and hypothetical scenarios are, as we have said, expressions of our dispositions to classify things with those terms and concepts. Even though accepting the intuition-based view as a *method* does not commit one to accept this view on what fixes reference, in what follows I will use “the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis” to apply to both.

We should also note that the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis as presented here is committed neither to an internalist nor a social externalist view on reference. It can be held that a person’s dispositions to react to hypothetical cases determine the reference of terms (and the concepts they express) as she uses them. Or, alternatively, we might think that it is how people in general, or experts, in a linguistic society are disposed to use terms, that determine their reference, as used also by speakers in that community who lack the relevant dispositions. We will return to the latter social externalist view in the next chapter. In this chapter we consider the internalist version (with the purpose of finding out whether it can provide ways to meet the challenge from opposite intuitions).

Let us say a bit about how, more exactly, our intuitions about, or dispositions to classify, hypothetical scenarios would affect the reference of concepts on this view. If a concept of F involves necessary and sufficient conditions for being F, then, according to this method of analysing concepts, which these conditions are and are not is revealed by our intuitions to possible cases in accordance with the following “principles”:

*Not necessary.* That x is G is *not* necessary for x to be F if, and only if, there is some scenario about which we are disposed to say that x is F but not G.

<sup>179</sup> This is a version of what is sometimes called “conceptual role semantics”. See e.g., Greenberg and Harman, 2006.



*Not sufficient.* That  $x$  is  $G$  is *not* sufficient for  $x$  to be  $F$  if, and only if, there is some scenario about which we are disposed to say that  $x$  is  $G$  but not  $F$ .

*Necessary.* That  $x$  is  $G$  is necessary for  $x$  to be  $F$  if, and only if, there are no scenarios about which we are disposed to say that  $x$  is  $F$  but not  $G$ .

*Sufficient.* That  $x$  is  $G$  is sufficient for  $x$  to be  $F$  if, and only if, there are no scenarios about which we are disposed to say that  $x$  is  $G$  but not  $F$ .

There is, on this view, an important difference between, on the one hand, arguing that something *is not* a necessary or sufficient condition, and, on the other hand, arguing that something *is* a necessary or sufficient condition. If we find the relevant counter-example to something being a necessary or sufficient condition, this serves as conclusive evidence that the condition in question does not hold. Thus, it turned out above that it is not necessary to have four legs to be a chair. To show conclusively that something actually *is* a necessary or sufficient condition, on the other hand, we would have to show that there are *no* hypothetical scenarios that serve as counter-examples to this. There is, of course, no way of conclusively proving such a thing. What we can do is to present hypotheses that are consistent with our intuitions about the possible cases we have considered this far, that is, with our best evidence so far. These hypotheses will be open to refutation. This is, for example, what happened to the analysis of knowledge as justified true belief. Gettier came up with his now famous descriptions of possible cases where people have true justified beliefs but our intuitions tell us that they nonetheless fail to have knowledge.<sup>180</sup> The conclusion being, of course, that knowledge cannot accurately be analysed merely as justified true belief.

A qualification should be made. Not any rash response to a scenario counts. Sometimes we do not think clearly or carefully enough about the details or implications of a certain scenario, to realise that it does (or does not) constitute a counter-example. For this reason, the intuition-

<sup>180</sup> Gettier, 1963. Gettier's argument is often used as a standard example of conceptual analysis: see e.g., Ahlström, 2008, Braddon-Mitchell and Jackson, 1997, Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, Schroeter, 2004, Weatherson, 2003.

based view of analysis should say that it is what we are disposed to think about scenarios when we think rationally that reveals something about our concepts.<sup>181</sup>

It is important to notice what the intuition-based view of analysis, as I have construed it, is *not* committed to. First, as I understand it, it does not amount to saying that it is always possible to specify necessary and sufficient conditions of a concept. Here is Jackson and Chalmers again:

What emerges as a result of this process may or may not be an explicit definition, but it will at least give useful information about the features in virtue of which a concept applies to the world. It will usually be the case that one can find complex expressions whose conditions of application approximate those of the original concept to some degree, where one finds increasingly good approximations through increasingly complex expressions. In this way we can elucidate at least many important aspects of how a concept's extension depends on the world. But in general, there is no reason to suppose that a finite expression yielding a counterexample-free analysis of a concept must result from this process. This pattern, whereby a conditional ability to evaluate a concept's extension yields elucidation of a concept without a finite counterexample-free analysis, is illustrated very clearly in the case of 'knowledge'.<sup>182</sup>

I take it that the thought here is something like this: there is little reason to expect that the way we are disposed to classify possible cases with a certain term can be fully and exactly described using other terms. But we can approximate it more and more by looking at more and more relevant scenarios and taking account of our dispositions to classify these using the term in question. This is what we are doing when we are analysing a concept or the meaning of a term. Consequently, the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis allows that for at least some concepts it is not possible to find a complete analysis (one that is not open to any counter-examples). All this view is committed to is that something is a sufficient or necessary condition if there are no intuitive counter-examples to this (as specified by the principles above).

This illustrates a difference between the intuition-based view and another closely related class of theories often referred to as “descriptivism” about meaning. According to such views, terms have their mean-

<sup>181</sup> Cf. the use of 'rational reflection' in Chalmers, 2004, Chalmers and Jackson, 2001.

<sup>182</sup> Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, p. 323. In a footnote, Jackson and Chalmers add that “[Jackson] is somewhat more optimistic than [Chalmers] about the possibility of satisfactory finite analyses, especially if one recognizes that conceptual analysis can accommodate an element of conceptual revision to clear up confusions in a folk concept.” We will return to this idea of conceptual revision later in this chapter.

ings by virtue of the descriptions that speakers associate with them. Theories of this kind are found both in Frege and Russell.<sup>183</sup> The meaning of a name for example, such as ‘Aristotle’, is on this view given by a definite description associated with the name by the speaker, such as “the writer of the *Nichomachean Ethics*”, and the referent of a name is whatever satisfies the definite description. A modified version is what might be called the cluster theory, according to which the meaning is not given by some single definite description but by a cluster of different definite descriptions of which some might not be accurate descriptions of the referent. The referent of the name, on this view, is the thing that satisfies most, or a sufficient number, of the descriptions associated with the name.<sup>184</sup> One difference between these descriptivist views on meaning and the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis (or meaning) is that the latter does not presuppose that our dispositions to classify possible cases can be perfectly and exactly depicted by a description, however complex or disjunctive this description is. We will return to this difference in the next chapter.

A point connected to this one is that the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis is not committed to the idea that the correct analysis of a concept, described in terms that express other concepts we have, is a short or simple one. For many concepts we might expect that if the analysis is to be exhaustive, or even close to exhaustive, and informative to us, it will be a long and complex one.

Neither is the intuition-based view committed to the idea that the correct analysis of a concept specifies for everything whether it falls within or without the extension of a concept. It is more plausible to think that it does not. After all, there is the phenomenon of vagueness, and we might want to allow that some concepts have “blind spots”, cases for which the concept simply does not specify whether they are in or out.

Of course, the claim should not be made too strong. There is almost certainly a high degree of indeterminacy in our concepts, in their application both to the actual world and to hypothetical epistemic possibilities. It can sometimes happen that when an epistemic possibility is found to be actual, no clear decision about the concept’s application is dictated.<sup>185</sup>

<sup>183</sup> See e.g. Frege, 1997, Russell, 1905.

<sup>184</sup> Searle, 1958.

<sup>185</sup> Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, p. 344.

All the intuition-based view of analysis says, as I conceive of it, is that to the extent that there are clear cases of falling inside or outside the extension of a concept, as there will be for every concept, these will show in our classification dispositions.

### 6.2.2 *Intuition-based analysis in metaethics*

It should be clear that, when construed in this uncommitted manner, the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis is used frequently in virtually every area of philosophy. Philosophers construe ingenious hypothetical scenarios and ask themselves how to describe these scenarios. And our willingness or unwillingness to describe a scenario in a certain way is taken as justification that certain things are or are not possible. We have already seen an example of how this is done in the case of analysing the concept of knowledge: Gettier's famous scenarios tell us that people can have true justified beliefs without having knowledge. In other philosophical discussions we are presented with hypothetical scenarios populated by swampmen, zombies and people travelling by teleporters to Mars, and our reactions to the examples are thought to show things about philosophically controversial questions; in these cases, the nature of mental content, consciousness and personal identity.<sup>186</sup> Examples of this kind are easily multiplied just through opening up a philosophical journal at random. On the intuition-based view of analysis, such argumentations can be seen as applications of the method of finding intuitive counter-examples.

And perhaps it should be surprising that this is a common method. The intuition-based view can in a very straightforward sense be said to deliver intuitively correct analyses. Its constraints on what counts as a correct analysis guarantees that an analysis of the concept of *x* will accord with what we are disposed to think can count as an *x*.

Metaethical debate is no exception to the use of this method. A clear example is the discussion concerning motivational internalism, as we saw in chapter 2. Motivational internalists hold that there is a necessary connection between accepting a moral judgement and being motivated in accordance with it (at least under normal circumstances), sometimes using as an argument for this view simply that a judgement which is not accompanied by motivation (in normal cases) intuitively does not get to

<sup>186</sup> Swampman: Davidson, 1987. Zombies: Chalmers, 1996. Teleporters: Parfit, 1984.

count as a moral judgement.<sup>187</sup> One of the main arguments for motivational externalism – the position that denies that there is a necessary connection of this sort – on the other hand, is that we can conceive of an amoralist; a person who accepts moral judgements without having the relevant motivation (even in normal circumstances).<sup>188</sup> The arguments on both sides seem to be examples of the intuition-based way of doing conceptual analysis, applied to the concept of moral judgements.<sup>189</sup>

Not only is this way of reasoning – taking intuitive counter-examples to establish the falsity of certain analyses of moral judgements and the truth of others – present in metaethical debate. It is also explicitly defended from methodological considerations about what a good analysis of moral judgements is. On one prominent view, the correct analysis of a moral concept depends on the dispositions of competent speakers (speakers who master moral terms) to use moral terms. Smith states his version of this view in terms of platitudes:

To say that we can analyse moral concepts, like the concept of being right, is to say that we can specify which property the property of being right is by reference to platitudes about rightness: that is, by reference to descriptions of the inferential and judgemental dispositions of those who have mastery of the term ‘rightness’.<sup>190</sup>

Smith’s idea of platitudes is hinted at already in this quote, but here is a more elaborate description, taken from a passage where Smith illustrates the idea through platitudes about colours:

These platitudes about colour play a certain crucial role in our coming to master colour vocabulary, for we come to master colour vocabulary by coming to treat remarks like these as *platitudinous*. The point is not that if we have mas-

<sup>187</sup> See e.g., Dancy, 1993, pp. 4-6 and Gibbard, 1993, pp. 318-19 for such arguments. And when Smith gives an argument for his form of internalism, that argument is deliberately independent of our intuitions about amoralists but it relies on other intuitions – intuitions about what it takes to be a good person. Smith, 1994, pp. 71-76.

<sup>188</sup> See e.g., Brink, 1989, pp. 46-49, Mele, 1996, Stocker, 1979.

<sup>189</sup> Indeed, in my discussion in that chapter I also sometimes relied on this method. We noticed in chapter 2 that philosophers on different sides here have different intuitions about how strong the connection between moral judgements and motivation is, both generally but, perhaps more importantly, also about particular cases like amoralist examples. When I said in 2.6 that one could hold it to be an advantage of *de dicto* internalism that it can accommodate this through holding open that people have slightly different concepts of moral judgements in this respect, I was implicitly relying on the idea that we can take someone’s intuitions about what counts as an X (moral judgement) to determine his or her concept of an X.

<sup>190</sup> Smith, 1994, p. 39.

tery of the word 'red' then we are able to produce a long list of remarks like these off the tops of our heads. That may or may not be true. The point is rather that these remarks capture the inferential and judgemental dispositions *vis-à-vis* the word 'red' of those who have mastery of that term, whether or not they are able to produce them off the tops of their heads. To have mastery of the word 'red' is to be disposed to make inferences and judgements along these lines. It is in this sense that the remarks constitute a set of platitudes.<sup>191</sup>

To master a term, then, is to treat a set of claims involving that term as platitudes, not necessarily in the sense of explicitly holding any of these claims as obviously true or even true, but in the sense of making inferences and judgements that are in line with them. This fits the idea of testing what a term and the concept it expresses refers to through letting competent speakers, speakers who master the term in question, make judgements about real or hypothetical cases. People who master colour terms will for example be disposed to judge that "There's no seeing a colour without seeing an extended coloured patch", which would show that this is a reference-fixing platitude for colour concepts. We saw in chapter 2 what kind of analysis of moral concepts Smith takes this to support. According to this analysis, judging that one has a moral reason to perform a certain action is to judge that fully rational people would desire that one performs that action. Obviously, this is not an *enumeration* of the platitudes that surround moral concepts. But, Smith argues, the analysis can account for the platitudes, and thus it is supported.

Jackson and Pettit hold a view on how moral concepts should be analysed which is, for our purposes, very similar to Smith's.<sup>192</sup> On this view "moral terms are involved in a network of content-relevant connections, including connections with other moral and evaluative terms".<sup>193</sup> That is, each moral term is analytically connected to other moral terms and descriptive terms, and together these connections form a network. And any specific term is defined by its place in the network.<sup>194</sup> A claim involving such a term is therefore, in a sense, a very complex claim about all of the relations between the term and other terms in the network.

What is interesting here is that according to this view the connections between different terms are given by the "commonplaces" involved in

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.

<sup>192</sup> Jackson, 1992, Jackson, 1998a, Jackson and Pettit, 1995

<sup>193</sup> Jackson and Pettit, 1995, p. 22

<sup>194</sup> This way of analysing moral terms builds on Lewis's view on how to analyse theoretical terms (in Lewis, 1970), which in turn draws on views defended in Ramsey, 1931 and Carnap, 1963.

"folk morality".<sup>195</sup> That is, they are what Smith calls platitudes. Those who master evaluative language have these platitudes as disposition to use the terms, that is to make judgements involving them, in accordance with the platitudes. Having spelled out certain commonplaces about the moral property of fairness, Jackson and Pettit write about people who make judgements about fairness:

They may not have the concepts necessary for spelling out those commonplaces, but the way they are disposed to carry on in forming and revising their fairness-beliefs gives them all the evidence needed for supporting the complex claim.<sup>196</sup>

So on their account it is people's dispositions to use moral terms that determine how these and the concepts they express should be analysed.

In chapter 3 we saw that Wong accepts a similar view on what fixes the reference of concepts and words, and uses it to argue for his speaker relativism. Recall, according to Wong different people have different moral systems, systems of moral rules. These moral systems differ between us to the extent that we have different "substantive moral beliefs that we cannot conceive to be false"<sup>197</sup>. This is important, according to Wong, since these beliefs that a person cannot conceive to be false (or descriptions that we can extract from them) are what fixes the reference of the term 'adequate moral system'. And since Wong analyses moral judgements as judgements about whether an action does or does not violate a rule of an adequate moral system, the consequence is that moral judgements made by different people have different content. (I also suggested there that the argument might be construed more directly, so that to avoid committing to an analysis of moral judgements in terms of adequate moral systems: that people have different moral beliefs, involving moral concepts, that they cannot conceive to be false,

<sup>195</sup> It is perhaps suggested in Jackson and Pettit, 1995 (p. 28-29), but explicitly stated in Jackson, 1992, Jackson, 1998a, that it is not the commonplaces found in our actual morality (or moralities) that is important, but those of "mature folk morality", the morality we would converge on under "critical reflection" (e.g. Jackson, 1998a, p. 140) According to one understanding this is a sign of that Jackson's idea involves a revisionary element: it is not our actual dispositions but those we would have given certain ideal circumstances that matters to the correct analysis (see further section 6.6.2 below). Another understanding would be that it is because our *actual* dispositions reveal that moral properties are what we would take them to be under such ideal circumstances that this matters to the correct analysis.

<sup>196</sup> Jackson and Pettit, 1995, p. 37

<sup>197</sup> Wong, 1984, p. 59

can be taken to imply directly that the reference of their moral concept and the terms that express them are different.)

At least one way to explicate Wong's idea about reference-fixing, is that he places it under the constraint of intuitive counter-examples. Not being able to conceive a belief or judgement to be false, then, is to be disposed not to (hypothetically) retract that belief or judgement in reaction to any hypothetical scenario.

So, both absolutists like Smith and Jackson, and speaker relativists like Wong, have accepted something like an intuition-based view about the reference-fixing of moral concepts and terms, and argued that their analysis is supported by this view. Now, in this part of the book we are concerned with a problem for both of these – what I have called the challenge from opposite intuitions. Let us state this challenge more precisely, in the form it takes with the intuition-based view of analysis.

### 6.3 THE CHALLENGE STATED

#### 6.3.1 *Absolutist intuitions*

Let us start with describing the absolutist intuitions that form the basis of the challenge. It is important to be careful here – some ways of trying to state them fail because they are consistent with certain forms of standard relativism. This is because, as we saw in section 5.2.2, different forms of standard relativism have different implications for the nature of moral properties. Consider first this statement:

- (1) Moral properties (or the properties referred to by moral terms) are absolute properties.

This can be further spelled out as:

- (1') Whether an act is morally right (has the property referred to by 'moral rightness') does not depend on what my (or anyone else's) actual morality is like.

This statement of the absolutist intuition contradicts assessor relativism. Remember, according to this view, while the circumstances of evaluation for ordinary statements are possible worlds, the circumstances of evaluation for moral statements are our individual moral frameworks, or moralities. So just like we would say that whether Mars



has two moons depends on what our actual possible world is like, if assessor relativism is true I should agree that whether an act is morally right depends on what my morality is like.

Speaker relativists (both indexical relativists and divergence relativists) can accept (1) and (1'), however. They can hold that different people's moral statements refer to different ordinary natural properties. For example, when used by a utilitarian, 'morally right' refers to the property of maximizing well-being. This is how it is on Dreier's indexical relativism for example. What indexical relativists cannot accept is that the properties are absolute *moral* properties – they are *moral* properties only relative to certain moralities. So we might try the following way of stating the absolutist intuition:

(2) Moral properties (or the properties referred to by moral terms) are absolute *moral* properties.

However, indexical relativists might want to maintain that they can accommodate this statement as well. (2) can be spelled out as the claim that whether something is a *moral* property does not depend on my or anyone else's morality. And this, in turn, can, if we exemplify with moral rightness, be cashed out as:

(2') Whether killing an innocent is morally right does not depend on my morality.

And indexical relativists can accept this, it seems. The content of 'morally right', on their view, depends on the morality of the speaker. So if our utilitarian, Smart, utters or thinks (2'), the content is: whether killing an innocent maximizes well-being does not depend on my morality. This is true. So maybe indexical relativists would want to hold that there are no specifically absolutist intuitions, only absolutist-seeming intuitions that standard relativists can accept as well.

This would be a too easy way of dismissing the absolutist intuitions, however. (To be clear, I am not attributing it to any standard relativist: as we will see in the next chapter, at least some standard relativists acknowledge that many people have an absolutist understanding of morality.) There are ways of cashing out the intuitive difference between standard relativism and absolutism. Compare (2') to a sentence involving an uncontroversial indexical:

- (3) Whether the seminar starts now, does not depend on which moment in time I am at.

If (3) is uttered at 2 pm its content is: whether the seminar starts at 2 pm does not depend on which moment in time I am at. This is true. But since ‘now’ is an indexical, we are also able to interpret (3) in such a way that it comes out as false. In a very straightforward sense, whether the seminar starts *now*, does depend on which time it is at this moment (of utterance). Say the seminar starts at 1 pm. Then, whether the seminar starts *now*, depends on whether the time is at present (the time of utterance) 1 pm. This means that we do not have absolutist intuitions about ‘now’ in the relevant sense here: we see that there is a sense in which whether something happens now, is relative to times (of use). Analogously, indexical moral relativists should maintain that there is one sense in which the moral rightness of, say, killing an innocent, is relative to moralities. What moral absolutists maintain is that, whether killing an innocent is morally right is *in no sense* relative to moralities. So we have a way of cashing out the intuition that moral properties are absolute moral properties, such that indexical relativists cannot accept the intuition.

### 6.3.2 *The challenge*

In which way is this intuition a challenge to standard relativists? Let us start with an analogy to illustrate. In the following passage Greenberg and Harman suggest how one might proceed to analyse the concept of a witch:

Mabel applies this concept to various people and also accepts some general views about witchcraft, including the view that witches have magical powers of certain specified sorts. We can ask Mabel how she would describe the possible discovery that no one has the relevant magical powers. Would she describe this as showing that there are no witches or as showing that witches do not after all have magical powers? If Mabel says that this sort of discovery would show that there are no witches, that is some evidence that her acceptance of the general views is more important to the content of her concept of a witch than her judgments that various people are witches.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>198</sup> Greenberg and Harman, 2006, p. 306

Mabel's reaction – “if no one has magical powers, then there are no witches” – reveals a disposition to think that a person is not a witch unless she has certain magical powers.

Let us apply the same way of exploring necessary conditions to moral properties. Moral absolutists think of moral properties as absolute moral properties. Should we say that this belief determines the reference of their concepts of moral properties? Here is a hypothetical scenario to test it:

*Scenario 1.* There are no absolute moral properties. What we experience as absolute moral properties pertaining to actions actually are merely relations between these actions and our own moralities (or properties that depend on these relations).

How would absolutists respond to this scenario? Probably there is no uniform answer to this question. However, there is reason to think that at least some absolutists would say that, if that scenario were true of our world, then there would be no moral properties: no actions would be morally right or wrong. Let us call them ‘die-hard absolutists’. They are disposed to think that, if there are no reasons to perform certain actions rather than others *that do not pertain to the actions’ relations to our subjective moralities*, then there are no moral facts at all. This reaction is structurally identical to Mabel’s reaction that if there are no people with magical powers, then there are no witches. And just as Mabel’s reaction is evidence that her concept of a witch involves as a necessary condition of being a witch that one has magical powers, the dispositions of the die-hard absolutists is evidence that their concepts of moral rightness and wrongness contain as a necessary condition for something to be the property of moral rightness or wrongness that it is an absolute moral property.

What reason do we have to think that some absolutists are disposed to react in this manner? The best evidence as to how people would respond to hypothetical scenarios like this, I take it, would be given by experiments in descriptive psychology, where the reactions of many people are studied in a systematic way. There are indeed studies in the vicinity, examining people’s commitment to objectivism about morality. Nichols and Folds-Bennett performed two experiments on children (between 5 and 6 years of age in one experiment, and 5 years of age in the other), and another study on college students.

The experiments on children tested if they thought of moral properties as response-dependent properties.<sup>199</sup> The questions were of the following sort:

You know, I think it was good for the monkey to help the other monkey. Some people don't like it when monkeys help each other when they're hurt. They don't think it's good when monkeys do that. Would you say that when one monkey helps a hurt monkey that is good *for some people* or good *for real*?<sup>200</sup>

Questions of the same kind were asked about the properties of being beautiful, yummy and fun. The children tended to treat the paradigmatically preference-dependent properties, being yummy and funny, as preference dependent, but were significantly less likely to treat moral properties (and beautiful) in this way.<sup>201</sup> The studies on college students examined whether the students thought that in scenarios involving cultural disagreement about whether, for example, "It's okay to hit people just because you feel like it", there is a fact of the matter. These studies indicated that some of the college students think that there is a fact of the matter while others don't.<sup>202</sup>

These studies are interesting, but it is not clear that they say much about whether people (children and college students) intuitively are moral truth-value relativists or absolutists. Take first the experiments on college students. Different questions were asked in two different experiments. In the first, the non-objectivist option was stated with the following formulations: "There is no fact of the matter about..." and "Different cultures believe different things, and it is not absolutely true or false that ...". This option does not discriminate between a relativistic view on moral matter and an absolutist but error-theoretical view. The second experiment included the following option: "There is no objective fact, independent of what different people think, about whether it was wrong for..." and "These actions were "wrong for Ted" and maybe "wrong for me", but they aren't *objectively wrong*, independent of what people think about them". Here there is a relativist twist to the formulation. But if this is the only "non-objectivist" option in the questionnaire we still cannot exclude that error-theoretically inclined abso-

<sup>199</sup> Nichols and Folds-Bennett, 2003

<sup>200</sup> Nichols, 2004, p. 174

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., pp. 173-76

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., p. 170. Here Nichols also emphasizes that also many students who did say that there is a fact of the matter about other things, such as about whether the earth is flat, said that there is no fact of the matter in the case of moral violations.

lutists choose this option because it comes closest to their view. This suspicion might be strengthened by the fact that the “wrong for”-clauses, unless specified, can be interpreted as meaning “wrong according to”.

The experiments on children *might* be better for the purpose of testing absolutist/relativist intuitions. What is interesting about these experiments is that the children distinguished between moral properties and paradigmatically response-dependent properties. No matter how one is to interpret the children’s answers – what they mean by “good for real” and “good for some people” – it is clear that they draw a line between these two sorts of judgements. But it need not mean that the children have an *absolutist* view on moral matters. The “good for real” answer might be what to expect given the truth of at least some forms of indexical relativism and divergence relativism.

We need not dwell further upon this matter, however, since it is clear that the experiments cannot provide the evidence we are after here. Suppose they do provide some evidence that children do take moral facts to be absolute, and that some college students think this while others don’t. Still, the experiments do not tell us how strong the absolutist belief is for those who have it. Is it like Mabel’s belief that witches have magical powers; that is, would they say that if there are no objective or absolute moral facts, then there are no moral facts at all? The experiments simply don’t test this.

However, even in the absence of empirical experiments on this matter we can be rather confident that there are absolutists who would react in the envisaged manner. First, my experience is that intuitions of this kind are fairly common among both students and teachers at philosophy departments. Second, intuitions of this kind have found their way into metaethical literature.

Consider for example the following argument from Smith against speaker relativism where he appeals to such intuitions:

[...] if normative reasons were indeed relative, then mere reflection on that fact would suffice to undermine their normative significance. For on the relative conception it turns out that, for example, the desirability<sub>me</sub> of some consideration, *p*, is entirely dependent on the fact that *my* actual desires are such that, if *I* were to engage in a process of systematically justifying *my* desires, weeding out those that aren’t justified and acquiring those that are, a desire that *p* would be one of the desires *I* would end up having. ... But what *my* actual desires are to begin with is, on this relative conception of reasons, an entirely *arbitrary* matter, one without any normative significance of its own. I might have had any old set of desires to begin with, even a set that delivered up the desire that not *p* after a process of systematic justification. The desirability<sub>me</sub> of the fact that *p* thus turns out to be an entirely arbitrary fact about

it. But arbitrariness is precisely a feature of a consideration that tends to undermine any normative significance it might initially appear to have.<sup>203</sup>

According to speaker relativism of any kind, the truth of moral judgements depends on facts that are arbitrary in Smith's sense above, that is, facts that depend on the actual desires or beliefs (the moral system) of the speaker or believer of the judgement. Such arbitrary facts, Smith contends, cannot have any normative significance; the actual desires of someone are arbitrary from a normative perspective, and consequently so are any fact or property that depend on these. Due to these considerations, Smith constructs his ideal observer analysis as an absolutist analysis: moral judgements are about what *everyone* would want us to do if they were fully rational; that is, my moral judgements are not merely about what I would want people to do if I were fully rational. And he is willing to take the consequence that, if it indeed turns out that the desires of different fully rational people would not converge, then there are no moral facts. In that case, there would only be arbitrary and thus non-normative facts that depend on people's actual wants. Here are the final words from *The Moral Problem*:

As I see it we are justified in thinking that there are moral facts, and so in engaging in ordinary moral debate, but our justification is defeasible, and it may itself be defeated by the outcome of those very debates. If we are interested in the final resolution of meta-ethical questions – in whether or not there *really are* any moral facts – then it seems to me that we therefore have little alternative but to engage in normative ethical debate and to see where the arguments that we give ultimately lead us.<sup>204</sup>

Why does Smith think that the outcome of moral debates is an indicator of the existence of moral facts? He does so because, as we have seen, he is convinced that the truth of moral judgements (and thus moral properties and facts) cannot depend on the actual desires of the speakers or believers of the judgements: and if rational moral debate tends to make different people's moral convictions converge, this is an indicator that there actually are moral facts of this kind. Indeed, he is so convinced of this that he is ready to say that if it turns out that rational moral debate does not tend to make people agree about the answers to moral questions, then this is an indication that there are no moral facts at all, no true answers to moral questions, since it would indicate that there are

<sup>203</sup> Smith, 1994, pp. 172-73.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

no facts of the actual-desire-independent sort out there. That is, Smith's reaction to the hypothetical inexistence of absolute moral facts is analogous to Mabel's reaction to the hypothetical inexistence of people with magical powers: if the inexistence is a fact, Smith contends, then there are no moral facts at all.

Other philosophers have shared Smith's reaction. While Smith remains optimistic to the existence of moral facts, Mackie famously draws the conclusion that an error-theory holds for moral judgements – moral judgements concern facts that do not exist:

The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself, or would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else's, attitude or relation to it. But the something he wants to say is not purely descriptive, certainly not inert, but something that involves a call for action or for the refraining of action, and one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else's. Someone in a state of moral perplexity, wondering whether it would be wrong for him to engage, say, in research related to bacteriological warfare, wants to arrive at some judgement about this concrete case, his doing this work at this time in these actual circumstances; his relevant characteristics will be part of the subject of the judgement, but no relation between him and the proposed action will be part of the predicate. The question is not, for example, whether he really wants to do this work, whether it will satisfy or dissatisfy him, whether he will in the long run have a pro-attitude towards it, or even whether this is an action of a sort that he can happily and sincerely recommend in all relevantly similar cases. Nor is he even wondering just whether to recommend such action in all relevantly similar cases. He wants to know whether this course of action would be wrong in itself. Something like this is the everyday objectivist concept of which talk about non-natural qualities is a philosopher's reconstruction.<sup>205</sup>

Mackie is not entirely clear on what it is he means that ordinary moral judgements are not about. Or at least, he seems to have several different things in mind. Alexander Miller extracts 16 interpretations of what Mackie, in different passages, seems to mean by the claim that moral concepts are of *objective* requirements.<sup>206</sup> However, one thing that Mackie clearly has in mind in the passage above, is that moral judgements are objectivist in the sense that they are not about the relation the speaker/believer stands in to the action in question, or about her attitudes towards it. This is obviously directed against forms of speaker

<sup>205</sup> Mackie, 1977, pp. 33-34.

<sup>206</sup> Miller, 2003, p. 116.

relativism that make moral judgements be about these things. It is not explicitly directed against other forms of relativism. As we have noted before, on Dreier's indexical relativism, and divergence relativism (forms of relativism according to which different people's moral concepts refer to different properties because their moralities involve different fundamental moral beliefs), we refer to the natural properties that our moralities pick out, and not to these moralities or the way the actions relate to them. But there is no reason to think that Mackie would not have extended his case to hold against these theories, had he considered them. A claim like the following seems to be congenial to Mackie's objectivist picture in spirit, if not to the letter: when the ordinary user of moral language says that an action is morally wrong, she does not mean to make a claim about the action she characterises morally, the truth of which depends on her own, or anyone else's, actual relation to it.

Now, Mackie argues not only that moral judgements are about objective or absolute facts – this of course holds for many other sorts of judgements as well. What is specific about absolute *moral* facts is that they are absolute facts about categorically prescriptive requirements. We need not go into what this means here. The important thing here is that this semantic or conceptual claim is just the first part of Mackie's argument for his error-theory. The second part is to argue for the ontological claim that there are no objective or absolute facts of that specifically moral sort. And from this he draws the conclusion that there are no moral facts at all. That is, Mackie, just like Smith, thinks that if there are no *absolute* moral facts, then there are no moral facts at all. Unlike Smith he also draws the conclusion that there are no moral facts.<sup>207</sup>

I suggest that we can think of the reasoning of Smith and Mackie as manifestations and specifications of a strong intuition that at least some absolutists have: if there are no absolute moral facts, there are no moral facts at all. It is probably true that the vast majority of moral absolutists are realists, that is, they think that there are moral truths. But this is consistent with the idea that many of them are *potential* error-theorists, like Smith. That is, they would become error-theorists if they actually

<sup>207</sup> Richard Joyce, who has also defended an error-theory, reasons similarly to Mackie, but he directs the semantic part of his argument against *agent relativism* – that is, the idea that the truth-value of a moral judgement depends on the morality of the agent who's action is judged. He argues that if there are no agent absolute moral facts, then error-theory holds for moral matters just like it does for witches. (Joyce, 2001, pp. 95-99)



came to think there are no absolute moral properties. And this is evidence that their moral concepts are concepts of absolute moral properties.

It should be admitted, however, that this evidence is not conclusive. Remember that according to the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis we are working on now, to establish that being G is a necessary condition of being F, one has to establish that there are *no* hypothetical scenarios about which we judge that something is F without being G. So, to show that on the die-hard absolutists' concept of moral properties an action has to have an absolute moral property to be, say, morally wrong, we would have to show that there are *no* hypothetical scenarios about which they would judge that an action is wrong even though it does not have an absolute moral property. But since it is impossible to actually test this for every possible hypothetical scenario, we cannot exclude that for some scenario where an action is described as having no absolute moral properties but as having a complex combination of other properties, they would judge that that action would be morally wrong. That is, we cannot exclude with absolute certainty that some philosopher in the future could think up clever scenarios which would make even die-hard absolutists, such as Smith and Mackie, falter and think of relative moral properties as a possibility.<sup>208</sup>

For this reason, the view that the moral concepts of die-hard absolutists refer to absolute moral properties is best seen as our best shot given our current epistemic situation. As long as no-one has made a reasonable case that there are counter-examples of the relevant kind, our best evidence is to the effect that at least some absolutists have concepts of moral rightness and wrongness which include as a necessary condition that any morally right or wrong act has an absolute moral property.

<sup>208</sup> It is of course trivially true that Smith and other absolutists could come to change their metaethical views in the future. But not all such changes are relevant in the present context. Let us make a comparison. It is, for sure, possible that in the future I (and every other competent user of English) will be disposed to use the term 'chair' only about things that hover three meters over the ground: but in that case we will have a change of meaning of the word 'chair'. People's dispositions to use moral terms could change in a similar manner: and then we would also have a change of meaning. What I am after here is something else: I am suggesting that the way some people are *currently* disposed to use moral terms to describe hypothetical scenarios, only absolute moral properties can count as moral properties. It is not an objection to this that their dispositions might change: no doubt they can. What would constitute an objection is if there are situations that they with their *current* dispositions are ready to classify as situations where moral properties are relative moral properties.

I think that this is indeed the conclusion to draw from the best evidence currently at hand. However, there are situations that seem to constitute obvious counter-examples of the relevant kind. If they are indeed such counter-examples, we have reason to reject my claim about the moral concepts of die-hard absolutists, and consequently reason to reject the idea that the challenge from absolutist intuitions is a real threat to standard relativism. Let us examine the case for this objection.

### 6.3.3 *Error-theorists make moral judgements*

Error-theorists are convinced by theoretic philosophical considerations that there can be no moral facts, that all moral judgements are false. But no one thinks that these philosophers would stop forming and accepting moral judgements when they are confronted with “morally loaded” situations in real life. That is, they continue to think of actions as morally right and wrong in certain situations, even though they have the belief that there are no absolute moral properties. And this seems to be evidence that their moral concepts are not such that there being absolute moral facts is a necessary condition for actions being morally right or wrong: these real life situations function as counter-examples to this.

However, I think there is a quite simple explanation to this phenomenon that does not threaten my conclusion. The objection we are considering here presupposes that the error-theorists form and accept moral judgements *at the same time as they are convinced that there are no absolute moral facts, and that they are taking this conviction into account when forming and accepting the moral judgement*. But this is not the best understanding of situations like the one above.

To see why, we can first recapitulate a line of reasoning from chapter 4. I argued there that speaker relativists have to explain away our experience of moral disputes as involving disagreements. One way for them to do this, I said, is through pointing to the social and evolutionary function of moral thinking. At least an important part of the function of moral thought and language is that it allows us to approach interpersonal conflicts in a way that makes it easier to cooperate and coordinate our behaviour. If moral judgements are to fill the social function of facilitating cooperation, it is important that we do not think of the truth (or correctness etc.) of our own and other people’s moral judgements as depending on the judge’s own desires or values. When we are engaged in moral situations and discussions it is important that we experience disagreement between ourselves and other people who make different moral evaluations of certain actions; that we are right in our claims and

that they therefore are wrong. Now, such thinking is typical of absolutist and atypical of relativist discourses. Thus relativists could argue (and have done so) that even though their view on moral beliefs and statements is correct – that is, that their truth-values depend on the believer's/speaker's own morality – it is quite understandable that we intuitively experience these beliefs and statements as being about absolute moral facts; this is how our moral experiences have come to be due to the coordinating function of moral thought.

To develop this into an explanation of why error-theorists come to form and accept moral judgements, we have to add something. In order for moral thinking to have the function of coordinating behaviour, it is not enough that we think of moral discourse in a typically absolutist way. We also have to experience actions as actually being morally right and wrong, that is, come to form and accept moral judgements. If we did not actually come to accept moral judgements, we would have no moral judgements that could affect and coordinate our behaviour. So, as moral thinkers, we are formed to experience actions, especially in morally loaded situations, as being morally right or wrong; and for many of us, at least, these experiences involve an absolutist phenomenology.

This can be the basis of an explanation of the sort we are looking for. Error-theorists deny that there are any absolute moral properties. This sceptical conclusion, though, is not based on not experiencing actions as being absolutely right or wrong in morally loaded situations. They have come to the conclusion on theoretical grounds in morally calm moments. The reason that error-theorists, just like the rest of us, come to form and accept moral judgements in morally loaded situations, is that they, just like the rest of us (that is, those of us who do that), experience that actions are right and wrong in the absolute sense. In these moral experiences, the presence of absolute moral facts is so obvious and compelling that the theoretical doubts that there are no absolute moral facts are “forgotten” or repressed.

Obviously, this is not conclusive evidence that this is why error-theorists continue to form and accept moral judgements. I think, however, that what I have said makes it the most reasonable hypothesis. And we can add one further consideration to this effect.

Error-theorists do not, when they are in morally loaded situations, reflect in the following way about the action in question: “On the one hand the action does not have absolute moral properties. On the other hand it has other features, say, being deliberately cruel, that indeed make it seem morally wrong. In light of this I conclude that the action is

wrong after all.” Had they reasoned in that way, this would have shown that they did not treat having an absolute moral property as a necessary condition of being morally wrong. But reasonably, this is not how they think. If they did (and if we set aside the idea that error-theorists all have very bad memory or are irrational) we could not expect them to still be error-theorists in their next morally calm moment. Their reasoning in the morally loaded situations would have shown to them that an action can be wrong without having an absolute moral property.

A better picture is the one drawn above. In morally loaded situations error-theorists do not even consider their belief that there are no absolute moral properties, this belief does not enter their deliberation. Instead they take their moral experience at face value, and that experience is as of absolute moral properties. (This point can be appreciated also without putting the argument in terms of the social function of moral thinking. It does not really matter *why* error-theorists, like many of us, have the absolutist moral experiences they do.)

We can conclude that the fact that error-theorists still form and accept moral judgements does not show that there are scenarios where they are ready to question that there has to be absolute moral facts for there to be moral facts; it merely shows that there are circumstances where they “forget” or repress their conviction that there are no absolute moral facts. It is simply very hard, perhaps in some sense psychologically impossible, for error-theorists to let their belief that there are no absolute moral properties guide their moral judgements in particular situations: the world presents itself very convincingly as if these properties are out there.<sup>209</sup>

<sup>209</sup> A parallel objection to the one I have discussed here concerns *potential* error-theorists, that is, die-hard absolutists who believe that there are absolute moral properties. Suppose that such die-hard absolutists were presented with hypothetical scenarios of the following kind: “Imagine that there are no absolute moral properties, but that someone tortured your child, wouldn’t that be morally wrong?” Probably, even for those who seem to be potential error-theorists, thinking that if there are no absolute moral properties then there are no moral properties at all, the actions described in such scenarios intuitively appear as wrong. But then, since the scenarios are described as lacking absolute moral properties, it seems that these people after all are willing to accept non-absolute facts as moral facts! I think this parallel version of the objection can also be parallelly rebutted: When we are confronted with certain kinds of actions, even in imaginary cases, we cannot help but think that these are wrong and we are unable to keep in mind the stipulated non-existence of absolute moral facts in the hypothetical scenarios.

To sum up, my answer to the objection under consideration is this. In cool hours error-theorists say that moral properties don't exist. The reason that they still make moral judgements when confronted with, say, morally outrageous actions, is that in such situations their sceptical beliefs are put to one side. This is not something they choose to do; it is just how we and our moral practice work. When we see certain things we cannot but form moral beliefs, and our sceptical beliefs or worries vanish temporarily from our conscious minds. But this doesn't remove the fact that if and when the sceptical beliefs about absolute moral properties are present, some people (actual and potential error-theorists) say that moral properties don't exist.<sup>210</sup>

We have not found any reasonable counter-examples to the suggestion that the moral concepts of die-hard absolutists are concepts of absolute moral properties. What we have most reason to conclude, given our current epistemic state, is that some people have absolutist moral concepts. So on the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, the challenge from absolutist intuitions is a real threat to standard relativism, construed as a general theory about everyone's moral concepts. Let us turn to objections to this conclusion.

#### 6.4 NO SIMPLE REPLY: THE DIFFERENCE FROM THE OPEN QUESTION ARGUMENT

To those acquainted with modern metaethics and philosophy of language it might seem obvious that there are ways to meet the challenge from opposite intuitions. The challenge is structurally similar to Moore's famous *open question argument* against metaethical naturalism: both objections hold our intuitions against analyses of moral judgements. It has been argued that, if analyses of moral concepts are grounded on a reasonable form of the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, then there is a simple reply to the open question argument. Because of the structural similarity between the challenge from opposite intuitions and the open question argument, one might expect that if

<sup>210</sup> Some cases where error-theorists continue to make moral judgements might have other explanations, and Mackie (1977) might be one example. After being convinced about error-theory Mackie continues to make moral judgements, but now, consciously it seems, without the absolutist presuppositions. For such persons it might be that the meaning of their moral terms change from absolute to relative when they (intentionally) change their presuppositions about what it takes for there to be moral properties.

this is correct, it holds for the challenge as well. I will argue that it doesn't.

The open question argument tells us that any naturalist analysis of moral terms and concepts fails. Consider the utilitarian analysis telling us "X is morally right" has the same meaning as "X maximizes well-being". We can ask the following question:

(OQ) Is whatever action that maximizes well-being also morally right?

This does not strike us as an odd thing to ask. Indeed, it is a question philosophers ask and debate frequently. But how can this be so if 'maximizes well-being' and 'is right' mean the same? If they did, it seems we should regard it a strange thing to seriously ask, much like "is every circle also round?". We who master the terms 'circle' and 'round' surely see this question as an indication that he who seriously asks it does not master these terms, since there is no room to doubt what the answer is once one has a proper understanding of them. It is part of the concept of a circle that circles are round. We who master the terms, then, do not see it as an open question. Not so with (OQ). In Moore's terms, such questions are "significant", "intelligible" and "the mere fact that we understand very well what is meant by doubting it, shews clearly that we have two different notions before our minds"<sup>211</sup>. According to the open question argument, then, since we see it as an open question whether every act that maximizes well-being also is morally right, it is not conceptually excluded that some act maximizes well-being without being morally right.

The open question argument now proceeds to generalize this result. For any natural property it is an open question whether every action, X, which has the property, also is morally right. And equivalent claims hold for other moral properties. Thus, the following general question is open whichever natural property N is, and whichever moral property M is:

(General OQ) Is every action that is N also M?

<sup>211</sup> Moore, 1903, p. 68.

That any question of this type is open, the argument goes, shows that no analysis of moral terms that gives the meaning of them in natural terms can be correct. For every natural property it is simply conceptually possible that an action has that property without having the property of being morally right, or any other specific moral property.

The open question argument and the challenge from opposite intuitions are similar to each other in that both build a case against analyses on our intuitions. The open question argument tells us that some proposed analysis is problematic since the analysis implies that something is conceptually precluded (for example, that acts that maximize well-being are not right), while our intuitions tell us that this is not conceptually precluded. The challenge from opposite intuitions tells us that some proposed analysis is problematic since on that analysis moral properties are of a certain kind (for example relative properties) while at least many people have intuitions to the effect that this (e.g., that moral properties are relative) is conceptually precluded.

How can the open question argument be replied on an intuition-based view of conceptual analysis? Smith approaches the question through “the paradox of analysis”: how can an analysis of a concept we are supposed to master be correct – and thus not add any information over and above what is already contained in the concept – and at the same time be unobvious and informative about the concept (why else would we need an analysis)? If we can answer this question it seems we can rebut the open question argument, which holds against analyses of moral terms precisely that they seem unobvious to us. Here is Smith’s reply:

This account of what conceptual analysis consists in enables us to make good sense of the phenomena associated with the Paradox of Analysis. Why are analyses unobvious and informative? Because even though someone who has mastery of some concept *C* must *have* certain inferential and judgemental dispositions, it may not be transparent to her what these inferential and judgemental dispositions are, and so, *a fortiori*, it need not be transparent to her what the best summary or systematization of the platitudes that describe these dispositions is. Whereas mastery of a concept requires knowledge-how, knowledge of an analysis of a mastered concept requires us to have knowledge-that about our knowledge-how. It might therefore take time and thought to see whether or not *C\** constitutes an analysis of *C* because it takes time and thought to figure out what the relevant inferential and judgemental dispositions are and what the best systematization of the platitudes describing these dispositions is.<sup>212</sup>

<sup>212</sup> Smith, 1994, p. 38.

How exactly does this help rebut the open question argument? A first part is the one Smith puts in terms of know-how and know-that: in order to master a concept one merely has to *be* disposed in a specific way, one does not have to know in which way one is disposed. A second part of the reply is at least indicated. It can take much time and thought to figure out what the relevant dispositions are and how to best systematize them, because this is a complex matter. This aspect is more explicit in Jackson's way of tackling the open question argument:

True, according to moral functionalism, a sufficiently rich descriptive story leads a priori to an act's being right; but this will be a clear case of an unobvious a priori or conceptual entailment, precisely because of the complexity of the moral functionalist story. Just as we can sensibly doubt the result of a long, complex numerical addition by virtue of its making sense to doubt that the addition was done correctly (and, consequently, insist that a statement of the result of the addition is a 'substantive' position in arithmetic, and that it is 'open' to us to query the answer), so we can make sense of doubting the result of the complex story that moral functionalism says leads from the descriptive to the ethical.<sup>213</sup>

The correct analysis, on both Smith's and Jackson's account, should account for a complex system of dispositions we have to use moral terms. If we think of each platitude (corresponding to a disposition to react to certain aspects of hypothetical scenarios) as being an aspect of the correct analysis, adding some condition to it, it has to hold that there is no counter-example to any such aspect of the analysis. If we consider the relevant hypothetical scenarios, those that pinpoint the different aspects, we will gain knowledge of the platitudes. The first part of the answer to the open question argument, the one in focus in the passage from Smith, is that we might not have considered all relevant scenarios, and for this reason the correct analysis might seem unobvious to us. The second part, the one Jackson states, is that even if we consider all relevant scenarios, this need not make the analysis as a complex whole obvious to us, even if it exposes the individual aspects of it.

To illustrate; suppose that epistemologists manage to patch up the holes Gettier made in the analysis of knowledge by adding a number of paragraphs to the analysis, such that there are no counter-examples to it. This need indeed not mean that the resulting analysis is obvious to us who master the concept of knowledge. It will probably be a complex analysis without intuitive appeal at first sight.

<sup>213</sup> Jackson, 1998a, p. 151.



Consequently it is not through considering our intuitions about an analysis as a whole that we test the analysis: it is through finding patterns in how we are disposed to use the term that expresses the concept in different scenarios. This way we can find (and discard) platitudes, claims about the property in question that we are never ready to deny. It need not be obvious which analysis best captures all of these platitudes. This is the reply to the open question argument. Can the challenge from absolutist intuitions be answered in the same way?

It cannot. The challenge from absolutist intuitions is about one specific aspect of the analysis of moral concepts: are they or are they not about absolute moral properties. Some people are disposed to think, in relevant hypothetical scenarios, that being an *absolute* moral property is a necessary part of being a moral property. Since the challenge concerns one specific aspect of the analysis, Jackson's response to the open question argument cannot be used here; it simply is not a complex matter. And since the challenge is stated through absolutist responses to hypothetical scenarios, it cannot be replied to in Smith's way; it is not the case that they are absolutists because they are not aware of their own relativist dispositions, which they would become aware of if confronted with the relevant scenarios. So, on the intuition-based view of analysis, there is no simple reply to the challenge of the kind that there is to the open question argument.

As admitted above, it is possible that some clever philosopher will think up scenarios described as involving no absolute moral properties in reaction to which even die-hard absolutists will say that there are moral properties (also in morally calm moments). But in want of such scenarios, our best shot is that these people's moral concepts are concepts of absolute moral properties.

## 6.5 RELATIVISTS AND MODEST ABSOLUTISTS

There are people who are not die-hard absolutists. To start with, some absolutists are what we can call "modest absolutists". Even though they believe that moral properties are absolute moral properties, there are scenarios about which they would say; if the world turns out to be like that, then moral properties are relative. Frank Jackson seems to be one example:

[...] some hold that we know enough as of now about moral disagreement to know that convergence will (would) not occur. In this case, there will not be a single mature folk morality but rather different mature folk moralities for dif-

ferent groups in the community; and, to the extent that they differ, the adherents of the different folk moralities will mean something different by the moral vocabulary because the moral terms of the adherents of the different schemes will be located in significantly different networks. [...] I will assume what I hope and believe is the truth of the matter, namely, that there will (would) be convergence. But if this is a mistake, what I say in what follows should be read as having implicit relativization clauses built into it. The identifications of the ethical properties should be read as accounts, not of rightness *simpliciter*, but of rightness for this, that, or the other moral community, where what defines a moral community is that it is a group of people who would converge on a single mature folk morality starting from current folk morality.<sup>214</sup>

Jackson thinks that absolutism is true, but sees possible circumstances under which it would not be. This means that absolutism is not built into his moral concepts. His analysis of moral judgements is very much like Smith's, but with this difference.

How about the moral concepts of relativists? Are there die-hard relativists; that is, speakers who exclude that any absolute properties can count as moral properties? I am not sure. Take Harman as an example. Harman is an ideal system relativist. According to his theory, the truth-values of moral utterances and beliefs depend on what the speaker's or believer's system of goals, values and principles would be like if it was corrected to become more coherent. My belief that an action is wrong is true if my system of attitudes *would* contain a negative attitude towards the action *if* the system were corrected. Harman's analysis is relativist since he thinks that different people's moral systems would be different if they were corrected. It is not clear, however, what Harman would say about a scenario where it turns out that people's moral systems converge if they are corrected no matter which goals, values and principles they contain from the beginning. Would he say that, in that case, absolutism turns out to be true after all. Or would he say that the truth-values of people's moral judgements are not relative to *those* corrected systems. In such a case, he could say, the systems are over-corrected; they cannot function as moral systems since they are no longer sensitive to the specific goals, values and principles of the individual.

If a relativist reacts in the first way, her moral concepts are structurally much like Jackson's: they should be analysed such that if there are absolute facts of a certain kind, these are moral facts; but if there are not, then relative facts count as moral facts. If the world turns out to be

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., p. 137.

in a certain way, moral terms used by this relativist refer to absolute moral properties; if the world turns out to be in another way, then they refer to relative moral properties.<sup>215</sup> If a relativist reacts in the second way, on the other hand, then she is a die-hard relativist: her moral concepts are concepts of relative moral properties. Moral terms, when used by her, always refer to relative moral properties.

The existence of die-hard absolutists is a problem for standard relativism: how can it be argued that these people use moral terms to refer to relative properties, when under no circumstances they are willing to say that such properties can count as moral properties? If there are die-hard relativists this poses a corresponding problem for absolutism. But even if there are no die-hard relativists, the existence of people who think that moral properties are relative at least under certain circumstances is a potential problem for absolutism. Whether moral judgments made by these people refer to relative or absolute moral facts depends on which properties there are in the world. (This connects to parts of the discussion in next chapter, where I discuss the view that standard relativism is true, not as a conceptual fact, but in virtue of how the world is constituted.)

## 6.6 OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

I have argued that *if* the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis is correct, the strong absolutist intuitions some people have threaten to prove standard relativism false, at least when this is construed as a *general* view, that is, as a view about the reference of the moral terms and concepts of every speaker.

However, this result is of course irrelevant to the question of whether standard relativists can answer the challenge from absolutist intuitions if the intuition-based view (as understood above) is not correct. If it should be modified or abandoned for a better view, chances are that the challenge can be met on the better view. And it is indeed a common view today, perhaps even the received view, that the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis is not consistent with how the reference of at least many terms and concepts is fixed. Many of these objections are argu-

<sup>215</sup> It might be worth noting that I am not excluding that modest absolutists and relativists can also be potential error-theorists – there might be scenarios about which they would say that there are no moral properties, since there are neither relative nor absolute properties that satisfy other necessary conditions for being moral properties.

ments to the effect that some form of externalist view on reference holds, either a social or a causal view, or both. If this is so, the reference of words and concepts depends (at least partly) on other things than the psychological states of the speaker. This, it would seem, makes it incredible that we can look to our intuitions to find the reference. Such externalist objections will be considered in the next chapter. Here I will consider objections to the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis that are not necessarily to the effect that internalism should be abandoned.

### 6.6.1 *Unrealistic picture of analysis*

It is quite common to hold against the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis that few, if any, concepts have been successfully analysed in this way. Thus Lycan writes that, “[...] no effort of analytic philosophy to provide strictly necessary and sufficient conditions for a philosophically interesting concept has ever succeeded”.<sup>216</sup> But the point is not restricted to philosophically interesting concepts. Part of Quine’s and others’ objection to the analytic-synthetic distinction was that even what had been thought of as paradigmatic and clear cases of simple and good analyses fail, because there are counter-examples. Harman collects some examples:

We can imagine discovering that cats are not animals but are radio controlled robots from Mars. [...] Speakers do not consider the Pope a bachelor. [...] People will not apply the term ‘bachelor’ to a man who lives with the same woman over a long enough period of time, even if they are not married. Society pages in newspapers will identify as eligible ‘bachelors’ men who are in the process of being divorced but are still married.<sup>217</sup>

What have seemed to be obvious necessary and sufficient conditions, have been proven to not stand up to the test of counter-examples. Such examples are supposed to serve as premises in an inductive argument against intuition-based conceptual analysis. If we have not yet found a good analysis along these lines, if even paradigm examples of analytic truth fail, what are the chances of finding one at all? More specifically, the following is the instance of the inductive argument that is directly relevant for us here: if we have not yet been able to find one example of a

<sup>216</sup> Lycan, 2006, p. 150

<sup>217</sup> Harman, 1999, p. 140. The example with robot cats is from Putnam, 1962, and the Pope example from Terry and Flores, 1986.

necessary condition that people are never, under no circumstances, ready to question, then it seems that we can expect that the same holds for the die-hard absolutists' belief that moral properties has to be absolute moral properties.

The objection can also, instead of relying on inductive reasoning from previous attempts to analyse concepts, take a more theoretical form. Harman expresses the thought behind the argument as follows:

Some beliefs may be more 'central' than others – more theoretical, more taken for granted (in a way that needs more explication than I can provide). These more central beliefs will seem obvious, because it is hard to take seriously revising them, but they are not therefore guaranteed to be true and there will normally be circumstances in which such previously obvious beliefs will be revised.

There is no sharp, principled distinction between changing what one means and changing what one believes. We can, to be sure, consider how to translate between someone's language before and after a given change in view. If the best translation is the homophonic translation, we say that there has been a change in doctrine; if some other (nonhomophonic) translation is better, we say that there has been a change in meaning. What we say about this depends on the context and our purposes of the moment.<sup>218</sup>

Two different but related ideas are in focus in the two paragraphs in this quote (although they are not fully and clearly separated). The first can be stated as follows:

*Revisability:* For every belief in our belief-systems there are circumstances in which that belief would be given up or revised.

The idea is that our beliefs are structured in a coherentist way rather than a fundamentalist way. Even for the most central beliefs in our systems it holds that if enough of the other beliefs in the system were revised, we would revise the central beliefs. This is the idea in the quote that backs up the inductive argument: if every belief would be given up under some circumstances, then it is simply not true that there are some beliefs to which there are no counter-examples. It is just that for some beliefs these counter-examples are much harder to think of, because we would have to imagine so many of our other actual beliefs to be false. This, then, is a more principled reason to doubt that there are *no* cir-

<sup>218</sup> Harman, 1999, p. 141.

cumstances or scenarios that would make also die-hard absolutists give up the idea that moral properties have to be absolute moral properties.

As we have seen, defenders of the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis like Chalmers and Jackson think that the correct analyses will often have to be very long and complex (and might even be open ended). Indeed, this was a central part of Jackson's reply to the open question argument; the correct analyses of moral terms in natural terms are so complex that it might be hard to get an intuitive grip on whether they are the correct analyses at all; just like it is hard to get an intuitive grip on whether certain mathematical calculations are correct. This makes it hard to evaluate this nuanced intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, in contrast to the claim that there are no analyses to which there are no intuitive counter-examples. As for the inductive objection: the reason that we have not yet found any counter-example free analyses *might* be that there are none; but it might also be that we have not looked at complex enough analyses and that even if we have or would do so, these would be very hard to evaluate on an intuitive basis. But it also makes the theoretical argument hard to evaluate: the view that all beliefs in principle are revisable, understood as a theory of how our minds and systems of beliefs work, has to be empirically confirmed. If the evidence fails to distinguish between this hypothesis and the complex-analysis hypothesis, it seems we have no reason to accept one rather than the other.

Luckily, I think, we do not have to solve this question. I will argue that we do not have to take a stand on the matter of whether there are beliefs that we are disposed not to give up under any circumstances or whether there are only very central beliefs, in order to maintain my conclusion about the moral concepts of die-hard absolutists. To see this, consider the second idea in the quote from Harman above.

*Change:* There is no principle drawing a sharp line between the changes in belief that count as changes in meaning and those that don't; our decisions about this depend on the context and our purposes of the moment.

In the quote from Harman I think that *Change* should be understood in the light of *Revisability*: since we actually do think of some changes in belief as constituting or giving rise to changes in meaning, and since we are disposed to revise every belief in reaction to some scenarios (*Revisability*), it cannot be that we think there is a change in meaning only when

someone has given up a belief that she previously was not disposed to give up. Change in meaning, rather, results from giving up central beliefs (beliefs we are disposed to give up only in a few peripheral cases); but there is no principle stating a sharp distinction between those changes in central beliefs that we take to change meaning and those that we do not; “What we say about this depends on the context and our purposes of the moment”.

As I see it, there are (at least) two different consequences for conceptual analysis one can draw from *Change*. The intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, as I have construed it, is supposed to capture the ways in which we intuitively determine when a term or concept has a certain meaning or reference: we do this according to principles attaching decisive weight to the beliefs that we are disposed not to give up under any circumstances. *Change* can be taken as a rejection of this; no such principles describe the way we intuitively determine reference or change in reference. Interpreted in this way, it is consistent with *Change* that we stick to the task of giving analyses of moral judgements that are in line with an intuitive picture of actual meaning, one that makes meaning depend on actual use and dispositions to use. It is just that we have to be more attentive to our intuitions about the specific case we are interested in, since we cannot go by simple principles. The other consequence one might draw is that when we make our analyses we should explicitly take into account the different purposes one might have in making it, since having different purposes in mind might affect what we should say is a correct analysis. Under this interpretation, *Change* might make analysing involve a revisionary component; if we take the purposes of making the analysis explicitly into account this might mean that the resulting analysis deviates from our intuitive judgements of what the correct analysis is. I will turn shortly to such revisionary approaches to conceptual analysis, but here I want to consider the first interpretation of *Change*.

There are changes in beliefs, or in dispositions, that we intuitively think of as leading to changes in reference. Or, in other words, there are beliefs or dispositions that we think of as relevant for reference, or reference-fixing. I think that the absolutist beliefs of die-hard absolutists are such beliefs. However, let us first return to the example of the concept of witches. In the case we discussed above we imagined that Mabel believes that certain people are witches. When she is asked to imagine that there are no people with magical powers, her reaction is, “in that case, there are no witches”. Intuitively we take Mabel’s reaction

as evidence of a disposition (not to judge people without magical powers to be witches) that makes her concept of witches refer only to people with magical powers. Imagine that Mabel also has the word ‘wutch’ in her vocabulary. She actually uses this word to describe the same people that she calls ‘witches’. But in reaction to the possible case that there are no people with magical powers, Mabel says, “well in that case these people would still be wutches – they would simply be wutches without magical powers (as long as they have certain other properties such as being wicked)”. Intuitively, we think that there is a difference between these terms (as they are used by Mabel) and the concepts they express: ‘Witch’ refers only to people with magical powers, but ‘wutch’ refers also to people without magical powers. So regardless of whether there are beliefs that are non-revisable or not, the way we actually classify terms and concepts on basis of how speakers use them, and are disposed to use them, we do think of reactions such as Mabel’s as relevant to their reference. We take Mabel’s error-theoretical dispositions about witches as evidence that there has to be people with magical powers for there to be witches, as she uses the word.

The same holds in the case of die-hard absolutists’ dispositions. These too have error-theoretical inclinations; they say and think that if there are no absolute moral properties, or no moral facts that are independent of the moralities of us as speakers and believers, then there are no moral properties or facts at all. They are not willing to apply their moral terms and concepts to actions unless (they think that) these have absolute moral properties. The intuitively plausible result is that moral terms as used by these speakers (and their moral concepts) refer only to absolute moral properties; they do not apply the terms to actions they do not consider to have such properties.

Perhaps there are no beliefs that are in principle non-revisable, and perhaps there is no sharp line between what counts as a change in meaning or reference or merely a change in a strong belief. But in certain cases it is clear that we intuitively give certain beliefs or dispositions a role in determining reference – the case of Mabel’s and most people’s concept of witches is one, the moral concepts of die-hard absolutists is another case. So if what we are after in giving an analysis of moral terms and concepts is something by the way of an account of their reference that agrees with the actual meaning as given by how we use and are disposed to use moral terms and concepts, then we should accept the conclusion that die-hard absolutists refer to absolute moral properties. (Still, of course, this should be seen as the best position given the evi-



dence we have now: we cannot exclude that someone will think up scenarios where die-hard absolutists are willing to accept the existence of relative moral properties.)

This means that accepting *Revisability* and *Change* as objections to the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis, does not provide a way of answering the challenge from opposite intuitions.

### 6.6.2 Revisionism

If we cannot answer the challenge from opposite intuitions – that is, if we cannot find a common meaning to moral terms as everyone (or every competent user) uses them – through considering the meaning of moral terms as people are actually disposed to use them, perhaps there is a possible solution in the idea that analysis can or should involve a certain amount of revision. Jackson, for example, adds a revisionist aspect to his version of the intuition-based view of conceptual analysis. Here is one of the examples he uses to illustrate the idea:

I take it that our folk concept of personal identity is Cartesian in character – in particular, we regard the question of whether *I* will be tortured tomorrow as separable from the question of whether someone with *any* amount of continuity – psychological, bodily, neurophysiological, and so on and so forth – with me today will be tortured tomorrow. But critical reflection of the style initiated most famously by Locke reveals – or so it seems to me and many – that personal identity so conceived is not worth having, and is nowhere instantiated. It is, thus, only sensible to seek a different but ‘nearby’ conception that does, or does near enough, the job we give personal identity in governing what we care about, our personal relations, our social institutions of reward and punishment, and the like, and which is realized in our world. Certain continuities between how persons are at various times arguably fit the bill, and so we should analyse personal identity in terms of such continuities.<sup>219</sup>

It seems that Jackson thinks there is good reason to abandon the project of grounding an analysis of personal identity solely on our actual dispositions because our actual concept does not give us what we want from a concept of personal identity. We want personal identity to be something that is worth having; and we want and need a concept that is instantiated, that actually makes me the same person as I was yesterday. If our actual concept, as pointed out by our dispositions, cannot give us that, we do best to revise it.

<sup>219</sup> Jackson, 1998a, p. 45.

This is congenial with what some advocates of revisionary analyses of moral concepts say. Richard Brandt gives the following suggestions to why analysing moral concepts and words from actual “linguistic intuitions” is not a good idea:

Even if linguistic intuitions pointed to more precise paraphrases of normative terminology than they actually do, one would not want to rely on them for guidance in normative reflection. For language might well embody confusing distinctions, or fail to make distinctions it is important to make.<sup>220</sup>

The locutions of ordinary language are not always well adapted to say what on reflection we want to say, or to raise questions which on reflection we want to raise. At least they are not infallible guides to framing the questions we want to ask.<sup>221</sup>

Like with Jackson, the idea here seems to be that the categorisations springing from our actual intuitions and dispositions need not be the ultimate or best categorisations to make, given our goals. I think that this is also what lies behind Peter Railton’s defence of revisionism:

The striking thing is that the development of scientific theory has shown us how claims which seemed logically or conceptually true when matters were viewed in a strictly philosophical way could nonetheless come to seem empirically false as a result of the effort to construct powerful explanatory empirical theories. [...] [P]hilosophers who can see from a historical perspective the danger of becoming entrapped by treating evolving linguistic categories as fixed should resist the temptation to view philosophical inquiry as somehow methodologically prior to science, and should instead attempt as best they can to integrate their work with the ongoing development of empirical theory. [...] Our naturalist’s central claims hence are, at bottom, synthetic rather than analytic. This would be so even if he put forward his naturalistic interpretation using *reforming definitions*, for a reforming definition is revisable as well as revisionist, and must earn its place by facilitating the construction of worthwhile theories.<sup>222</sup>

We want our ‘linguistic categories’ to fit with findings in empirical sciences; if our actual ways of categorising things with our terms and concepts don’t do that, we should revise them.

Can standard relativism be defended as a revisionist analysis of moral judgements? It depends on how revisionism is specified. As we have seen, the idea is not that we should simply stipulate a definition of moral terms. The revisionist suggestion is that we should search for a

<sup>220</sup> Brandt, 1979, p. 7.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>222</sup> Railton, 1989, pp. 154-55.

concept that can serve all or many of the purposes we want moral concepts to serve. There can be different understandings of which restrictions this puts on analysis. We can look at Railton's ideas to see this. When discussing how much revision an analysis can involve, he writes: "although the definitions proposed may not fit with all of our linguistic or moral intuitions, they [should] nonetheless express recognizable notions of goodness and rightness".<sup>223</sup> When Railton specifies this idea he distinguishes tolerable revisions from non-tolerable ones:

Revisionism may reach a point where it becomes more perspicacious to say that a concept has been abandoned, rather than revised. No sharp line separates tolerable revisionism and outright abandonment, but if our naturalist wishes to make his case compelling, he must show that his account of a person's good is a clear case of tolerable revision, at worst.<sup>224</sup>

Railton also gives examples of tolerable and non-tolerable revisions (here talking of vindicative and eliminative reductions to make the same point):

The successful reduction of water to H<sub>2</sub>O reinforces, rather than impugning, our sense that there really is water. By contrast, the reduction of "polywater" – a peculiar form of water thought to have been observed in scientific laboratories in the late 1960s – to ordinary water-containing-some-impurities-from-improperly-washed-glassware contributed to the conclusion that there really is no such substance as polywater. Whether a reduction is vindicative or eliminative will depend upon the specific character of what is being reduced and what the reduction basis looks like.<sup>225</sup>

In light of these passages, Railton *can be* interpreted as proposing what we might call "modest revisionism": that is, a view that puts rather large restrictions on how much revision an analysis can involve. What does it take for a definition to express a recognisable notion of moral rightness? The nature of the examples in the last quote might suggest the following answer. Sometimes when we find out that the things we think of as x's have some distinguishing property F, we are willing to say that x's are those things that have F. This is how it was with water and H<sub>2</sub>O. In these cases 'thing that has F' can serve as a tolerable revisionist analysis of 'x'. For other terms, when we find out that the things we think of as x's are things that have F, we are inclined to conclude that there are no

<sup>223</sup> Railton, 1986, p. 205.

<sup>224</sup> Railton, 1989, p. 159.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

x's. This is how it was with polywater and contaminated water. In such cases 'thing that has F' would not be a tolerable revisionist analysis of 'x'.

With this restriction on what counts as an acceptable revisionist analysis it should be clear that revisionism provides no rescue from the challenge from absolutist intuitions for standard relativism. Die-hard relativists are disposed to say that if the actions we think of as being, say, morally right, do not have an absolute moral property, but only relative moral properties, then they are not morally right after all. That is, they are disposed to react in the way people did to the discovery that the substance thought of as polywater was contaminated water.

Indeed, this will be the result as long as we say that acceptable analyses must "express recognisable notions" of the analysed objects. Die-hard absolutists see it as essential to moral rightness and wrongness that they are absolute moral properties; they will not recognise a standard relativist analysis as an analysis of moral rightness or wrongness.

Consequently, if the amount of revision is restricted in this manner, revisionism cannot help speaker relativists answer the challenge from opposite intuitions. Indeed, it even seems that it allows for *no* amount of revision at all in any interesting sense. The intuition-based view of analysis allows that we can be mistaken, and thus that the correct analysis is allowed to "revise" certain of our beliefs or intuitions. What it implies is that the correct analysis must not go against people's dispositions to judge what may and may not count as, say, moral rightness or wrongness. But this is exactly what modest revisionism tells us as well.

I am not at all convinced that this is the correct understanding of Railton's view. And it is equally unclear to me what Jackson's view is regarding which revisions are permitted. He writes that we should look for a 'nearby' conception that does the job we give to the original concept. Before this is specified it is impossible to determine whether it can help standard relativists. If 'nearby' is understood to imply something like the requirement described above, then it cannot.<sup>226</sup>

If revisionism is to help speaker relativism escape the challenge from absolutist intuitions, the analysis suggested has to be one that is not

<sup>226</sup> When Jackson discusses the concept of free action, he says that compatibilist arguments point to "a conception near enough to the folk's to be regarded as a natural extension of it". (Jackson, 1998a, p. 44) If this is what Jackson means by 'nearby' conception, the key question becomes: *who* must regard it "as a natural extension" for it to count as an adequate analysis? Obviously, die-hard absolutists would not regard the standard relative conception of moral rightness thus.

recognisably an analysis of moral rightness and wrongness – in the sense described above – to at least some people. This is of course an alternative. We might call this “radical revisionism”, rather than modest. Depending on which form of radical revisionism we adopt it might be possible to argue for a standard relativist or an absolutist analysis of (everyone’s) moral judgements.

Perhaps radical revisionism is a better interpretation of Railton’s view. He might want to say that the dissimilarity between the cases of water and polywater he is after is not the one I have discussed. What is relevant is not what people are willing to accept as a correct analysis or not, but something other – such as the explanatory power of the analyses. My only complaint about this would be that the examples used might fool the reader to think that the form revisionism defended provides intuitively acceptable analyses – in the sense that ‘H<sub>2</sub>O’ is an acceptable analysis of ‘water’. It should be made clear that this is not the case. (Railton’s example of a revisionist analysis of ‘water’ as ‘H<sub>2</sub>O’ of course leads the mind to causal theories of reference. We return to this in the next chapter.)

What I want to emphasize here is this. If we adopt radical revisionism we will have left the project of finding an analysis of moral judgements that is consistent with our dispositions to use moral terms and concepts in the following sense: the result will be an analysis that some people will not be disposed to accept as an analysis of moral properties at all. What I argue here, then, as explained in chapter 5, is that as long as we do want an analysis that respects what all speakers, or even most, are ready to say *can* count as moral rightness and wrongness, then people’s diverging intuitions over absolutism and relativism pose a problem.

## 6.7 CONCLUSION

Standard relativism cannot be founded on an intuition-based view of analysis. Die-hard absolutists are disposed to think that relative properties cannot count as moral properties. So, starting from this approach to conceptual analysis, their moral judgements should be given an absolutist analysis. If we want to escape this conclusion and argue that standard relativism holds as a general theory, it seems we have to opt for a radically revisionist analysis, an analysis that a group of competent speakers will be disposed to think of as not giving an account of moral rightness or wrongness.

Or, can we appeal to some form of semantic externalism, not attaching the weight intuition-based views do to individual speaker's dispositions to use terms and concepts? This is the topic of next chapter.

# Chapter 7

## Semantic Externalism and Relativism

### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

The argument in the previous chapter, it seems, ignores the insights of semantic externalist views. We can distinguish between two kinds of such views. According to *causal theories of reference*, the reference of certain terms is fixed by the causal history of our use of the term, rather than by the dispositions of the speaker. And according to what we might call *social externalism*, the reference of a term as used by a speaker is fixed by how the term is used in the speaker's linguistic community, rather than by how it is used by the speaker herself. On both of these views, it seems, an individual speaker's dispositions to use a term need not matter to the reference of the term, since it does not imply anything about the causal history of her use of the term or about the way other speakers in her community use the term.

In this chapter I will consider these two types of semantic externalism in turn, discussing the consequences for the challenge from opposite intuitions against standard relativism.

### 7.2 CAUSAL THEORY OF REFERENCE

Kripke and Putnam famously argue that the descriptive account of meaning is incorrect for names and natural kind terms like 'gold', 'water'

'lemon' and 'tiger'. That is, they challenge the view that the meaning of such terms are given to them by descriptions associated with the terms by the speakers and that the reference of the terms are whatever satisfies those descriptions. The arguments they give are demonstrations of cases about which descriptivism gives the intuitively wrong result but the causal theory of reference has the intuitively right implications. Let us look at some such arguments to get the picture.

One of Kripke's arguments against descriptivism about names is known as 'the modal argument'. We associate different descriptions with the name 'Aristotle': 'the writer of the *Nichomachean Ethics*', 'the greatest student of Plato', 'the teacher of Alexander the Great' etc. Can these descriptions – either individually, or in a complex disjunction as on the cluster theory – constitute the meaning of 'Aristotle' and serve to determine its referent? If they did, it would be necessary that Aristotle had the properties or the disjunctive cluster of them. But it isn't. Aristotle could have died as a child, or moved to another city. If he had, he wouldn't have had any of the properties that we associate with him: *but he would still have been Aristotle*. So it cannot be these descriptions that determine the reference of 'Aristotle'. The point of modal arguments like this, then, is that descriptivism has the wrong implications for modal claims involving names, such as "Aristotle necessarily is x" or "Aristotle possibly is x". Or, in other words, descriptivism has counter-intuitive implications about the extension of names in possible worlds that are not actual.

In another example Kripke considers the suggestion that people refer to Gödel by the name 'Gödel', because they associate the description "the man who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic" with the name. Kripke argues against this:

Suppose that Gödel was not in fact the author of this theorem. A man named 'Schmidt' whose body was found in Vienna under Mysterious circumstances many years ago, actually did the work in question. His friend Gödel somehow got hold of the manuscript and it was thereafter attributed to Gödel. [...] So [on the view in question], since the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is Schmidt, we, when we talk about 'Gödel', are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not.<sup>227</sup>

This is not a modal argument: the example is not that someone else than Gödel *could have* discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic. What

<sup>227</sup> Kripke, 1980, pp. 83-84.



Kripke points out is that for all we know a priori, it might be Schmidt and not Gödel who actually made the discovery. If the description theory is true, and Schmidt is the real discoverer, as it might be for all we know a priori, we are actually using 'Gödel' to refer to Schmidt. But this is intuitively incorrect.

Here is a corresponding non-modal argument against descriptivism for natural kind terms. Kripke is here discussing Kant's suggestion that being yellow is part of the concept of gold:

Could we discover that gold was not in fact yellow? Suppose that an optical illusion were prevalent, due to peculiar properties of the atmosphere in South Africa and Russia and certain other areas where gold mines are common. Suppose there were an optical illusion which made the substance appear to be yellow; but in fact, once the peculiar properties of the atmosphere were removed, we would see that it is actually blue. Maybe a demon even corrupted the vision of all those entering the gold mines (obviously their *souls* were already corrupt), and thus made them believe that this substance was yellow, though it is not. Would there on this basis be an announcement in the newspapers: 'It has turned out that there is no gold. Gold does not exist. What we took to be gold is not in fact gold.'? Just imagine the world financial crises under these conditions! Here we have an undreamt of source of shakiness in the monetary system.

It seems to me that there would be no such announcement. On the contrary, what would be announced would be that though it appeared that gold was yellow, in fact gold has turned out not to be yellow, but blue.<sup>228</sup>

So being yellow is not part of the concept of gold, or the meaning of the term 'gold'. If it were, we would react to the discovery that there is no yellow but otherwise goldish substance (which is a genuine possibility, for all we know a priori) by saying that there is no gold – but we don't. And similar cases can plausibly be made up for other properties we associate with 'gold', such as being a metal – that is, cases where we are ready to reject that what we judge to be gold has these properties.

Putnam made the same point through his famous twin-earth example. Imagine a planet, twin-earth, which is an exact copy of earth except that the transparent and odourless liquid that flows in the rivers and that twin-earthlings drink, for short, the watery stuff, is not H<sub>2</sub>O but XYZ. XYZ is just like H<sub>2</sub>O – e.g. it tastes the same and quenches thirst in the same way – except for its underlying chemical structure. Intuitively we think that H<sub>2</sub>O is water and that XYZ is not, that is, that our term 'water' does not refer to the XYZ-liquid there is on twin-earth (though their

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

word ‘water’ does that), *despite the fact that all the descriptions we associate with ‘water’ fit XYZ.*<sup>229</sup> Many of us associate water with being H<sub>2</sub>O, of course, but this is not what makes the difference. Even if we imagine earthlings in 1750 (or simply people today) who do not know (or think) that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, we think that the term as they used it would refer to H<sub>2</sub>O and not to XYZ on twin-earth. These associated descriptions cannot be what determine the reference, then. Putnam makes this point even clearer by having us imagine Oscar<sub>1</sub> on Earth and Oscar<sub>2</sub>, his counterpart on twin-earth, living in 1750. We can even stipulate that they “were in exactly the same psychological state”; yet, the term ‘water’ would have different extensions when the two of them use it, H<sub>2</sub>O for Oscar<sub>1</sub>, and XYZ for Oscar<sub>2</sub>. The twin-earth example, then, shows that the descriptions that we associate with ‘water’ don’t give the meaning and are not what fix the reference of the term.

If the descriptivist view about meaning and reference is not correct for names and natural kind terms, what is the correct view? Examples of the kind described above have been thought to support two conclusions about these terms. One is that a causal theory of reference holds for the terms, and the other is that the terms are rigid designators. Jackson put the reasoning that lead up to these as follows:

[...] we learn two things from Putnam’s story. As has been widely noted, we can think of the Twin Earth story in two different ways, depending on whether we think of Twin Earth as somewhere remote from Earth but in our, the actual, world, or as in another possible world altogether. From the first version, we learn the importance of acquaintance in determining the reference of the word ‘water’. The reason the water stuff XYZ on Twin Earth – a planet located, let’s suppose, in Earth’s orbit but on the opposite side of the Sun – does not count as water is that it was not XYZ that we were acquainted with when the word ‘water’ and its cognates in other languages were introduced (and have continued to be acquainted with). From the second version, we learn that the term ‘water’ is a rigid designator. Even if Twin Earth is simply Earth (or its counterpart) in another possible world, and in that possible world XYZ is both watery and the stuff we – not the Twin Earthians – are acquainted with, it does not count as water.<sup>230</sup>

When the twin-earth example is construed non-modally, we learn the first lesson: the reference of ‘water’ is fixed along the lines of a causal

<sup>229</sup> Not everyone has this intuition unambiguously. For example, Jackson, 1998a, p. 38, and Lewis, 1994, p. 424, think that in ordinary language it is indeterminate whether it is H<sub>2</sub>O or XYZ that counts as water on twin-earth. I will ignore this complication in what follows.

<sup>230</sup> Jackson, 1998a, p. 39.

theory of reference. The difference between XYZ and H<sub>2</sub>O, which makes our term ‘water’ refer to only the latter, is not how well they fit certain associated descriptions, but the causal relation we stand in to them respectively. H<sub>2</sub>O is the substance that we, and those who introduced the term ‘water’, causally interact with. Similarly for names: the reason that ‘Gödel’ refers to Gödel is not that Gödel fits the descriptions we associate with ‘Gödel’ (it is possible that he doesn’t): the reason is that Gödel is at the end of a causal chain linking our usage of the term with some initial baptism where the specific individual, Gödel, was given the name ‘Gödel’. According to causal theories of reference, then, we refer to *x* by ‘*x*’ if and only if our use of ‘*x*’ stands in some special causal relation to *x*.<sup>231</sup>

The second lesson from the Putnam/Kripke arguments that Jackson refers to ensues when the example is construed modally: the terms in question are rigid designators. That is, they keep their reference in every possible world – if the watery stuff on earth had been XYZ that would not have been water. So water could not have been anything else than what it actually is, namely H<sub>2</sub>O.<sup>232</sup>

What will interest us in the following discussion is the first lesson, that a causal theory of reference holds, and not the idea of rigid designation. As we have seen, these arguments are used as objections against descriptivism, and they seem to work equally well against the closely related intuition-based view of conceptual analysis put forward in the previous chapter. If it is the causal history of our use of a term, and the underlying structure of the thing at the end of that causal chain, that

<sup>231</sup> See e.g. Putnam, 1975, and Kripke, 1980, e.g. pp. 91-97 for the reference of proper names and pp. 138-39 for the reference of natural kind terms. Before one has spelled out the “special causal relation”, the view is of course very underspecified. (Kripke says that what he has given is not a *theory* of reference, since he has not specified it enough, but a better *picture* of reference than the descriptive picture.) Different specifications will give rise to different versions of the causal theory of reference (for example taking into account that the reference of a term can change after the initial baptism (see, e.g. Evans, 1973)). The differences between these will not matter to us here, however, since my objection to founding standard relativism on a causal theory does not depend on any specific variant of the view.

<sup>232</sup> It is the combination of these two lessons that leads to the intriguing conclusion that certain a posteriori truths, such that “water is H<sub>2</sub>O”, are necessary truths. It is a posteriori and not a priori because we can know that the referent of ‘water’ is H<sub>2</sub>O only through investigating the chemical structure of the watery stuff we are causally acquainted with. And it is (metaphysically) necessary because, given that the watery stuff we are acquainted with actually is H<sub>2</sub>O, then this fixes the extension of water for every possible world: so there is no possible world in which water is not H<sub>2</sub>O.

matters to the reference of the term, it seems that how we are disposed to classify real and possible scenarios using that term really does not matter. So it looks like this view might provide a way of meeting the challenge from absolutist intuitions (or dispositions) against standard relativism: the force of the challenge hinges on the fact that our dispositions do matter to the reference of terms.

7.2.1 *Two ways of grounding speaker relativism on a causal theory of reference*

There are at least two ways in which speaker relativism could be argued for on the grounds of a causal theory of reference. The first is suggested by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons' moral twin-earth objection to the idea that the reference of moral terms is determined along the lines of a causal theory of reference.<sup>233</sup> Here is the objection, briefly put. Imagine that here on earth, what causally regulates our use of moral terms is some consequentialist property. On moral twin-earth, however, even though everything else is the same as on earth, what regulates the use is a deontological property. If the causal theory of reference were true, then moral terms on earth and on moral twin-earth would refer to different properties. But, continues the objection, we have the intuition that an earthling who utters, "X is wrong" genuinely disagrees with a twin-earthling who utters, "X is not wrong". They disagree over what is wrong. But this can be so only if the term 'wrong' refers (if it refers at all) to the same property on both planets. Thus, the reference of moral terms cannot be fixed by causal regulation. That is, they use the kind of objection from intuitive moral disagreement that I discussed in chapter 4 to argue against the implications of applying a causal theory of reference to moral terms.

In chapter 4 I also argued that relativists have ways of explaining away the intuitive appearance of disagreement. For this reason I think that Horgan and Timmons' argument fails.<sup>234</sup> Here, however, I am interested

<sup>233</sup> Horgan and Timmons, 1991, Horgan and Timmons, 1992, Horgan and Timmons, 2000, Timmons, 1999. The objection is directed against so called "Cornell Realists" who defend a causal theory approach for moral terms. See e.g., Boyd, 1988, Brink, 1989, Sturgeon, 1986, Sturgeon, 1988.

<sup>234</sup> There are also other possible explanations of why we think that earthlings and moral twin-earthlings refer to the same kind of moral properties. One is that we find it hard to accept the crucial premise of the thought experiment – that the uses of the terms are governed by different natural properties on the different planets. Spontaneously we assume that both uses (if they are like ours) are governed by a non-reducible kind of

in the part of the objection that potentially suggests that applying a causal theory of reference to moral terms leads to speaker relativism. An initial conclusion of the argument is that, as the moral twin-earth example is construed, *if the reference of terms like 'morally right' and 'morally wrong' is causally determined*, then these terms refer to different properties on earth and moral twin-earth respectively. There are two different conclusions one could draw from this. Suppose first that the situation is exactly analogous to Putnam's twin-earth example involving 'water'. In that scenario we want to say that the twin-earthlings do not make judgements about water, since the substance that regulates the use of 'water' on twin-earth is XYZ and not H<sub>2</sub>O (as here on earth). The analogue in the moral case would be to conclude that since the property that regulates 'right' on moral twin-earth is a deontological property and not a consequentialist property (as here on earth), the moral twin-earthlings do not count as making moral judgements. This is not a form of moral speaker relativism: it does not imply that different people's *moral* judgements have different truth-values.

On the other hand, one could hold that the semantics of moral terms should be only partly modelled on the semantics of natural kind terms like 'water'. The idea would be that even though the *reference* of moral terms is determined along the lines of a causal theory of reference (like in the case of water), 'morally right' judgements made by twin-earthlings count as moral judgements, despite the difference in reference. On the latter view, the *meaning* of moral terms would not be determined by the causal history of their use, only their reference.<sup>235</sup> At least one way to understand this, is as a version of indexical relativism, though different from Dreier's version. On the present view, the relevant part of the context of utterance is the causal history of the speaker's use of the term, while on Dreier's view it is the speaker's motivational set-up. Also, it would not be a version of the kind of relativism I have focused on in this book – it would not be a form of standard relativism. That is, it would not say that the truth-values of moral judgements depend on the speaker's *morality*.

To my knowledge, this form of speaker relativism has never been defended, and I will leave to one side in what follows (though I will briefly return to the consequences of my argumentation for it later). There is,

moral properties. (Cf. Copp, 2000, Sayre-McCord, 1997a)

<sup>235</sup> See Horgan and Timmons, 2000, pp. 140-41, for their account of this distinction.

however, another way in which speaker relativism could be motivated by a causal theory of reference, a way which, even if it has not been explicitly stated by relativists, is suggested by some speaker relativists' formulations. Furthermore, the form of relativism that ensues is a form of standard relativism. Let us turn to this.

Harman makes it very clear that his form of speaker relativism is not to be understood as a claim about meaning; it is a claim about how things are in the world:

[...] moral relativism is not by itself a claim about meaning. [...] Moral relativism is a thesis about how things are and a thesis about how things aren't! Moral relativism claims that there is no such thing as objectively absolute good, absolute right or absolute justice; there is only what is good, right or just in relation to this or that moral framework. What someone takes to be absolute rightness is only rightness in relation to (a system of moral coordinates determined by) that person's values.<sup>236</sup>

In order to make sense of the idea of moral speaker relativism as a view about moral properties rather than about the meaning of moral expressions, Harman draws an analogy between moral relativism and the relativism about physical parameters that follows from Einstein's relativity theory:

Einstein's Theory of Relativity does not involve a claim about meaning or about what people intend to be claiming when they make judgments about an object's mass. The point is, rather, that the only truth there is in this area is relative truth.

Before Einstein, judgments about mass were not intended as relative judgments. But it would be mean-spirited to invoke an "error theory" and conclude that these pre-Einsteinian judgments were all false! Better to suppose that such a judgment was true to the extent that an object had the relevant mass in relation to a spatio-temporal framework that was conspicuous to the person making the judgment, for example, a framework in which that person was at rest.

Similarly, the moral relativism I will argue for is not a claim about what people *mean* by their moral judgments. Moral relativism does not claim that people intend their moral judgments to be "elliptical" in the suggested way; just as relativism about mass does not claim that people intend their judgments about mass to make implicit reference to a spatio-temporal framework.<sup>237</sup>

Harman finds this comparison so useful that he returns to it many times in a few pages. He compares his moral relativism to relativism in

<sup>236</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 17.

<sup>237</sup> Harman, in *Ibid.*, p. 4.

physics about for example motion, mass and simultaneity. These theories make no claims about the meaning of terms, according to Harman:

The claim is, rather, that there is no such thing as absolute simultaneity or absolute mass. There is only simultaneity or mass with respect to one or another frame of reference. What someone might take to be absolute magnitudes are really relative magnitudes; magnitudes that are relative to that person's frame of reference.<sup>238</sup>

Similarly, then, Harman's moral relativism is the claim that there is no such thing as absolute moral rightness or wrongness:

Moral right and wrong are relative matters. A given act can be right with respect to one system of moral coordinates and wrong with respect to another system of coordinates. And nothing is absolutely right or wrong, apart from any system of moral coordinates.<sup>239</sup>

Dreier makes use of the same kind of analogy:

Relativists may agree, to some extent [that the linguistic intentions of speakers is, often at least, absolutist rather than relativist]. For pre-theoretic moral ideas to be all they aspire to be, a relativist might say, there would have to be absolute standards for moral concepts to latch onto. But since there aren't any, relativism suggests, why not make do with the relative standards that we actually do have? There is no need to abandon moral judgment altogether, so long as we are willing to tone down its aspirations.

Compare common-sense judgments of mass, or length, or duration. For all but the more sophisticated folk of the last century or so, all such judgments have been absolute on their face. A policeman on the witness stand testifies that while staking out the apartment, he saw the defendant enter and then leave one hour later. The defense cross-examines: When you say it was one hour later, can you provide an inertial frame? "A duration of one hour must, officer, be relative to one inertial frame or another, you know." The policeman denies that he meant any such thing. "Just one hour, is all I meant, not relative to any of your fancy frames." In a very straightforward sense, the policeman's *intention* was to name an absolute duration, of the sort that is simply not recognized in relativistic physics. Is the policeman's testimony thereby impeached? Has he said something false? We would not ordinarily say so. To put it briefly: the policeman's judgment had a false presupposition behind it. His own conception of the world, adequate and accurate enough for his own purposes, is not really correct. But the false presupposition, the incorrect *theory* that the policeman himself would give if carefully questioned, does not seem to infect the integrity or veracity of his ordinary, first-order judgments. What the policeman said, we believe, is true; only his background

<sup>238</sup> Harman, in *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>239</sup> Harman, in *Ibid.*, p. 13.

absolutist theory of it is mistaken. So it is with ordinary moral judgment, a relativist may say.<sup>240</sup>

Both Harman and Dreier use the analogy to avoid a potential problem for moral standard relativists, namely the one pointed out in the previous chapter: at least many people conceive of moral properties as absolute moral properties and seem to intend to refer to such properties. If this is so, and if there are no absolute moral properties, as relativists like Dreier and Harman claim, should we not draw the conclusion that an error-theory holds? People do (some at least), after all, intend their moral judgements to be about properties of a kind that doesn't exist. Here comes the analogy to the rescue: this is not the conclusion we draw about mass or motion or simultaneity. People, such as Dreier's policeman, think of these as absolute properties, and this is what they intend to refer to. But we don't think that an error-theory is correct here, even though there are no such things as absolute mass or simultaneity. Instead we say that these people's judgements manage to refer to the relative physical properties there are, in spite of their mistaken beliefs. So, let us say the same thing about moral judgements!

I will not discuss the metaphysical question of whether there are or are not any absolute moral properties. The question I will ask is whether, if there are no absolute moral facts, relativists can deny error-theory and say that relativism is true as a claim about the world.

Harman and Dreier rely heavily on the analogy with relativism in physics to answer this question in the affirmative. So we should ask whether the analogy holds at closer examination: Why does it work, if it does, to say that people refer to relative physical properties even though they intend to speak about absolute properties? And does the answer carry over to the moral case?

Why does it work for physical relativism? The things Harman and Dreier say suggest that terms like 'mass' and 'simultaneity' work much like natural kind terms. Dreier's policeman case is designed to show that we can refer to the property in question even though we have a misconception about it. In other words, the descriptions we associate with the term – that it stands for an absolute property – can turn out not to fit the referent. This is what we could expect if the reference of 'mass' and 'simultaneity' is fixed along the lines of a causal theory of reference: no matter what intuitions we have, if the property at the other side of the

<sup>240</sup> Dreier, 2006, pp. 261-62



causal chain is a relational property, then that is the referent. Furthermore, as Harman emphasizes, the discovery that the physical properties are relative was a discovery about how the world is, an empirical discovery: like, for example, the discovery that water is  $H_2O$ .

This way we could get a form of relativism about simultaneity and mass that is founded on a causal theory of reference. We refer to relations between the object, or the two events, and a frame of reference, because these are the kinds of relations our uses of the terms are causally related to in the relevant way; they are the relations we are acquainted with even though we are wrong about their nature. To make it a *speaker* relativist view about mass and simultaneity we have to add a contextualist element: a speaker refers to the relation that pertains between *her* frame of reference (a frame of reference somehow salient in *her* situation) and the object, or the two events, in question.

One could imagine the corresponding view about moral relativism. What is out there, and what we, or some of us, conceive of as absolute moral properties really are relative moral properties, relations between our own moral frameworks and the actions judged. If a causal theory of reference holds for moral terms we refer to these relations between our own moralities and actions since these are the relations that are causally related to our use of moral terms in the right way. This, then, makes it a form of standard speaker relativism: the truth-value of each speaker's moral judgements depends on her morality.

Neither Harman nor Dreier explicitly accepts this way of arguing for moral speaker relativism. In fact they say very little about how we are to understand the analogy, as they say very little about how we are to understand the idea that physical relativism holds in spite of peoples absolutist intuitions. But I think that the causal externalist interpretation outlined above is at least suggested by the analogy, and I will focus on this in the following discussion. I will briefly return to other interpretations of the analogy later.

In what follows I will first examine the claim that a causal theory of reference holds for, and can make relativism true about, the physical terms in question, focusing on the example of 'simultaneity'. After that I consider the same claim for moral terms.

### 7.2.2 *Relativism about simultaneity as a claim about the world*

Normally we think of simultaneity as a relation that pertains between two events. But it follows from Einstein's special theory of relativity

that two events cannot be simultaneous absolutely, but only relative to a frame of reference:

Events which are simultaneous with reference to the embankment are not simultaneous with respect to the train, and *vice versa* (relativity of simultaneity). Every reference-body (co-ordinate system) has its own particular time; unless we are told the reference-body to which the statement of time refers, there is no meaning in a statement of the time of an event.<sup>241</sup>

If this is correct, simultaneity is not a two-place relation but a three-place relation. As we established above, this does not hold by virtue of people's intentions or dispositions to us the word 'simultaneity'. The question I want to ask here is whether it is plausible to think that it holds because the reference of 'simultaneity' is fixed along the lines of a causal theory of reference.

The plausibility of a causal theory of reference for natural kind terms and names is appreciated through considering possible cases like Kripke's about Aristotle and gold and Putnam's twin-earth scenario. Can a causal theory of reference for 'simultaneity' be defended in the same way? When we approach this question, I think it is helpful to distinguish between different aspects of the intuitions we have about the examples with natural kind terms and names, to see if these are present also in the case of 'simultaneity'. I have already discussed two aspects, causal reference-fixing and rigid designation. We have seen how for example the twin-earth scenario can be construed in two different ways to bring out our intuitions that causal reference-fixing and rigid designation holds for natural kind terms. Let me introduce a third aspect, which will be useful in the following discussion. We can call it "conceptual neutrality". This aspect is brought forward by our willingness to say, in examples like Kripke's about Gödel and gold, that we might be mistaken about the descriptions we associate with the terms.

Or take the example of water. Supposedly, people used to think that water was a simple substance, not a compound substance like H<sub>2</sub>O. Then they found out that the watery stuff in their surrounding was not a simple substance. When they did, they did not draw the conclusion that the watery stuff was not water, but that water is not a simple substance. Why? Part of the answer is that even though they had thought that water was a simple substance, they were willing to say that they might be wrong about this. In the same way, though we are pretty sure that water

<sup>241</sup> Einstein, 1960, p. 26.

is  $H_2O$ , we hold it open that this might not be so. If we did not we would not even be able to conceive of a scenario where science discovers that water is something else, like XYZ or a simple substance – we would think that a discovery that the watery stuff in lakes etc. is not  $H_2O$ , would amount to a discovery that that is not water. This is not the way we think. In this way, we hold it open whether the referents of natural kind terms have the properties we think they have. This is what I mean by the claim that, say, the concept of water, is neutral between water being  $H_2O$ , XYZ or a simple substance: conceptual analysis alone cannot tell us whether water is  $H_2O$ , XYZ or a simple substance.

If our natural kind concepts were not conceptually neutral in this way, then their referents could not be determined along the lines of some causal theory of reference. For the causal history of our use of a term to play a role in fixing the reference of that term, it cannot be determined beforehand, by conceptual analysis, what the reference is. That is, the concept needs to be neutral in the manner described above.

It is indeed possible to imagine a counterfactual situation where, say, the word ‘water’ was not used in this manner. Suppose that we all think that water is  $H_2O$  and consider the following scenario:

*Scenario 2:* The watery stuff you are acquainted with here on Earth is discovered to be a simple substance, not  $H_2O$ . In fact, there is no  $H_2O$ .

There are two relevantly different responses:

*Reaction 1:* In that case, water is a simple substance.

*Reaction 2:* In that case there is no water. For something to be water it has to be  $H_2O$ .

As noticed above, *Reaction 1* is the actual reaction of normal English speakers. But it could have been different. Suppose that our response had been *Reaction 2*. If we came to believe that the watery stuff is a simple substance we would have stopped calling it ‘water’. The difference between our actual reaction and this reaction is that while we actually hold it (conceptually) open what water is and let empirical investigations reveal it, in the counterfactual situation we refuse to call something ‘water’ if it doesn’t have a specific chemical structure.

If a speaker uses the term ‘water’ in the latter way, she is disposed to use the term ‘water’ of something only if it is  $H_2O$ . So the concept *she*

expresses with this term is not neutral as to whether the referent of the term is  $H_2O$ .<sup>242</sup> The case for the view that a certain concept is neutral is built on certain intuitions: we have the intuition, or are disposed to say, that whatever the watery stuff is made of, *that* is water. When we remove this disposition – in one speaker or a whole linguistic society – it no longer seems correct to say that those speakers use the term ‘water’ to express a neutral concept. And in such a case a causal theory of reference could not hold for ‘water’: as noted above, the view that the reference of ‘water’ is determined along the lines of some causal theory of reference depends on that the concept of water is neutral between water being, say,  $H_2O$  and XYZ.<sup>243</sup>

In the same manner, the idea that we can apply a causal theory of reference to ‘simultaneity’, and in this way argue that relativism about simultaneity holds, depends on the idea that the concept of simultaneity is neutral between simultaneity being a two-place and a three-place relation. Is it? Imagine that we think of simultaneity as a two-place relation. Then someone convinces us that there is no such thing as two-place simultaneity. What we experience when we experience two events as simultaneous, she explains to us, is that the two events stand in some special relation to our frame of reference. And in relation to other frames of reference the two events are not related in that way. How would we react to this piece of information? History shows that our reaction would be to say that, in that case, simultaneity is a three-place relation (and not to say that simultaneity does not exist). This suggests that the concept of simultaneity is neutral between simultaneity being a two-place and a three-place relation. We are willing to say that the three-place relation counts as simultaneity.

As I have said, conceptual neutrality is a necessary precondition for a causal theory of reference to hold. But it is not a sufficient condition. Consider the case of water again. The concept of water is neutral between water being a simple substance and  $H_2O$ . This in itself does not warrant us to conclude, from the discovery that the watery stuff here on earth is  $H_2O$ , that all water is  $H_2O$ . Two different conclusions are consistent with the neutrality. Either we say that that the simple substance watery stuff (or XYZ) on another planet is also water. Or we say – as the

<sup>242</sup> Or if we wish to, we can imagine a linguistic community that use the term in that way – remember that we are putting off the discussion of social externalism to later in this chapter.

<sup>243</sup> Cf. Joyce, 2001, p. 97

non-modal version of the twin-earth story (where twin-earth is thought of as another planet in our actual world) showed that we do – that it is only that substance which we are acquainted with here on Earth that counts as water. It is only in the latter case that “H<sub>2</sub>O -ism” about water holds, that is, that only H<sub>2</sub>O counts as water. Likewise, that the concept of simultaneity is neutral does not guarantee that a causal theory of reference holds for ‘simultaneity’, and therefore, it seems, does not guarantee relativism about simultaneity: that the term refers only to the three-place relation we are acquainted with.

Does a causal theory of reference hold for ‘simultaneity’? If it does, and Einstein is correct that what we are acquainted with through our simultaneity experiences is a three-place relation and not a two-place relation, then ‘simultaneity’ refers to this three-place relation. I’m genuinely uncertain if it does hold, however. Imagine, if one can, that in a far off corner of our actual universe, the laws of physics are different than here. If we travelled there, what we would experience as simultaneity would actually be a two-place relation between two events. Is this two-place relation simultaneity? I’m not sure. (And perhaps there is no fact of the matter here; our concept of simultaneity might very well be indeterminate in this respect.)

The good news for Einstein, however, is that in contrast to “H<sub>2</sub>O -ism” about water, this need not matter to the truth of relativism about simultaneity. We have established that the concept of simultaneity is neutral between simultaneity being a two-place and a three-place relation. If the causal theory of reference does not hold for ‘simultaneity’, this means that the causal history of our use of the word cannot determine that it refers to a three-place rather than a two-place relation. But it seems that physics can do this job by itself. That is, even if the two-place relation in the far off corner of universe would count as simultaneity if it existed, Einstein’s special theory of relativity is plausibly construed as a general theory about the laws of physics in our universe (in contrast to the discovery of that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, which is only a discovery about the watery stuff *on earth*), which means that it is a theory that implies that there are no such far off corners.<sup>244</sup>

<sup>244</sup> Similar considerations seem to hold regarding the question of whether ‘simultaneity’ is a rigid designator. As we have seen, a term is a rigid designator if it refers to the same kind of property in every possible world. This is an intuitively plausible view about ‘water’. Is ‘simultaneity’ a rigid designator? My intuitions here are not very clear. However, no matter if ‘simultaneity’ is a rigid designator or not, relativism about

So, no matter whether the causal theory of reference holds for ‘simultaneity’ or not, relativism about simultaneity is true. It is true, not (merely) because of conceptual matters, but because of facts about what there is and what there isn’t. In the next section we ask if the same can be said about moral relativism.

### 7.2.3 *Moral relativism as a claim about the world?*

In this subsection I argue that moral standard relativism cannot be defended as a theory about the world in the way we have seen that relativism about simultaneity can. I will approach my argument for this conclusion through another argument against treating moral terms as natural kind terms, given by Eric Gampel.<sup>245</sup>

The starting point of this argument is that the causal theory of reference is plausible for a term only if we have certain referential intentions. Two relevant intentions are missing in the case of moral terms, Gampel argues. The first is Causal Specification, that is, that “we understand the kind largely in terms of its causal role”<sup>246</sup>. When using moral terms, Gampel says, we are not trying to refer to what is “causally responsible for the usual features associated with the corresponding kinds”<sup>247</sup>. The point then is that we are not willing to let facts about what causally governs our use of moral terms determine the reference of these terms.

I am not convinced that this is true. It does not seem obviously wrong to say that, to the extent that we intend to refer to anything at all when we make moral statements, we do try to pick out the objects of, or what is causally responsible for, our moral experiences, experiences of right and wrong. I will not pursue this line any further here, however. The reason for this is that even if the argument succeeded in establishing that the causal theory of reference is not applicable to moral terms, this would not preclude that moral relativism is true as a claim about how the world is. We saw that relativism about simultaneity does not hinge on ‘simultaneity’ functioning along the lines of the causal theory of reference, and this seems to hold for moral relativism as well. The thesis that

simultaneity can be said to be a true theory about how the world is. If ‘simultaneity’ is a rigid designator, relativism is a theory about what simultaneity necessarily is; if it is not a rigid designator, relativism is a theory about what simultaneity actually (but not necessarily) is.

<sup>245</sup> Gampel, 1996, Gampel, 1997.

<sup>246</sup> Gampel, 1996, p. 196.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

there are no absolute moral facts is never construed as a theory that holds in some places in our universe but not in all. If it were, it would be terribly implausible. If it is an absolute moral fact that my doing a specific act, A, is wrong, that is, if it is wrong not only in relation to one or another morality but absolutely wrong, then this will be so everywhere. Absolute moral facts are not restricted to one or another location in this way. This means that it suffices that the moral concepts are neutral between moral properties being absolute or relative moral properties for moral relativism to hold, given that there are no absolute moral properties. Thus, if one wants to argue that moral relativism does not follow from the non-existence of absolute moral properties (and the existence of the relevant relative properties), one has to establish that concepts of moral properties are *not* neutral between moral properties being absolute and relative moral properties.

Before we turn to the question of whether they are neutral, let us look at the second part of Gampel's argument. The second referential intention Gampel claims is missing when we use moral terms is Indexicality: when we use natural kind terms "we aim to pick out what is actually causally responsible, not what might be responsible in some far-off time or world"<sup>248</sup>. Gampel's argument that this aim is missing in moral talk is as follows:

It may be difficult and implausible to suppose that neither I nor anyone before me has ever successfully referred to something good. But it is not logically impossible. [...] [M]aybe no one has ever been genuinely depraved. But to say that we've never seen or touched water [...]? Impossible – given the indexicality in my referential intentions.<sup>249</sup>

Gampel is on to something here, but his diagnosis is wrong for two reasons. First, our referential intentions (or as I prefer, our dispositions) do not exclude that there is no water; they do not guarantee that the concept of water is instantiated. They exclude that water is not the watery stuff in our environment, the stuff with which we are acquainted; but they cannot guarantee that there is such stuff. Second, given that there is such stuff, Indexicality is not what makes it impossible to deny the existence of water. That we aim to pick out what is actually causally responsible wouldn't have this consequence if our intentions (or dispositions) also put further restrictions on what can count as water, such as

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

that it is a simple substance or  $H_2O$ . If 'water' referred to the substance that is both actually responsible for our use of the term (Indexicality) and is a simple substance, then there would be no water (since there is no such substance).

This suggests that what is relevant here is that the concept of water is *neutral* as regards the chemical structure of water. Such conceptual neutrality, not Indexicality, is what guarantees that water is *whatever* watery stuff that is causally responsible for our use of the term 'water'. The difference between the concept of water and moral concepts suggested (but not explicated) by Gampel's reasoning thus seems to be that the latter ones, but not the former, are neutral. Again, the relevant question, it turns out, is whether this is true or false: are moral concepts neutral between moral properties being absolute or relative?

I argued in the last chapter that some people, those I called die-hard absolutists, do not have neutral moral concepts; as they are disposed to use moral terms, they refer to absolute moral properties. In my argument I made use of the following scenario:

*Scenario 1.* There are no absolute moral properties. What we experience as absolute moral properties pertaining to actions actually are relations between these actions and our own mental states (such as our moral opinions, desires or motivations).

I argued that some people, the die-hard absolutists, are disposed to think that if *Scenario 1* is a fact, that is, if there are no absolute moral properties, then there are no moral properties at all. This stands in opposition, then, to how we would react to a scenario where the watery stuff turns out to be XYZ, the goldish substance turns out to be blue, or Gödel turns out not to have proved the incompleteness of arithmetic; in these cases we still think that it counts as water and gold and Gödel. Die-hard absolutist are not disposed to use moral terms, or intuitively conceptualize moral terms, in a way that is structurally similar to that which made us conclude that natural kind concepts are neutral.

This means that moral standard relativism, as a general theory about everyone's moral judgements, is still in trouble; the challenge posed to this view by certain speaker's strong absolutist intuitions cannot be solved by founding the theory on a causal theory of reference. (This holds also for the form of relativism suggested by Horgan and Timmons' moral twin-earth scenario: moral properties are relative on this view as well, so die-hard absolutists are not ready to count these as *moral*



properties.) Absolutism is also still in trouble. Certain speakers, such as Harman and Dreier, are ready to say that, at least if there are no absolute moral properties, then the relative properties there are count as moral properties. These people do have moral concepts that are neutral between moral properties being relative or absolute. So, intuitively, what holds for ‘simultaneity’ holds for moral terms as they use them; if there are no absolute moral properties, moral relativism is true as a claim about how the world is.

#### 7.2.4 *Objection and reply: Causal theory on dispositional grounds*

An expected objection to my reasoning above is that I contradict the insights of Kripke and Putnam. My argument relies on the idea that we need to have certain intuitions, or dispositions (or perhaps even associated descriptions) regarding a certain term for the causal theory of reference to hold for that term. But on Kripke’s and Putnam’s picture this is not so; in fact all of our associated descriptions or beliefs about the referents of our terms might be false, since it is the actual nature of the kind or object that our use of the term stands in a certain causal relation to that matters. So it seems that my objection to the idea that standard relativism can be defended through a causal theory of reference works just because it assumes things that go against the very idea of causal theories of reference.

The answer to this objection, I think, is that although Kripke and Putnam’s arguments did contain new and important insights about how the reference of certain terms are fixed, these arguments do not give any reason to reject a descriptivist theory, or at least not something like the intuition-based view of analysis. Kripke and Putnam’s arguments build, after all, on our ability to say what terms like ‘gold’ and ‘water’ refer to in certain possible cases. This point is stressed by Jackson:

Our ability to answer questions about what various words refer to in various possible worlds, it should be emphasized, is common ground with critics of the description theory. The critics’ writings are full of descriptions (*descriptions*) of possible worlds and claims about what refers, or fails to refer, to what in these possible worlds. Indeed, their impact has derived precisely from the intuitive plausibility of many of their claims about what refers, or fails to refer, to what in various possible worlds. But if speakers can say what refers to what when various possible worlds are described to them, description theorists can identify the property associated in their minds with, for example, the word ‘water’: it is

the disjunction of the properties that guide the speakers in each particular possible world when they say which stuff, if any, in each world counts as water.<sup>250</sup>

The twin-earth scenarios are *described* to us, and based on these *descriptions* we are able to tell what our term ‘water’ refers to. So, it seems that what guides us in making our judgements about what ‘water’ refers to, are these descriptions. Or at least, for all these examples show, this might be the case. In the case of water we seem to be thinking roughly; water is *the watery stuff of our acquaintance here on earth*. So, descriptivists can hold, it is this, or some similar, description we associate with ‘water’.<sup>251</sup>

But it might seem that this misses the point of the objection. Simple descriptions of the sort above obviously cannot accurately give ‘water’ its meaning. First, we would have to spell out what ‘watery stuff’ means exactly. Let’s say that it is spelled out as “the odourless, drinkable substance that falls in rain, flows in rivers and fills the oceans”. But suppose the substance in rivers and oceans really is not odourless (a demon has deceived us): we still want to say that that is water. And what about scenarios where there are two different substances, with different chemical structure, distributed in the lakes and rivers etc? Or scenarios where the watery stuff is no natural kind at all? The original analysis gives us no clue to what ‘water’ refers to in such cases. The analysis would obviously have to be modified to account for such possible cases, taking into consideration our reaction to these cases. But the more such complications we find, the less plausible it might be to think that we can give a complete analysis free from counter-examples. On inductive grounds it might be argued that the fact that every hitherto suggested description or analysis fails, there is no accurate analysis; there are counter-examples to every analysis.

This objection can be rebutted as well, however. If we draw the inductive conclusion, we have to reject descriptivism, given that this view is understood as claiming that there must be a description in other terms. But it is not a reason to reject the intuition-based view of analysis as I have construed this. We cannot draw the conclusion that there is no specific way in which we are disposed to classify every scenario; it

<sup>250</sup> Jackson, 1998b, p. 212

<sup>251</sup> And in order to accommodate the modal version of the twin-earth example we should add a modal operator to the description: “the watery stuff we are *actually* acquainted with here on earth”. Cf. Davies and Humberstone, 1980, pp. 18-19, Jackson, 1992, pp. 483-84

might just be that this way is not fully explicable in other terms or concepts we have, which is why none of our descriptions is fully satisfactory as an analysis (even though they may be good approximations of our dispositions to classify). (This point was made in the previous chapter too.) This means that it is fully compatible with the examples given by Kripke and Putnam and our intuitions about these, that it is our dispositions about what counts as being e.g. water, gold or Gödel in possible cases that determine the reference of the terms in question.

This is *not* to say that the causal history of our use of these terms does not matter to their reference. It is an idea about *why* the causal history matters; it does because speakers allow it to matter; because we are (as Kripke and Putnam indeed showed) disposed to say that it is that which we stand in a certain causal relation to which is water or gold or Gödel.

The point I have tried to make intuitively here has been given a more theoretic underpinning by proponents of so-called two-dimensional semantics, most notably by Chalmers and Jackson.<sup>252</sup> I will not here be able to do justice to the two-dimensional framework with all its technicalities or the differences between different forms of the theory. What I present is a rough intuitive picture of it that I take to be close to Chalmers' version, which he calls "epistemic two-dimensional semantics". According to two-dimensionalism, linguistic expressions can be evaluated in relation to two different kinds of possibilities, and these evaluations are connected to two aspects or "dimensions" of meaning, or two different kinds of intensions. First, we can evaluate expressions relative to (metaphysically) possible worlds. Some terms, for example 'bachelor', have different extensions in different possible worlds: someone who actually is a bachelor *could* have been married. We can define one of the intensions associated with expressions, the "secondary intension" in Chalmers' words, through this notion of possible worlds; it is a function from possible worlds to extensions. The secondary intension of 'bachelor', then, tells us what things are bachelors in every possible world.

We can also evaluate expressions relative to another kind of possibilities. Even though 'water' has the same reference in every possible world no matter how they are constituted (since it is a rigid designator), it does not have the same referent no matter how *the actual world turns out to be constituted*. If it turns out that the watery stuff around us is H<sub>2</sub>O, then

<sup>252</sup> Chalmers, 2004, Chalmers and Jackson, 2001, Jackson, 1998a, Jackson, 1998b.

water is H<sub>2</sub>O; if it turns out that the watery stuff is XYZ, then water is XYZ. In Chalmers' terminology, this is not to say that it is *metaphysically* possible that water is XYZ, because it isn't (there is no possible world in which it is); it is to say that it is *epistemically* possible (there is a scenario where water is XYZ):

There are two key ideas here. The first is the idea of epistemic space: there are many ways the world might turn out to be, and there is a corresponding space of epistemic possibilities. The second is the idea of *scrutability*: once we know how the world has turned out, or once we know which epistemic possibility is actual, we are in a position to determine the extensions of our expressions. Together, these two ideas suggest that an expression can be associated with a function from epistemic possibilities to extensions: an *epistemic intension*.

Take the first idea first. There are many ways the world might be, for all we know. And there are even more ways the world might be, for all we know *a priori*. The oceans might contain H<sub>2</sub>O or they might contain XYZ; the evening star might be identical to the morning star or it might not. These ways the world might be correspond to epistemically possible hypotheses, in a broad sense. Let us say that a claim is *epistemically possible* (in the broad sense) when it is not ruled out *a priori*. Then it is epistemically possible that water is H<sub>2</sub>O, and it is epistemically possible that water is XYZ. It is epistemically possible that Hesperus is Phosphorus, and epistemically possible that Hesperus is not Phosphorus.

Just as one can think of metaphysically possible hypotheses as corresponding to an overarching space of metaphysical possibilities, one can think of epistemically possible hypotheses as corresponding to an overarching space of epistemic possibilities. Some possibilities in the space of *metaphysical possibilities* are maximally specific: these can be thought of as maximal metaphysical possibilities, or as they are often known, possible worlds. In a similar way, some possibilities in the space of epistemic possibilities are maximally specific: these can be thought of as *maximal epistemic possibilities*, or as I will call them, *scenarios*.<sup>253</sup>

When we consider a possible case as an epistemic scenario we do not consider it as a way the world could have been (this would be to consider it as a possible world), and ask what one of our terms refers to in that possible world (holding constant the way the world actually is). Instead we are considering the possibility as actual<sup>254</sup> and ask what a certain term would refer to if the actual world turned out to be in a certain way. The epistemic, or primary, intension, associated with a term, is a function from *scenarios*, not possible worlds, to extensions (in those scenarios). The primary intension of 'water', for example, tells us what water refers to in different epistemic scenarios.

<sup>253</sup> Chalmers, 2004, pp. 176-77.

<sup>254</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 177.

The “non-modal” thought experiments used as arguments for a causal theory of reference by Kripke and Putnam, involve such epistemic scenarios. So, what we do when we consider these is to investigate the epistemic intension of the terms – the function from epistemic scenarios to extensions for these terms – and take our dispositions to react to the scenarios as a guide to these epistemic intensions. And for some terms, it turns out, the dispositions serve to ground an epistemic intension or analysis, according to which it is the causal history of the use of the term that matters to the extension.

We can also explicate my notion of conceptual neutrality in terms of epistemic possibility. For natural kind terms several different extensions are epistemically possible; otherwise the epistemic intension of those terms could not make their extensions in a scenario depend on the specifics of the scenario. This is what it means that, say, the concept of water is neutral between water being H<sub>2</sub>O and XYZ; it is both epistemically possible that water is H<sub>2</sub>O and that water is XYZ. Other concepts are not neutral in this sense: we cannot imagine scenarios in which someone counts as a witch without having magical powers. So the epistemic intension of ‘witch’ does not allow the causal history of our use of ‘witch’ to determine whether the term refers to people with or without magical powers.<sup>255</sup>

I have argued that the same holds for some people’s use of moral terms regarding whether these refer to relative or absolute moral properties. Die-hard absolutists do not see it as an epistemic possibility that

<sup>255</sup> We should note one thing about the neutrality of concepts: a concept may be neutral in certain respects and not others. Apparently the concept of water is neutral between water being H<sub>2</sub>O or XYZ. But this does not yet make the point that *anything* causally related to our use of the term ‘water’ in the way that H<sub>2</sub>O supposedly is, would count as water. Consider for example a scenario in which what causally regulates our use of water is not H<sub>2</sub>O but stones. A demon has manipulated our experiences so that we think it is a liquid that is possible to drink etc. Would we say that if this scenario is actual, then water is stones? It is not obvious that we would; perhaps we would rather say that in such a scenario there is no water. So even for the typical examples of terms for which a causal theory of reference holds, it is not obvious that the causal history of our use of the terms trump all other considerations in determining the extension: it might well be that as we use the word ‘water’, water cannot be stones. What I have argued for about the die-hard absolutists’ use of moral terms, then, is not a difference in kind from our use of natural kind terms. I have argued that as die-hard absolutists use moral terms, there is *one respect* in which the concepts they express are not neutral. For all I have argued it might very well be that die-hard absolutists allow the causal history of moral terms to do some job – the job of determining which of different absolute properties the moral terms refer to.

moral rightness and wrongness are relative moral properties. Other people, such as Harman and Dreier, seem to associate a different epistemic intension with moral terms; they are disposed to say that if there are no absolute moral facts, then moral terms refer to the relative properties in the area, properties that are in some way dependent on the morality of the speaker.

As we have seen, Harman and Dreier suggest that even though many people have an absolutist understanding of moral properties, we can accept relativism as a kind of “second best” theory. They try to make this move plausible through the analogy with relativism in physics. Many people have absolutist understandings of mass and simultaneity, but we don’t want to say that the lack of such properties make their judgements false. Instead we say that, if there are no such absolute facts, their judgements are made true by the relative facts there are in the area. I have argued that this analogy fails. There is a major difference between the two cases: those who have an absolutist understanding of mass and simultaneity do allow that, if there are no absolute facts of these kinds, then simultaneity and mass are relative properties; but many moral absolutists do not allow the corresponding move for moral properties. They rather say that there are no moral properties at all than relativize them.

#### 7.2.5 *Other interpretations of the analogy: revisionism again*

Neither Harman nor Dreier says that the analogy between moral relativism and relativism about physical parameters is to be interpreted in the causal externalist way I have done here. So perhaps I have misconstrued their idea, and perhaps my objections have no bite if their view is construed in other ways.

Unfortunately, Harman and Dreier give few clues as to how the analogy is to be interpreted. In some passages, though, Harman seems to suggest that it is something like a principle of charity that is in play in the case of physical relativism:

it would be *mean-spirited* to invoke an “error theory” and conclude that these pre-Einsteinian judgments were all false! Better to suppose that such a judgment was true to the extent that an object had the relevant mass in relation to a spatio-temporal framework that was conspicuous to the person making the judgment [...].<sup>256</sup>

<sup>256</sup> Harman, in Harman and Thomson, 1996, p. 4, my italics.

It can be discussed whether it really is charitable to ascribe relativist content or truth-conditions to the die-hard absolutist's moral judgements. But this is not really the crucial point for my general argument. What I have shown is that there is at least one aspect in which the cases are not analogous. In the case of relativism about simultaneity, people are ready to say that if there is no two-place simultaneity, then simultaneity is the relevant three-place relation. This lends the same intuitive plausibility to the idea that physical relativism can be established as a thesis about how the world is, as Kripke's and Putnam's arguments did for natural kind terms and names. In the moral case, on the other hand, there are at least some people who are ready to say that if the relative properties are all there is, then there are no moral properties at all. So the intuitive support is lacking as these speaker's are disposed to use moral terms.

Of course one *can* maintain that a causal theory of reference holds for moral terms as used by die-hard absolutists. But if one does, the analysis is not compatible with a traditional intuition-based methodology and will not have captured the intuitive meaning that moral terms have by virtue of the way we are ready to use them. In other words, it will be a radically revisionist analysis: an analysis of judgements about moral rightness and wrongness that goes against what some people are willing to classify as moral properties.

### 7.3 SOCIAL EXTERNALISM

Language is a social phenomenon. We use it to communicate with others who share our language, that is, with people in our linguistic community. It is also commonly thought that the meaning of the words a speaker uses, is not determined wholly by her own use of the words, but also by how other competent speakers in her linguistic community use them. According to such *social externalism*, meaning and reference are determined non-individually by the linguistic community the term is used in. This opens up for a certain way in which the individual speaker might be mistaken about the meaning or reference of the terms she uses: she might simply be mistaken about how other people in her society uses them. This way, social externalism might be taken to provide a possible way for standard relativists to answer the challenge from absolutist intuitions. It might also be taken to provide a safeguard against the challenge from opposite intuitions against the single analysis assumption; if it is not how individual speakers use terms that determines the

reference of the terms as used by those speakers, then the fact that the different speakers (are disposed to) use moral terms differently is no reason to think that they refer to different properties by using them. Let us investigate these claims.

### 7.3.1 *Arguments for social externalism*

After presenting his case that a causal theory of reference holds for natural kind terms through the twin-earth scenario, Putnam introduces his idea of the *division of linguistic labour*. He uses the following example to illustrate and argue for the idea:

Suppose you are like me and cannot tell an elm from a beech tree. We still say that the extension of ‘elm’ in my idiolect is the same as the extension of ‘elm’ in anyone else’s, viz., the set of all elm trees, and that the set of all beech trees is the extension of ‘beech’ in *both* of our dialects.<sup>257</sup>

How can it be that we can use a term, like ‘elm’, to pick out certain things, like elms, without having the slightest idea about what tells these things from certain other things, such as beeches? What makes this possible, according to Putnam, is the division of linguistic labour. Some people in our linguistic community know how to tell elms from beeches and the rest of us depend on these “experts” when we use the terms to refer to what they do. From examples like these he formulates his conjecture:

HYPOTHESIS OF THE UNIVERSALITY OF THE DIVISION OF LINGUISTIC LABOR: Every linguistic community exemplifies the sort of division of linguistic labor just described: that is, possesses at least some terms whose associated ‘criteria’ are known only to a subset of the speakers who acquire the terms, and whose use by the other speakers depends upon a structured cooperation between them and the speakers in the relevant subsets.<sup>258</sup>

Tyler Burge has argued that social externalism (or “non-individualism”) holds for mental content as well as linguistic meaning, using similar thought experiments. Burge asks us to imagine an ordinary English-speaking person, we can call him Art, who thinks that he has arthritis in his thigh. When he says, “I have arthritis in my thigh” he expresses the belief that he has arthritis in his thigh. But unknowingly to Art, arthritis is a condition of the joints only. One cannot have arthritis in the thighs, so Art’s statement and the belief it expresses are false. Now we are to

<sup>257</sup> Putnam, 1975, p. 226.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 228.



imagine a counterfactual situation, which is exactly like the original one – Art has learnt the words in the same way and is disposed to use them in the same way, he has “the same physiological history, the same diseases, the same internal physical occurrences”<sup>259</sup> etc. – except for that in the community where Art grew up and lives, ‘arthritis’ is used more inclusively, it is used to apply to rheumatoid conditions of the thighs as well as of the joints. In the counterfactual situation, Art utters the same words: “I have arthritis in my thigh”. In this situation, it seems that his statement and the belief it expresses are true.

The point of this thought experiment is that intuitively we want to say that in the counterfactual situation, Art’s statement and the belief it expresses are not about arthritis, they are about another condition, we can call it ‘tharthritis’, that can be had in the thighs. The difference between the two situations is not that Art has different dispositions to use ‘arthritis’. The only difference is how other speakers in Art’s linguistic community use the word. So, it seems, at least for some words, the meaning and reference of a term (and the content of the concepts and beliefs expressed with this word) as used by a speaker, does not depend on how this individual speaker is disposed to use the term, but on how the term is used by others in the speaker’s linguistic community.

In the examples above it seems reasonable to say that it is the experts, botanists and medical experts respectively, that are the relevant speakers in the linguistic community, those we should turn to when we want to know what kinds of things the terms we use refer to. But as Timothy Williamson points out, it need not be so for all terms:

Even where we cannot sensibly divide the linguistic community into experts and non-experts, the picture of a natural language as a cluster of causally interrelated but constitutively independent idiolects is still wrong, because it ignores the way in which individual speakers defer to the linguistic community as a whole. They use a word as a word of a public language, allowing its reference in their mouths to be fixed by its use over the whole community. Such verbal interactions between speakers can hold a linguistic practice together even in the absence of a common creed which they are all required to endorse.<sup>260</sup>

The idea here – that the meaning and reference of our terms is given to them by linguistic conventions in our community or by the knowledge of experts – seems plausible enough. It is, after all, a common phenome-

<sup>259</sup> Burge, 1979, p. 78.

<sup>260</sup> Williamson, 2006, p. 36.

non that we are wrong or (partially) ignorant about the correct application of a term (and the concept it expresses), in relation to how that term is used in our linguistic community. We do not want to say in those situations (not in all of them, at least) that the mistaken speaker uses the term with another meaning; she is plainly mistaken about the meaning the term has as it is used in her community.

For this reason, it seems, it would be premature to conclude from the fact that *some* speakers think that moral properties are absolute moral properties that moral terms, when used by these speakers, refer to absolute moral properties. It might simply be that the absolutists are mistaken about the nature of moral properties, just like Art is mistaken about the nature of arthritis.

### 7.3.2 *Social externalism on dispositional grounds*

Putnam's and Burge's arguments for social externalism rely on our intuitions about possible cases in the same way as the arguments for causal theories of reference do. Burge's arthritis-example can be construed as a twin-earth scenario with the two linguistic communities residing on earth and twin-earth respectively. In this scenario, the conventions or use of terms in the linguistic communities of the speakers in question play the same role as the nature of the stuff the speakers are causally acquainted with in the original example; it serves to determine the meaning and reference of the terms in question so that these are different on earth and twin-earth. Just as the two forms of semantic externalism and the arguments for them are structurally identical in this way, so are my objections to the idea that any of them can be used by relativists to answer the challenge from absolutist intuitions. Die-hard absolutists are just as reluctant to let linguistic conventions determine whether moral properties are absolute or relative, as they are to let it be determined by the nature of the properties they are causally related to.

One premise in this objection is that the intuitive plausibility of social externalism for a term depends on that the speakers *allow* that the use of other speakers in the linguistic community, either the community as a whole or some group of experts, determine the reference. Let me make this point through considering yet another example, one Williamson uses to argue in favour of a social externalist view. Williamson has us considering two people, Stephen and Peter, who deny (and thus are disposed to deny) the following sentence: "every vixen is a female fox". The reason that they do so is not that they have a deviant use of 'vixen', 'female' or 'fox'. (Indeed, they reject the sentence, "every vixen is a vixen"

as well.) The reason is instead that they accept elaborate philosophical theories about the logic of ‘every’ that implicate that “every vixen is a female fox” need not be true. We can further assume that these theories are false, at least as theories about what people in general use ‘every’ to say; used in this way, “every vixen is a female fox” is true. We don’t have to go into what their theories are; it suffices to say that they are accepting these theories on what seems to be good grounds:

When Peter and Stephen are challenged on their logical deviations, they defend themselves fluently. In fact, both have published widely read articles on the issues in leading refereed journals of philosophy, in English. They appear to be like most philosophers, thoroughly competent in their native language, a bit odd in some of their views.<sup>261</sup>

So Peter and Stephen are not madmen without any understanding of the word ‘every’ whatsoever. Williamson argues further that what we should say in this case is that Peter and Stephen do not use the word ‘every’ with a different meaning than other people because of their deviating disposition to use the term:

Peter and Stephen learned English in the normal way. They acquired their non-standard views as adults. At least before that, nothing in their use of English suggested semantic deviation. Surely they understood (1) [“Every vixen is a vixen”] and its constituent words and modes of construction with their ordinary meanings then. But the process by which they acquired their eccentricities did not involve forgetting their previous semantic understanding. For example, on their present understanding of (1), they have no difficulty in remembering why they used to assent to it. They were young and foolish then, with a tendency to accept claims on the basis of insufficient reflection. By ordinary standards, Peter and Stephen understand (1) perfectly well. Although their rejection of (1) might on first acquaintance give an observer a defeasible reason to deny that they understood it, any such reason is defeated by closer observation of them. They genuinely doubt that every vixen is a vixen. Peter and Stephen are not marginal cases of understanding: their linguistic competence is far more secure than that of young children or native speakers of other languages who are in the process of learning English. If some participants in a debate have an imperfect linguistic understanding of one of the key words with which it is conducted, they need to have its meaning explained to them before the debate can properly continue. But to stop our logical debate with Peter and Stephen in order to explain to them what the word ‘every’ means in English would be irrelevant and gratuitously patronizing. The understanding which they lack is logical, not semantic. Their attitudes to (1) manifest only some deviant patterns of belief.<sup>262</sup>

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 12-14.

If these considerations make it reasonable to think that Peter and Stephen use ‘every’ with the same meaning as people in general in spite of their deviating dispositions to accept sentences involving the term, then we seem to have a reason to accept social externalism about this word. The fact, if it is a fact, that when they say, “every vixen is a female fox” this is true, does not depend on their own dispositions to use the word, but on how the word is used in their linguistic community.

I think that we are indeed inclined to think that Peter and Stephen use the word with the same meaning as the rest of us. But I think we are thus inclined only because we make certain additional assumptions; namely those Williamson spells out in the following passage, where he argues against the idea that Peter and Stephen use the word ‘every’ in non-standard senses:

Peter and Stephen are emphatic that they intend their words to be understood as words of our common language, with their standard English senses. They use ‘every’ and the other words in (1) as words of that public language. Each of them believes that his semantic theory is correct for English as spoken by others, not just by himself, and that if it turned out to be (heaven forbid!) incorrect for English as spoken by others, it would equally turn out to be incorrect for English as spoken by himself.<sup>263</sup>

That is, Peter and Stephen *allow* that the reference of the term, as they use it, is fixed by how the term is used more generally in their linguistic community. As it is sometimes expressed, they *defer* to the linguistic community. If we explicitly change this bit of the story, the conclusion that they use the word with the same meaning as the rest of us becomes implausible. Peter and Stephen reject the sentence “every vixen is a female fox” and similar constructions involving ‘every’. Now we are to imagine that they react to the suggestion that as most people use the term the sentences they reject are true, by saying something like; “well, in that case I use the term to refer to something other than most people do”. (And perhaps, since they are intelligent people they would also think; “it might be best that I change my use of ‘every’ so that it conforms with other people’s use, and reserve another term to say what I have said up to now with ‘every’”). In other words, in this scenario, Peter and Stephen do not defer to the linguistic community, they do not allow the conventions or use in the community in general to fix the reference of the term as they use it. If this is the case, the intuitively correct con-

<sup>263</sup> Ibid., p. 12, my italics.

clusion to draw is that Peter and Stephen do not use ‘every’ to refer to the same thing as the rest of us do.

The same thing holds for Art who thinks that it is possible to suffer from arthritis in the thighs. If his reaction when he is informed that experts in the field say that arthritis is a condition of the joints only, is, as we might expect, to say roughly “well, in that case I guess I was mistaken about what arthritis is and that it is not arthritis I have in my thighs but something else”, then we should draw Burge’s conclusion: Art used ‘arthritis’ to refer to arthritis, the condition that the rest of us and the medical experts call ‘arthritis’. But on the other hand, Art’s response could be something like; “oh, do they use the term in that way: I use it for any rheumatoid condition”. In that case it is not at all as obvious that we should say that Art’s utterance of “I have arthritis is my thigh” is false.

Perhaps it is hard to imagine someone reacting like Art in the latter case, because for many terms, of which ‘arthritis’ is one, deference to the community’s or the experts’ use is deeply entrenched in our thinking. It is less entrenched for other terms. Imagine that someone convinces you that as people in general use the word ‘chair’, the word refers to ears. It would for sure be hard to believe such a thing, but we are now assuming that you are convinced that it is the case. What would you say, (1) or (2)?

(1) Oh, in that case I was mistaken about the nature of chairs, I thought they were things to sit on, not ears. I guess that most of my statements and beliefs about chairs have been false.

(2) Oh, I use the word ‘chair’ to talk about things we sit on (or at least I have used it so up to now, maybe I should change my use). As I have used the term it was indeed correct to say things like “some chairs have legs” (even though it is obviously false to say “some ears have legs”).

The reactions in (1) are analogous to the standard response about ‘arthritis’ and to Peter and Stephen’s responses about ‘every’. Now, as regards the example we are considering now, it is obvious that we would respond in line with (2). We would not be willing to say that basically all statements which we have used the term ‘chair’ to make (and the beliefs we have expressed) are false and indeed absurd, in the way they would be if ‘chair’ in those statements had referred to ears. (“I think we should buy new chairs for our kitchen. Maybe the chairs we saw at IKEA

last week.”) Rather, the correct thing to say in such a scenario is that we have been using ‘chair’ with a meaning that deviates from the meaning it has in our linguistic community.

In some cases, then, we are not willing to defer to the community. To be clear, I am not arguing here that we are not in any way sensitive to other people’s use of the term in question also in those cases. Since we want to be able to communicate with people in our linguistic community – this is the whole point of having a language – we will tend to change our use of a word when we find out that it is deviant from the use of the word in society in general. The difference is that we are not willing to let the use of others determine what we have been referring to all along. We are only prepared to change our terminology, in order to be able to communicate with others.

The conclusion to draw from this is that the reference of a term as a speaker uses it, is determined by the use of experts or the linguistic community, *only* in case the speaker is willing to let the experts or community do that job. Actually, this conclusion might be something Williamson is ready to accept. Remember the quote above, where he said that individualism is wrong “because it ignores the way in which individual speakers defer to the linguistic community as a whole. They use a word as a word of a public language, *allowing its reference in their mouths to be fixed by its use over the whole community.*”

We can also describe our conclusion in the terminology we introduced in the discussion about causal theories of reference. We can say that, even if we happen to think that arthritis can be had in the thighs, we see it as an epistemic possibility that arthritis is a condition of the joints only. Our concept of arthritis is neutral between these two possibilities. But we do not see it as an epistemic possibility that all chairs are ears. Our concept of chairs is not neutral between chairs being things to sit on or bodily organs we hear with!

### 7.3.3 *Upshot for the meaning of moral terms*

Is it reasonable to say that moral absolutists (or relativists) can be mistaken about the nature of moral properties in the way that Art is about arthritis in Burge’s example? This depends on whether they are willing to let the use of moral terms in their linguistic community determine the reference of the terms as they use them, like Art is about ‘arthritis’, or if they react more like we do about the scenario involving the term ‘chair’ above.

I think the latter is true for most absolutists and relativists. Die-hard absolutists would not say: “Well, if it is indeed correct that most people use the term ‘morally wrong’ to refer to relative properties, then I have been wrong about the nature of moral properties”. They are not willing to let other people’s use of these terms determine what they are and have been referring to by the term. Rather, they would say: “I understand that others might use terms like ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’ differently than I do. But as I use the terms, they apply to absolute properties, not to relative ones. The beliefs I have and express when I use these words is about absolute moral properties. I cannot see that anything but absolute properties could count as moral properties.” (Perhaps they would be prepared to change their terminology, however. But that, as I said above, says nothing about what they refer to before (or unless) such a change in terminology actually occurs.)

The same holds, I think, for moral relativists. It is unlikely that relativists like Harman and Dreier would say: “Well, if it is true that most people use the term ‘morally wrong’ to refer only to absolute properties, then I was wrong about the nature of moral properties. In that case relative properties cannot count as moral properties.” We have indeed seen that they think that moral properties can be relative properties *even though most people have absolutist linguistic intentions*.

Even though I think that this is true, we can notice that the point I wish to make here – that social externalism cannot help answer the challenge from opposite intuitions – requires less than I have argued for this far. In the scenarios above, as in the one with the word ‘chair’, an individual speaker reacts to the fact that her use of a word deviates from the use in the rest of her linguistic community. Some people are probably reluctant to accept my conclusions about such cases. But we can modify the ‘chair’ scenario as follows. Suppose that about half of the people in your society use the term ‘chair’ to refer to ears (for some reason the difference in use has escaped you). In this case it is even more obvious than in the original scenario that we would not react by saying: “In that case I have been mistaken about the nature of chairs – chairs, then, are ears”. We would rather say something like: “In that case they use ‘chair’ to refer to something else than I do – I use it to refer to things to sit on”.

Such a scenario is more like the *actual* situation we have with diverse intuitions about the nature of moral properties. Neither moral die-hard absolutists nor relativists are alone as individual speakers in having the intuitions or dispositions they have. It is true that we don’t know the

actual exact size of the different groups; but this doesn't matter, since it is plausible to think that they both constitute rather large groups. So the relevant test is what they would say about a scenario like this: Suppose that a large group of people in our society use 'morally right' to refer to absolute properties and another large group use it refer to relative properties. We can be pretty certain that most absolutists and relativists are not willing to think: "In that case I have been mistaken about the nature of moral properties – they are after all relative/absolute properties". In other words, they would not be ready to accept the other group as experts in the relevant sense here. Rather they would say something like: "This does not change my view on the nature of moral properties – I still think that moral properties cannot be something else than absolute moral properties/I still think that moral properties can be relative". So absolutists and relativists are not ready to defer to each other in this matter.

Consequently, social externalism cannot be used to clear away the challenge from opposite intuitions. People (at least many) do not allow the dispositions to use moral terms of other people in their linguistic community to decide whether moral properties are relative or absolute. This means that the only way to use a social externalist semantic theory to ground standard relativism would be to construe it as a radically revisionist analysis. That is, to let the use of moral terms of a subgroup of speakers in the linguistic community determine what the correct analysis of moral judgements is, even though other speakers in that community are not ready to accept that analysis as giving a correct picture of moral properties, and are not willing to accept the subgroup's use as a guide to the correct analysis.

#### 7.4 CONCLUSION

The challenge from opposite intuitions remains unanswered. If we are after a non-revisionist analysis of moral terms, then we have to let our analysis take account of how people are disposed to use the terms. For the terms about which we intuitively think that semantic externalism holds, we do that because we are willing to let external matters trump our own understanding of the referent. It is true that *some* people are willing to let the fact of whether it is relative or absolute properties that cause our moral experiences and judgements determine whether moral properties are relative or absolute. But other people – die-hard absolutists – are not. I have also argued that, plausibly, neither of these groups



of people is ready to defer to the usage of moral terms in society at large, so that external matters about the usage of moral terms in the other group could trump their own understanding of what can and cannot count as moral properties.

# Chapter 8

## Analysis Pluralism

### 8.1 INTRODUCTION

In the last two chapters I have argued that different people require different things (are disposed to think that different things have to hold) for an act to be morally right or wrong. *Die-hard absolutists* require that the act has an absolute moral property. *Modest absolutists* think that morally right actions have an absolute moral property but, contrary to die-hard absolutists, they think that if there are no absolute properties of the relevant kind, then moral properties are relative. *Modest relativists* say that if there were absolute properties of a certain kind, then these would be the moral properties; but since there are no such absolute moral properties, moral properties are relative. The modest relativist requirement is structurally identical to the modest absolutist requirement; what differs is their view on the ontological question of whether there are any absolute properties of the relevant kind.<sup>264</sup> Perhaps, but this is not something I have argued for, there are also *die-hard relativists*;

<sup>264</sup> Perhaps, standard relativists may also say that if there are absolute properties of a certain kind, both these and the relative properties count as moral properties. There are also different possible reactions to the scenario where absolute properties of the relevant kind do not exist. Firstly, relativists might say that moral terms refer only to the relative properties, since they refer to the properties we are causally connected to. Or they may say that both the absolute properties in question and the relative properties count as moral properties, but that only properties of one of the kinds exist.

relativists who hold that nothing but relative properties could count as moral properties.

In my discussion I have focused on die-hard absolutists and argued that their existence is a problem for standard relativism. Or at least, this is so if we use the traditional methodological approach to analysing moral judgements: that is, if we want an analysis that is non-revisionist in the sense that it does not conflict with what some people are and are not disposed to classify as moral properties. As die-hard absolutists are disposed to use moral terms, these refer (only) to absolute moral properties; that is, an absolutist analysis holds for their judgements. I have also argued that there is a potential problem for absolutists. First, if there are die-hard relativists, they are disposed to use moral terms so that these refer only to relative moral properties. Second, even if there are no die-hard relativists, modest absolutists and relativists pose a potential problem for absolutism. Which analysis holds for their moral judgements, depends on which scenario we take to be a correct description of the world. If there are absolute facts of the kind that they are ready to classify as absolute moral properties, then they refer to absolute moral properties and an absolutist analysis holds for their judgements. If this is the case, an absolutist analysis holds for everyone's moral judgements. If, on the other hand, there are no absolute properties that the modest relativists or absolutists are ready to classify as moral properties, then a standard relativist analysis holds for their moral judgements. If absolutism is to be defended as a general theory, then, there has to be absolute properties and facts that standard relativists are ready to classify as moral properties. Since this might seem improbable, there is a real threat to absolutism as well (even assuming that there are no die-hard relativists). In this chapter I want to investigate what further conclusions to draw if both standard relativism and absolutism are in trouble in this way.

One consequence would be that *every* cognitivist analysis of moral judgements is in trouble, since the standard relativist and the absolutist analyses of moral judgements together exhaust the possible general analyses: either moral properties are relative or they are absolute. This is a negative thesis – certain theories do not hold.

Does it imply a positive thesis? As long as we use an intuition-based view of analysis, and as long as we assume that cognitivism is right, what it suggests is that we should reject the single analysis assumption – the presupposition in metaethics that moral judgements should be analysed in the same way *no matter who makes them*. Instead we should accept

analysis pluralism – when we make moral judgements, some of us refer to absolute moral properties and others to relative moral properties.

We should note that in one sense, analysis pluralism seems to be the consequence even if there are no die-hard relativists and there are absolute properties that modest absolutists and relativists acknowledge as moral properties. Even if, in that case, an absolutist analysis holds for everyone's moral statements, there are two different kinds of absolutist analyses. The absolutist analysis that holds for moral judgements made by die-hard relativists' holds solely by virtue of their dispositions; so if there were no absolute moral properties, an error-theory would hold for them. The absolutist analysis that holds for modest absolutists and relativists, holds partly because of how the world turns out to be; their moral judgements are analysed so that they would be true even if there were no absolute moral properties.

In this chapter I will argue that analysis pluralism can be spelled out and sustained as a coherent and plausible position. I argue for analysis pluralism on the grounds that an absolutist analysis holds for some people's moral judgements, while a relativist or non-absolutist analysis holds for judgements made by others. But there can also be differences along other dimensions. It might, for example, be that a non-naturalist analysis holds for some speaker's moral judgements while a naturalist analysis holds for others. This is not something I argue for here however – the focus is on the relativism vs. absolutism aspect of our moral concepts.

Analysis pluralism is a thesis strictly about what moral judgements are about. It is not an ontological thesis, since it does not take a stand on whether the properties moral judgements are about exist or not. It might be worth noting, however, that analysis pluralism potentially involves an interesting position regarding this matter – a partial error-theory. Some people's moral judgements are about absolute moral facts, and if such facts don't exist, then all of their positive moral judgements are false. Other people's moral judgements might still be true, though. Since it is possible that different absolutists refer to different sorts of absolute properties, e.g. non-natural and natural properties respectively, it is also possible that some absolutists' moral judgements can be true while others' cannot. I will not discuss this matter further here, however.

As noted, the route to analysis pluralism seems to rest on two assumptions; the intuition-based view of analysis and cognitivism. These can be questioned. First, it might be thought that the analysis pluralist conclusion constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* against the intui-

tion-based view of analysis. If this methodology cannot deliver a uniform analysis of moral judgements, then we should give it up. In section 8.2 through 8.4 I discuss objections to analysis pluralism that can be understood in this way and argue that they fail. Second, it might be argued that, if we do not give up this methodology, the real conclusion to draw is that cognitivism fails: if no single cognitivist analysis can account for moral judgements, non-cognitivism can. So analysis pluralism really collapses into non-cognitivism. I discuss and reject objections to this effect in section 8.5. I end the chapter, in 8.6, by pointing to the ability of analysis pluralism to explain metaethical disagreement.

## 8.2 THE SAME-BUT-DIFFERENT PROBLEM FOR ANALYSIS PLURALISM

According to analysis pluralism, moral judgements made by different people may be about different sorts of properties, for example absolute and relative properties respectively. Consequently, the same moral sentence uttered by different speakers can have different truth-values. So analysis pluralism is a form of speaker relativism. It is *not* a form of standard speaker relativism, however, since it does not say that the truth-value is relative to the speakers' moralities (although this might be so for some speakers' moral judgements).

In this section I want to point to a predicament for every form of moral truth-value relativism which might seem to be problematic for analysis pluralism in a way it is not for standard relativism. Let me first describe the predicament for standard relativists and how they can handle it.

According to some forms of standard relativism the contents of moral judgements depend on the morality of the one who makes the judgements. Moral terms have different referents depending on who uses them. This seems to have the following consequence. Imagine two people with relevantly different moralities; say, a utilitarian and a Kantian. They are such that moral terms have different referents when they use them respectively. This means that the utilitarian cannot accurately say, "the Kantian's utterance of "x is right" is a statement about (the) rightness (of x)". 'Rightness' in the mouth of the utilitarian, does not refer to the property referred to when the Kantian uses the term 'right'.

However, for standard relativists this problem can be handled. First they can be assessor relativists, in the manner of Kölbel or MacFarlane,

holding that everyone refers to the same property, but that this is a property that has different extensions relative to different contexts.

Second, the problem can be handled also on speaker relativism, if the position is formulated carefully enough. We saw one example of this in chapter 2. We said there that indexical relativism (the view that moral terms are indexicals) should not be modelled on simple indexical terms like ‘I’ and ‘here’, since this gives the wrong result for moral terms in intentional contexts. If P says “Q believes/says that it is here”, the referent of ‘here’ depends on the location of P, not that of Q. By contrast, a plausible speaker relativism has to imply that, if P says “Q believes/says that x is morally right”, then the referent of ‘morally right’ depends on the morality of Q. But there are other, more “complex”, indexical expressions that speaker relativism can be modelled on. One example we used in chapter 2 was ‘local’. In a sentence like “this is a local bar”, at least sometimes ‘local’ refers to the property of being located in an area close to the speaker. When put in an intentional context it does not (always) work like simple indexicals however:

(1) Niklas thinks/says that Majornas krog is a local pub.

At least on one natural reading, (1) ascribes to Niklas the belief/statement that Majornas krog is a pub that lies close to him (not close to the speaker or believer of (1)). Now we can also consider:

(2) Niklas’s belief/statement is a belief/statement about (the) localness (of pubs).

In a sense, the grammatical surface structure of the expression ‘belief/statement about localness’ in (2) is misleading. The expression does not refer to beliefs or statements that are *about* something special, statements that have a certain content. It refers to statements with a certain character. Moral speaker relativists can claim that this holds for ‘statement about rightness’ as well.

The fact that standard relativists can hold that statements about rightness have a character in common makes it possible for them to say that it is this character that is referred to when we say, “that is a statement about rightness”. This means that there is no “same-but-different problem” for standard relativists: they can say that what makes some judgments with *different* truth-conditions count as the *same* moral judgment, is that they have a common character. But according to analysis

pluralism, judgements about rightness made by different speakers do not have a common character. Different analyses of moral judgements hold for moral judgements made by different speakers.

The following analogy suggests that for this reason there is indeed a pressing same-but-different problem for analysis pluralism. Suppose we find that there are two groups (in our otherwise quite uniform linguistic community) in which the term ‘chair’ is used very differently. In one group, the word is used just about chairs, and in the other it is used so as to apply to human ears. You and I belong, I suspect, to the first group. In such a situation we would say that the word ‘chair’ refers to different things when different speakers use it. And we would also say that the others don’t use the term to make *judgements about chairs* – they use it to talk about ears. (And they would say corresponding things about us). This means that we would not think of the situation as one where analysis pluralism about *judgements about chairs* holds.

So this seems to be what we should say if I have been correct about moral terms like ‘moral rightness’ as well. If one group uses the term to refer to absolute properties and the other group uses it to refer to relative properties, members of neither group should say that members of the other group use the term to make judgements about rightness (or more generally, moral judgements). So it seems that analysis pluralism about judgements about moral rightness (or moral judgements) is not a viable alternative. Members of each group should say: “They use terms like ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’ to say other things than we do; only we use the terms to make moral judgements”. This suggests that, if we accept the conclusion from the previous two chapters – i.e. that expressions like ‘morally wrong’ should be analysed differently when different speakers use them – then we should say that when some speakers use the expression they don’t use it to make moral claims. (Who you should say does and does not use it to make moral claims depends on which group of speakers you belong to.) Instead of analysis pluralism about moral judgements we have a position we might call “exclusive analysis monism”: all moral judgements should be analysed in the same way, not because all judgements that intuitively are moral judgements should be analysed the same way, but because all judgements that are not to be analysed in one specific way are excluded from being moral judgements.

But exclusive analysis monism is also problematic: it maintains the single analysis assumption only because it construes the concept of moral judgements too exclusively. Whichever group of speakers one excludes – saying that those speakers do not make moral judgements –

the result is that speakers who we intuitively think of as making moral judgements are excluded. In this way this view goes against how we actually ascribe moral judgements, in a way that construes the concept of moral judgement in a counterintuitively narrow way. When we attribute moral beliefs to people, we do so irrespectively of their metaethical views. We don't say that someone fails to master the concepts of rightness and wrongness because they have what we take to be false intuitions or beliefs about the nature of rightness and wrongness.

If neither analysis pluralism nor exclusive monism is feasible, we seem to have a *reductio ad absurdum* against my conclusion in the previous chapters – that different analyses hold for moral judgements made by different speakers. And if this conclusion follows from the intuition-based view of analysis, as I have argued, it is a *reductio* against using this methodology. We should choose another methodological approach. This will involve construing what I have called a revisionist analysis, an analysis that conflicts with what (some) people are ready to acknowledge as moral rightness and wrongness; only this way can we reach the result that *the same* analysis holds for all (or most) judgements that we intuitively include in the class of for example judgements about moral rightness.

I think that it is indeed true that if we want to give one analysis of all intuitive moral judgements, then we have to opt for a revisionist analysis in this sense. And giving such analyses is a fully legitimate enterprise, as long as it is made clear that it is not supposed to be analyses that are consistent with what everyone is ready to classify as, for example moral rightness. What I will argue in what follows, however, is that we need not give up the intuition-based view of analysis: analysis pluralism can handle the same-but-different problem set out above.

### 8.3 SOLVING THE PROBLEM AND EXPLICATING ANALYSIS PLURALISM

#### 8.3.1 *A structure of a solution*

In chapter 2 I presented and discussed the view that Tresan calls “de dicto internalism”. It has been thought that in order to accommodate the idea that moral judgements necessarily motivate (at least in normal circumstances), cognitivists have to argue that moral judgements have a special content or character by virtue of which this connection to motivation holds. De dicto internalism is the idea that it can be true that it



necessarily holds that moral beliefs motivate even though they don't have such a special content or character. It is not the content or character of moral judgements which guarantees the necessary connection. The necessity comes from the concept of moral judgements: for something to count as a moral judgement it has to be accompanied by motivation. What makes this possible is the idea that something is a moral judgement, or a moral belief, not just by virtue of the meaning it has, or what it is about. Of two beliefs with the same meaning one can be a moral belief and the other is not: having a certain content (or character) is not *sufficient* for being a moral judgement. The general trick, then, is to disconnect what makes something count as a moral judgement from what meaning it has.

This trick can be taken one step further than *de dicto* internalism requires. We can say that having a certain content (or character) is neither sufficient nor *necessary* to be a moral judgement. What makes something a moral judgement are other things than the meaning, for example that it is (in normal circumstances) necessarily accompanied by motivation. If this is so – if what makes a judgement belong to the class of moral judgements are other things than the meaning of the judgement – it opens up for the possibility that different members of this class have different meaning. It opens up for the possibility of analysis pluralism.

This involves a similar manoeuvre as the one we saw that indexical relativists can use. Analysis pluralism has to involve the claim that the grammatical surface form of expressions like 'statements about moral rightness' is in a sense misleading. This expression does not pick out statements on basis of their content (what they are about). Neither does it refer to statements by virtue of their character (as indexical relativists can say) or their meaning generally. Statements about moral rightness have something else in common than their meaning.

The idea sketched in this subsection – that what unites moral judgements are other things than their meaning – is only a structure of an answer to the problem. We have to substantiate and make plausible the idea.

### 8.3.2 *Characteristics of moral judgements*

In the previous subsection I suggested that the following might be the case:

*Negative thesis about the class of moral judgements:* What makes something a moral judgement (or more specifically, a judgement about moral rightness etc.) is not its meaning.

One might think that to defend this negative thesis I have to argue about some set of characteristics that it can fill the role of x:

*Positive thesis about the class of moral judgements:* What makes something a moral judgement (or more specifically, a judgement about moral rightness etc.) is that it is x. X is such that judgements with different meaning can be x. Specifically, both judgements about absolute and relative properties can be x.

It is outside the possible scope of this text to give a comprehensive answer to the question of what x is, that is, the question of what makes something a moral judgement. In what follows I will point to some characteristics of the way we classify judgements as being moral judgements that are central to my argument. After that, in the next subsection, I will argue that what I have said is enough to argue that both judgements about relative and about absolute moral properties can count as moral judgements.

We can begin by noticing that to a large extent we seem to agree about which of the discussions we are involved in that concern moral questions and in our identifications of moral statements among other sorts of statements. We seem to intuitively pick out roughly the same judgements in our everyday life as being moral judgements.

This is also something that is more or less taken for granted in metaethics, and moral philosophy at large. In one sense, of course, philosophers do not agree about which the moral judgements are; we disagree about whether they express beliefs or not (or, if they do, beliefs with what content), we disagree about whether any of them are true, we disagree about how they are connected to motivation and rationality etc etc. But the discussion presupposes that even though we do not agree about how moral judgements are to be described in these terms, we do have (roughly) the same class of judgements in mind – we do indeed think that metaethical disagreement is disagreement about the nature of that class of judgements we are familiar with and have in mind. In other words, when we discuss the nature of moral judgements we assume that we have an understanding of which judgements we are discussing, and take it that we disagree about that class of judgements. And as I said

above, it seems reasonable to think that this is roughly right; we do point out roughly the same judgements and questions and discussions in our everyday life as being moral judgements, questions and discussions. Let me call this class of judgements *the intuitive (everyday) class of moral judgements*.

So we pick out roughly the same judgements as moral judgements in our everyday discussions and take it that moral judgements are judgements *like that*. But when we are to describe what it is to be *like that*, what it is that characterises judgements that are *like that*, we quickly end up in philosophical disagreement. Indeed, I find it doubtful that there is one description of what characterises moral judgements that fits every person's way of classifying certain judgements as moral judgements. A more realistic picture, I think, is that different people's concepts of moral judgements differ in certain respects from one another, and that what they have in common might be just that they pick out the intuitive everyday class of moral judgements as being moral judgements. Let me explain.

We might hope to capture at least part of the answer to what it is to be a moral judgement through the connection between moral judgements and motivation. As we saw in chapter 2, probably the most common view regarding this connection among philosophers today is conditional internalism, the view that moral judgements necessarily motivate in normal circumstances. As non-normal cases count for example cases where the person making the judgement is depressed or listless. As we have seen, *de dicto* internalism provides a means to argue that there can be such a connection even if this is not guaranteed by the meaning (content or character) of moral judgements or by the nature of the attitudes they express. Instead, the connection holds because of our concept of moral judgements. According to (conditional) *de dicto* internalism our concept of moral judgements is such that something counts as a moral judgement just in so far as it is accompanied by motivation in the believer or speaker, at least in normal cases. This suggests that the connection to motivation might be one thing that makes something count as a moral judgement.

There is one problem with this view, however. In chapter 2 I argued that one advantage of the *de dicto* approach to accounting for the connection between moral judgements and motivation, is that it admits of the possibility to say that different people have somewhat different concepts of moral judgements regarding how strong the connection to motivation is. Not all people are conditional internalists. Some people, non-condi-

tional motivational internalists, intuitively think that a judgement that is not accompanied by motivation can never be a moral judgement. While conditional internalists think that it suffices to be disposed to be motivated under certain circumstances, non-conditional internalists think that the disposition has to be manifest. Yet others are willing to say that judgements can count as moral judgements even if they are not (or were not) accompanied by motivation even in normal circumstances. These are motivational externalists. Traditionally it is thought that we have to say that at most one of these theories truly describe the nature of the connection between moral judgements and motivation. If this is so, the intuitions that go against the true theory have to be explained away. But the *de dicto* approach to moral motivation gives us the possibility to say that people who have different intuitions here simply have somewhat different concepts of moral judgements: different in that these concepts give rise to differently strong connections between moral judgements and motivation.

I find this a very appealing consequence of (or possibility given by) the *de dicto* approach. We – everyone – can agree that being accompanied by motivation is a salient feature of moral judgements. As we have noticed, it is central for moral practice in terms of the evolutionary and social function of moral judgements – if we had not tended to be motivated in accordance with our moral judgements then having such judgements could not have served to facilitate cooperation in light of conflicting interests. And being followed by motivation is indeed a striking feature of practically all real-life moral judgements we encounter – the intuitive everyday class of moral judgements. But this gives us no reason to expect that everyone ties moral judgements to motivation in the same way. It is not a reason to think that everyone holds that being accompanied by motivation in a certain way is necessary for being a moral judgement. Why expect that people’s concepts of moral judgements are exactly alike in this respect? Given the way that people react to amoralist-type examples, it seems reasonable to say that according the concept of moral judgements that most of us have, motivation is necessarily connected to moral judgements under certain conditions. According to other people’s concepts, however, there is either an unconditional necessary connection, or no necessary connection to motivation at all.<sup>265</sup>

<sup>265</sup> This holds, of course, only given that we are after the *intuitive* meaning of ‘moral judgement’ or the *intuitive* concept of moral judgement; that is, if we ask for an analysis

If I am correct that people have somewhat different concepts of moral judgements, concepts that to a certain extent count different judgements as being moral judgements, then we can give up on finding a correct account of *our* concept of moral judgements. But I think it is still possible to identify a core class of judgements that we do not question whether they are moral judgements, even though we do disagree about how this class can be extended. As we have noted, the absolute majority of the judgements in our everyday life that pass for moral judgements are accompanied by at least some motivation in the judge. Discussing Stocker's examples of people who are not motivated in accordance with their moral judgements, Dreier puts this point as follows:

What Stocker wants to describe is a radically disaffected person, one lacking altogether the motivation associated with the moral judgment. Thus, he characterizes his politician as overcome by "tiredness," "accidie," "despair." In such extreme forms, these conative states are, it seems to me, highly abnormal. We are to imagine a man who would not lift a finger, as it were, to achieve what he believes to be good – for if he would make even some minimal effort, then the relevant motivation is exposed.<sup>266</sup>

Even motivational externalists should agree that among the real, as opposed to merely hypothetical, cases of moral judgements, almost every one is accompanied by motivation in the speaker. These, then, are judgements that externalists as well as internalists of different sorts can agree are moral judgements.

Indeed, it is reasonable to suppose that it is (at least partly) because the exception cases are so uncommon that people can have so different views about the nature of the connection between moral judgements and motivation, and, as a consequence of this, different concepts of moral judgements in this respect. Suppose that unconditional internalists, conditional internalists and externalists picked out very different subclasses of the various judgements we actually encounter as being moral judgements. Then we could expect large communicative difficulties and therefore a pressure towards conceptual convergence. But since people's different concepts of moral judgements pick out roughly the same judgements among the judgements that we actually encounter as moral judgements, there is no such pressure.

(or analyses) that is constrained by what people are ready to classify as moral judgements. The claim is that there is little reason to expect that a certain connection between moral judgements and motivation is such that everyone will be ready to intuitively agree to it.

<sup>266</sup> Dreier, 1990, p. 12.

I think similar things hold for other characteristics of moral judgements. It is common in metaethics to think that there are limitations on the content of moral judgements; what can a moral judgement be about? Some of these limitations might be uncontroversial and shared by everyone. Someone who sees no problem in applying the term ‘morally wrong’ to actions she thinks are morally right probably doesn’t use that term to make moral judgements. And we would hardly say that someone who never uses ‘morally right’ about actions but only about, say, stones, uses the term to make moral judgements (at least not judgements about moral rightness).<sup>267</sup>

There are other, more controversial, constraints regarding what content a principle or rule can have if it is to count as a moral principle, however. One example of constraints of this kind is stressed by Philippa Foot<sup>268</sup> and many others have accepted it<sup>269</sup>. Judgements that concern *moral* principles and rules must, according to these writers, have a social concern. They should somehow be concerned with contributing to the well-being of other people. This might be thought to be what (or one of the things that) demarcates moral reasons from for example reasons of self-interest; the former has to take account of the interests of other people. I think that this is certainly in general true about the moral judgements we encounter in our everyday lives. (Perhaps this has an explanation in the evolutionary and social function of moral judgements: if in forming our moral judgements we took account only of our own interest, these judgements would not be able to serve as effectively as a basis for facilitating cooperation.) But I also think that different people may have somewhat different concepts of moral judgements regarding the “content constraints”. Some speakers are, I think, ready to accept that an entirely egoistic principle might count as a *moral* principle or even that people might have strange *moral* views according to which it is morally right to counteract rather than promote the well-being of other people. Others will say that this disqualifies these principles from being *moral* principles.<sup>270</sup> But here, like in the internalism/externalism case, it seems that such disagreements (which I think is a reason to say that people have different concepts of moral judgements) do not prevent

<sup>267</sup> Cf. Tersman, 2006, p. 111.

<sup>268</sup> Foot, 1958.

<sup>269</sup> See e.g. Smith, 1994, p. 40, Dreier, 1990, p. 24.

<sup>270</sup> Cf. Nichols, 2004, pp. 6-7. Nichols refers to empirical evidence that different people draw the line between moral and conventional rules at different places.

us from agreeing about a core class of moral judgements. Almost all of the moral judgements we encounter do in fact have a social concern of some sort, so we can all agree that these are moral judgements.

Other characteristics might be more or less the same according to everyone's concept of moral judgements. One such feature is the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties: if two actions are exactly alike in every natural property, then they must also have exactly the same moral properties. Under such circumstances it cannot be that one of the actions is morally right and the other morally wrong. The supervenience of moral properties on natural properties can be seen as a part of our concept(s) of moral judgements: for someone to count as making moral judgements with expressions like "x is morally right" she must not be disposed to apply the term 'morally right' to one but not the other of two actions that she takes to be exactly alike in other respects. If she does, she does not express a *moral* concept with the term, she does not use it to make *moral* judgements.

No doubt, the characteristics I have brought up are insufficient to pinpoint what is special about moral judgements. And as I said above, I will not take on the task of doing so here. The point of the discussion has been the following. Even though it seems that different speakers have concepts of moral judgements that diverge on some points (and are the same on others) we can speak of a class of judgements that all of us identify as being moral judgements. So, although according to some people's concepts of moral judgements there is no necessary connection between moral judgements and motivation and moral judgements are not necessarily concerned with the well-being of others, even these people can admit that the main bulk of moral judgements that we in fact encounter are in fact accompanied by motivation and are concerned with the well-being of others. Even though we have been unable to specify a set of characteristics that make us all see these as moral judgements, we know that we all see these standard examples as being moral judgements. I will now argue that we can use this conclusion in our argument for the idea that judgements with different meaning – e.g. judgements about absolute as well as judgements about relative properties – can count as *moral* judgements.

### 8.3.3 *Dispositions to classify judgements as moral judgements*

What I have said about a widely accepted core class of moral judgements seems to hold for both standard relativists and for absolutists. They both hold that at least *those judgements*, the large bulk of standard exam-

ples, are moral judgements, but they disagree about how to analyse them. Standard relativists and absolutists alike think of their respective views as views about that class of judgements. So they seem to agree to the following condition of when something is a moral judgement:

*Shared Intuitive Condition:* If J belongs to the intuitive everyday class of moral judgements then J is a moral judgement.

But standard relativists and absolutists also have other ideas about what makes something count as a moral judgement. Standard relativists accept:

*Standard Relativist Condition:* Moral judgements are about relative properties, so J is a moral judgement only if it ascribes a relative property.

And absolutists accept:

*Absolutist Condition:* Moral judgements are about absolute properties, so J is a moral judgement only if it ascribes an absolute property.

Both standard relativists and absolutists seem to accept two different conditions for when something is a moral judgement, then. They can do this since they think that all of the judgements that belong to the intuitive everyday class of moral judgements (those that satisfy the shared intuitive condition) are about relative and absolute properties respectively (they satisfy the specific relativist or absolutist condition). But it is possible to imagine scenarios where the shared intuitive condition comes in conflict with the other conditions. We can for example ask an absolutist to imagine the following scenario.

*Scenario 3.* Imagine that it turns out that many of the judgements in the intuitive everyday class of moral judgements – that is, the actual judgements we all single out as moral judgements – are not about absolute moral properties. When some people – perhaps around 50 percent of us – make such judgements, they refer to relative properties. These judgements are just like the rest of the judgements (those that are about absolute properties); there is no difference in how they are connected to motivation, or in how the



speakers argue for their judgements, or in which kinds of actions they judge to be morally right or wrong (that differs in the same way in both groups) etc. That is, all the usual candidates for characteristics of moral judgements are had to the same extent by judgements made by speakers in both groups. The only difference is that speakers in the different groups have different strongly held metaethical convictions about the nature of moral judgements; this is what makes moral terms refer to different kinds of properties when they use it respectively.

The question to the absolutists is: would you say that these judgements that are about relative properties are moral judgements? Perhaps some absolutists think that the case is unrealistic: if the judgements in question have the usual characteristics of moral judgements, they might say, then they are about absolute moral properties. But that would be a rather unimaginative response. Surely we are able to imagine that it might turn out that we are wrong about what some people use a certain term to refer to; maybe we have missed something in their use of the term, or perhaps we have had a slightly false picture of what it is that determines the reference of terms in general. So, let us suppose that our absolutist agrees to do the imaginative exercise. She tries to imagine that it turns out that she is wrong about the content of some peoples putatively moral statements; it turns out that they refer to relative properties, even though their statements display all the features that normally make us classify them as moral judgements, whatever those are. What possible responses are there?

(1) In that case, it would turn out that half of those we thought of as making moral judgements, were not doing that. Those who refer to the relative properties do not make moral judgements, since something is a moral judgement only if it is about absolute properties.

(2) In that case, what turns out is that some moral judgements are not about absolute moral properties. Half of those who make moral judgements refer to relative properties.

I think that (2) is the more likely response here. We are confident that those judgements that we do classify as moral judgements in our everyday life actually are moral judgements (even though we are ready to ad-

mit that there can be some mistakes). This is the class of judgements that standard relativists as well as absolutists have in mind when they defend their views. So reasonably, if the analysis does not fit (all or most of) these judgements, one should admit that the theory is incorrect.

What I'm trying to show here is not, of course, that standard relativists and absolutists think that their own analyses are wrong. I argue that they are ready to say that under certain circumstances – which they think do not actually obtain – their analyses would be wrong. More specifically, and this is really quite trivial, both standard relativists and absolutists think that if their respective analyses *were* not a fitting analysis of the class of judgements we all identify as being moral judgements, then it *would* be mistaken. That is, even though standard relativists and absolutists have their respective theories about what moral judgements are about, their concepts of moral judgements are neutral between moral beliefs being about relative and absolute moral properties. This is what makes moral analysis pluralism possible: both judgements about relative properties and judgements about absolute properties can count as moral properties.

I don't want to push this point too hard, however. I think there might be a genuine tension here in our concept(s) of moral judgements. The most probable reaction from our absolutist above might be uncertainty and vacillation. Perhaps some absolutists are tempted to say that in one sense, moral relativists make moral judgements (since they think and behave just like everyone else who makes moral judgements, except for their metaethical convictions), but in another sense they don't make moral judgements (since they do not speak about absolute moral properties). If this is the case we have two different ways of classifying judgements as moral judgements (or one confused way). What analysis pluralism does, in that case, is to focus on the more inclusive classification. Partly, I think that this is where our strongest intuition is, but more crucially, I think that this is the most interesting and important of the two classifications. It construes the class of moral judgements in a way that makes it possible for us to see all of us as speaking moral language and as participating in the same moral practice.

#### 8.3.4 *The meaning of moral judgements and the meaning of 'moral judgement'*

Let me sum up the reasoning above and further explain how it connects to the arguments in previous chapters. To understand moral practice and our way of conceptualizing this, it is crucial to separate two differ-

ent things. First, there are the meanings of moral judgements and terms. To investigate this we ask under which conditions people are ready to classify acts as morally right acts, morally wrong acts, etc. Second, we have the meaning of the expression 'moral judgement' and more specifically expressions like 'judgement about moral rightness' and 'judgements that an action is morally wrong'. Here we look at what we are ready to classify as being such judgements. To make this distinction is to point to the possibility that what makes something a moral judgement might be something other than what gives it the meaning it has.

It is when we distinguish these two matters that we see that analysis pluralism is possible and plausible. In chapters 6 and 7 I argued that moral judgements have different meanings, or should be analysed differently, when different people use them, since different speakers are ready to classify acts as morally right and wrong under different circumstances. In this chapter I have argued that due to the meaning(s) of expressions such as 'judgement about moral rightness' and 'judgement about moral wrongness', the judgements with different meaning all count as judgements about moral rightness and wrongness. The content of moral judgements is underdetermined by the facts that make them count as moral judgements, whatever those are. The result is that moral terms and moral sentences can have different meaning when different people use them, and still be recognisably moral terms and moral sentences.

This puts us in a position to deal with the objection from the analogy between moral judgements and judgements about chairs. If a speaker uses the term 'chair' in another way than we do (for example to refer to ears) then she does not make judgements about chairs when she uses this term. By analogy it seemed we should be committed to this: if a speaker uses 'right' in a fundamentally different way than we do, then she does not make judgements about moral rightness when she uses this term. Now we can see why the analogy fails. Judgements about chairs are judgements about chairs only if they are about chairs. For moral judgements, on the other hand, something other than the content matters to whether they are *moral* judgements. Moral judgements are moral judgements irrespectively of whether they are about for example relative properties or about absolute properties, as long as they conform to the characteristics that make us classify them as moral statements. This, then, solves the same-but-different problem for analysis pluralism.

#### 8.4 OTHER OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

In this section I state some other potential problems with analysis pluralism and argue that they can be solved as well.

##### 8.4.1 *Explaining disagreement*

Analysis pluralism is a form of speaker relativism. It implies that the truth-values of moral sentences vary depending on who the speaker is. This means that this view can be objected to on the same ground as other forms of speaker relativism: it clashes with the intuitions most of us have that moral disputes – situations where one person says “x is right” and another says “x is not right” – are real disagreements. In such situations we think that both parties cannot be right at the same time; but speaker relativism implies that they can.

In chapter 4 I argued, however, that speaker relativists can answer this objection. We experience moral disputes as we typically experience disputes over absolute matters, because this has helped moral judgements serve their evolutionary function of furthering cooperation. Therefore, standard relativists can say, even if standard relativism is true we can expect us to have these intuitions.

We are now in a position to add an element to this explanation. The social function of moral discussion explains why we all have that absolutist intuition about disagreement. But it is compatible with this that for different people, the absolutist intuition has been connected with different strength to their views of the nature of moral properties. As I have argued in the previous two chapters, some people, such as Smith and Mackie, make a strong connection, while others, such as Dreier and Harman, do not see the absolute intuitions as that central. Even though they might have the intuition that moral disputes are disagreements in the absolutist sense, they think that there can be moral properties even if it turns out that there are no absolute moral properties. So, it is fully consistent with the analysis pluralist view I am defending – the view that some people’s moral judgements refer to absolute properties while moral judgements made by others refer to relative properties – that we all have the absolutist disagreement intuition.

##### 8.4.2 *Explaining the single analysis assumption*

There is one thing that the explanation of disagreement cannot account for, however. Some people do give up the thought that moral disputes are disagreements in the absolutist sense and become standard relativ-

ists or non-cognitivists instead – but they still hold on to the single analysis assumption. If it is true, as I have argued, that different analyses hold for moral judgements made by different people, why do philosophers (and others?) assume that all moral judgements should be analysed in the same way? Should we not have been able to see through this?

But perhaps the prevalence of the single analysis assumption is not so strange, even though it is mistaken. On the face of it, moral practice is a practice that seems to “keep together”: we interact in conversations with moral words without problem. It doesn’t *seem* like we speak past each other or that we misunderstand each other. So it seems quite natural that we suppose that it is a unified practice in the sense that everyone’s moral judgements should be analysed in the same way.

More specifically it seems that moral absolutists and relativists can engage in moral discussions with each other without (more than a usual amount of) misunderstanding. In moral discussions the relative or absolute nature of moral properties is not at issue – it is normative matters, over the rightness and wrongness of actions, that stand in focus. And relativists and absolutists seem to be able to – and indeed do – take the same standpoints in such matters. So people can participate in normative discussions and debates with each other even if they refer to different properties (absolute and relative properties respectively), since this will not affect what they say or think in normative moral matters and need not matter to how they behave in moral discussions. (Indeed, some of the things I have argued for may serve as explanations of why it need not matter. I have argued that both relativists and absolutists see moral disputes as we typically think of disagreements over absolute matters – it is only that die-hard absolutists have incorporated this in their moral concepts. I have also argued that it is consistent with absolutism that moral judgements are caused by emotions or motivational states and that they are necessarily connected to these; thus it is not strange, as it might seem, that also moral judgements made by people with absolutist moral concepts mirror their subjective emotions and motivational states.) This, then, would be an answer to why we make the single analysis assumption, even though it is false; people behave just the same in moral discussions, regardless of their metaethical convictions.

People do not behave the same in metaethical discussions however. This is what we have seen; some people are willing to accept relative properties as moral properties while other people are not. So they have different premises in their metaethical reasoning. This is the reason I have given to accept analysis pluralism. But why do metaethicists, who

are aware of these differences between people's metaethical convictions, still accept the single analysis assumption? The best explanation I can think of is the same as that above; the fact that people do behave the same in moral discussions makes it a reasonable *prima facie* assumption.

So we have an explanation of why we make the single analysis assumption. People do behave the same in normative moral debates, and what makes this possible is that their strong convictions about the absolute or relative nature of moral practice do not affect the way they behave in moral debates.

#### 8.4.3 *Does it make the question of relativism vs. absolutism unimportant?*

It might seem that one consequence of the reasoning in the previous subsection is that the discussion over relativism and absolutism is not a central issue when it comes to moral discourse. After all, the point of moral judgements is their use in normative moral discussions and thinking. So if the commitment to speaker relativism or absolutism is not something that affects how people behave in normative moral practice – how we behave in moral discussions – why would it be an interesting aspect in analysing moral judgements at all?

There are a few different things to say in response. First, I think it has at least *potential* relevance to normative moral thought and discussion. Die-hard absolutists are disposed to think that, if there are no absolute moral properties, then there are no moral properties at all. So if they actually came to believe that there are no such properties, they would reject every positive moral judgement, which would have implications for their normative moral discussions. The reason that we do not see this as an actual effect is, first, that almost all absolutists believe that there are absolute moral facts and, as I argued in 6.3.3, error-theorists forget their scepticism about their existence when they are in morally loaded situations.

Second, even if this is an unimportant distinction in normative ethics, the idea of whether moral terms refer to absolute or relative properties is something that metaethicists do take an interest in. And as long as we do that we have to attend to people's intuitions about the relative or absolute nature of moral properties; and doing this should make us conclude that some refer to absolute properties while others refer to relative properties. Or that is what I have argued anyway.

The third answer grants more to the objection under consideration. If we put the two first answers to one side for a moment, I think that we should recognise that there is something to the objection. Perhaps it points to something that can be considered an important aspect of meaning. Loosely stated, the idea would be that some aspect of people's use of a term matters to the meaning of the term (and the concept expressed), if and only if the aspect is significant to communication involving the term (or thoughts involving the concept). So if the relativist/absolutist aspect of our use of moral terms is not significant for moral communication and thinking, then the absolutist and relativist dispositions do not go into meaning.

If this is a reasonable idea about meaning, and if we think that the absolutist/relativist aspect of use is not significant, then it seems we have a tension between two different aspects of meaning. On the one hand we have this significance-to-communication criterion. On the other hand we have the aspect I have emphasized, connected to traditional philosophical methodology: what matters to the correct analysis of a certain concept is what things people are ready to recognise as being in the extension of the concept. The latter view makes people's strong absolutist and relativist dispositions relevant to the correct analysis of moral judgements, while the first doesn't.

What I want to emphasize here is that if we focus on the significance-to-communication criterion and therefore disregard the strong absolutist and relativist intuitions some people have, we will get what I have called a revisionist analysis of moral judgements. It will be an analysis that conflicts with what some people are ready to count as moral properties. This is not to say that it is a bad analysis, as long as it captures some other aspect of meaning. But neither is the possibility of giving such analyses a threat to analysis pluralism as a thesis about the correct non-revisionist analyses of moral judgements.<sup>271</sup>

## 8.5 ANALYSIS PLURALISM AND NON-COGNITIVISM

I have now argued that analysis pluralism is a coherent and plausible upshot of analysing moral judgements from an intuition-based method-

<sup>271</sup> It also possible that the tension between the different aspects of meaning, as well as the divergence in people's intuitions about what can count as a moral property, is part of the explanation of metaethical disagreement.

ology. This means that this methodology does not have to be abandoned – analysing moral judgements this way is one thing we can do, and the result is analysis pluralism. But there might be another worry. Analysis pluralism shares the following view with non-cognitivism: it is not having a certain content or character, or expressing a certain kind of belief, that makes something a moral statement; and it is not being a belief with a certain content or character that makes something a moral conviction. It may be argued that, in effect, this makes analysis pluralism collapse into a form of non-cognitivism. In the first subsection below I argue that this is not so, through answering three possible suggestions to the effect that non-cognitivism has the better explanation of the considerations behind analysis pluralism. In the subsection after that I make concessions to non-cognitivism: my arguments for analysis pluralism do not suffice to exclude non-cognitivism or certain non-cognitivist elements, but leave open such possibilities for further research.

#### 8.5.1 *Non-cognitivist objections*

(i) As we saw in chapter 3, one of the main arguments for non-cognitivism is that among the people we want to say use terms like ‘right’, ‘wrong’, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to make moral statements, there is a significant difference in which actions and things they apply these terms to. That, for example, is how Hare sets up his famous example where missionaries and cannibals apply these words to different things.<sup>272</sup> Hare concludes that insofar as the moral terms have descriptive meaning, the descriptive meaning is different in the different groups. So it must be something other than their descriptive meaning that makes them moral statements: non-cognitivists say that it is that they express something other than beliefs.

Folke Tersman has formulated the probably most elaborated argument of this kind. Tersman focuses on the question of under which conditions it is plausible to attribute moral convictions to someone. He argues for something he calls “the latitude idea”. Tersman notes that since moral realism implies absolutism, it implies that we could correctly translate someone else’s sentence with our own moral sentence only if that sentence had the same cognitive content as ours. But this is not plausible for moral expressions. Here we allow for more latitude: “according to the latitude idea, we should require less agreement, and

<sup>272</sup> Hare, 1952, p. 148.



allow for more error and idiosyncratic views in the case of ethics as compared with other subject matters.”<sup>273</sup> It is not cognitive content that matters to whether we do or should attribute a moral conviction to someone. When it comes to moral sentences we do and should allow sentences with different cognitive content as translations of each other (even though there are some constraints on the cognitive content of moral statements, such as Foot’s idea, mentioned above, that moral requirements concern people’s well-being in some way). Instead, Tersman argues, the correct constraint on when to attribute moral convictions (except for the well-being kind of constraints just mentioned) has to do with motivation. We should attribute a moral conviction that it is morally right to do X to people only if they “(in general) have some tendency or motivation to perform X”.<sup>274</sup> Tersman takes this to suggest that we should accept some form of non-cognitivism (even though he does not take on the task of developing which form this would be).<sup>275</sup>

So far, this is inconclusive as an argument for non-cognitivism. As we saw in chapter 3, standard relativists can agree that the argument shows that moral convictions are not beliefs with a special cognitive *content*, but still maintain that they are beliefs – beliefs with a certain (motivational) character. So the argument by itself cannot be used by non-cognitivists to rule out standard relativism. Tersman notes this, and says that, even though he thinks that some form of non-cognitivism is the best explanation of the latitude-idea in the end, his main thesis is that the considerations about attribution of moral judgements speak against moral realism and that this is consistent with some form of relativism.<sup>276</sup>

But here, it seems, non-cognitivists could appeal to the reasoning underlying analysis pluralism. What I have argued is that standard rela-

<sup>273</sup> Tersman, 2006, p. 111.

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>276</sup> At one place Tersman gives, in one sentence, an argument against standard relativism; “by committing themselves to an idea about the nature of a moral disagreement that is neither prompted by nor justifiable in terms of the idea that moral judgments consist of beliefs, this would leave them with little reason for remaining cognitivists.” (*Ibid.*, p. 106) Tersman acknowledges, however, that this is short of being a developed objection to standard relativism in a footnote attached to the comment: “Of course, there are other reasons for being a cognitivist. [...] notice that the main aim of this book to [sic!] is to explore whether moral disagreement undermines realism. Whether it also undermines relativist forms of cognitivism is an issue of secondary importance.” (Tersman, 2006, p. 106, fn. 33).

tivism is not true as an analysis of everyone's moral judgements. So, non-cognitivists can say, since judgements about moral rightness do not have in common that they are beliefs with the same content *nor that they are beliefs with the same character*, the only remaining alternative is that what they have in common is that they are something other than beliefs, such as some desire-like attitudes. Or, expressed in terms of moral statements: if what makes a statement a moral statement is not that it expresses a certain kind of belief, it must be that it expresses something else, such as desires.

*Reply.* We should agree with Tersman that the latitude-idea in itself does not rule out standard relativism, and we should extend this to hold for analysis pluralism as well. The fact that we do not attribute moral judgments on the ground of their cognitive content can be fully accommodated by the view that moral convictions are beliefs but that two beliefs with different content and character can count as the same moral conviction (and that moral statements are expressions of beliefs but that two statements can express beliefs with different content and character and still be the same moral statement). So the latitude-idea does not suggest non-cognitivism rather than cognitivist analysis pluralism. And it gives us no reason to think that the latter collapses into the former.

(ii) It might also be thought that non-cognitivists can refer to the distinction between primary and secondary functions of moral statements in this context. Some non-cognitivists acknowledge that it makes good sense to hold that moral statements can express beliefs. It is just that doing so cannot be their primary function; their primary function is to express some non-cognitive attitude.<sup>277</sup> One way of cashing out the distinction between primary and secondary functions is in terms of what makes something a moral statement. It is the primary function of moral statements to express desires if this is what they express in virtue of the facts that make them *moral* statements.<sup>278</sup> Using this idea, what Hare's scenario shows, is that even if moral judgements made by the cannibals and missionaries express beliefs, this is not their primary function. What makes their judgements *moral* judgements is not facts that make them express certain beliefs; so their primary function must be something else. And this seems to be the consequence of analysis pluralism as

<sup>277</sup> See e.g. Hare, 1952, pp. 121-26.

<sup>278</sup> Cf. Tersman, 2006, p. 10. It should be noted that Tersman does not use this idea to make the argument I discuss.

well; the facts that make some judgements moral judgements are not facts by virtue of which a certain cognitive analysis holds for them. So their primary function must be to express desires rather than beliefs. Thus, analysis pluralism really amounts to non-cognitivism.

*Reply.* The objection simply assumes that the facts which make moral judgements *moral* judgements are facts that make them express something. This assumption is questioned by analysis pluralism (and *de dicto* internalism). What these ideas point to is exactly the possibility that that which holds together the class of moral judgements is not that they express something special. They provide a way of maintaining that moral judgements are beliefs, even though it might hold necessarily that moral judgements are accompanied by motivation and emotions.

(iii) It might be thought that this response does not take the connection between meaning and communication seriously enough. Linguistic meaning or content, it seems, is that which is communicated by words to others. Consequently, since according to analysis pluralism, what is communicated (in the sense of being what (all) others pick up from the utterance) by someone's utterance of "abortion is morally wrong" can be neither that abortion has an absolute property nor that it has a relative property, this cannot be part of the meaning or content of the utterance. What is communicated in this sense has to be something that different speakers of moral judgements share in their understanding of moral properties. And that cannot be the cognitive content: some people understand moral properties to be relative and others think of them as absolute. As a consequence, must we not say that it is something other than the cognitive content that is communicated?

*Reply.* The negative thesis that the intuitive cognitive meaning is not communicated in this sense, does not imply the positive thesis that some non-cognitive state is communicated or expressed. It doesn't since it is possible that moral practice is special in the following sense; even though it seems that something is communicated – in the sense that what is said by a moral judgement is something that is picked up by someone as long as he masters moral language – this is not so. In this sense we talk past each other – some speak of absolute properties, others don't.

This is indeed a counterintuitive result. But it is an explicable counterintuitivity: I argued in 8.4.2 that we can explain why we make the single analysis assumption even though, on closer examination, it is mistaken. Furthermore, that we talk past each other in this way does not exclude that we are involved in an important and meaningful activity.

Moral discussions are indeed important to us – both at a social level to further coordination and cooperation, and at an individual level because moral questions are something we care about.

This reply should be tempered. What analysis pluralism implies is that the non-revisionist meaning of moral judgements, or meaning as given by an intuition-based methodology, is not (always) communicated. It is this meaning that is not always transferred in moral conversations. It is consistent with this that non-cognitivists (or standard relativists) are right that what is picked up in moral discussions is that the other accepts a certain norm or has a certain motivational attitude. The result is that an analysis which focuses on what is communicated in this sense, will be a revisionist analysis; since some people are disposed to say that nothing but absolute moral properties can count as moral properties such as moral rightness, the analysis will be out of sync with their concepts of moral properties.

#### 8.5.2 *Concessions to non-cognitivism*

I have argued that analysis pluralism does not collapse into non-cognitivism: the underlying considerations do not force us to accept that moral judgements express desires, rather than just different beliefs for different people. From what we have seen this far, however, it is clear that they are very similar. Both reject the idea that it is being a belief with a certain content or character that makes something a moral judgement, and claim that it is something else that keeps together the class of moral judgements.<sup>279</sup> So how should we decide between the views?

We might think that analysis pluralism has an advantage, in that cognitivism is *prima facie* plausible. This is why non-cognitivists take great pains to accommodate their view to the belief-like features of moral judgements.<sup>280</sup> Through analysis pluralism we can take this belief-likeness at face value, at the same time as we can accept what is plausible about non-cognitivism. Indeed, as I have argued in chapter 2 and in this chapter, analysis pluralists can accept all of the following, without

<sup>279</sup> It might also be that, because they are so similar, analysis pluralism will have to deal with some of the objections often directed at non-cognitivism, such as the Frege-Geach problem. I will have to postpone discussion of these matters to another occasion.

<sup>280</sup> This is an essential part of modern variants of non-cognitivism, such as Blackburn's and Gibbard's views. See e.g., Blackburn, 1993, Blackburn, 1998, Gibbard, 2003.

committing to the claim that moral judgements express something other than beliefs:

That it has been crucial that moral judgements are accompanied by motivation for them to play the coordination and cooperation fostering role they play.<sup>281</sup>

That (therefore) emotions/affections may be crucially involved in the production of (most) moral judgements.

That (therefore) nearly all moral judgements we come across are accompanied by at least a bit of motivation.

That being accompanied by motivation (at least under normal conditions) is necessary to be a moral judgement (at least on many people's concept of moral judgements).

Given the *prima facie* plausibility of cognitivism, we might think, giving up cognitivism for non-cognitivism would be justified only if there were no way for cognitivists to accommodate such claims.<sup>282</sup> But as I have argued, there is.

However, this is a real advantage of analysis pluralism over non-cognitivism only if moral non-cognitivists do not succeed in accounting for the belief-like features of moral judgements. This question – and more generally questions about where the difference between the two views lies, if there is a difference – hinges at least in part on questions about what determines what kind of attitude a judgement expresses. Why say that moral judgements express desires, rather than saying that they are necessarily accompanied by desires? I cannot settle this interesting question here, but will leave it for future investigation. This means that the arguments I have given do not exclude non-cognitivism or mixed theories according to which both beliefs and desire-like states are expressed.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. Joyce, 2001, pp. 14-15, Joyce, 2006, pp. 175-76. Joyce argues that the cooperative function of morality does not necessarily speak in favour of non-cognitivism.

<sup>282</sup> This comes close, I think, to a claim Dreier makes (which he borrows from Tresan): "As Jon Tresan says in a different context, if a cognitivist theory can account for everything in normative language that is accounted for by expressivism, we may be less inclined to take expressivism seriously." Dreier, 1999, p. 569

There is also another way in which my argumentation leaves room for non-cognitivist elements. So far, I have assumed that analysis pluralism is a purely cognitivist view. But it could be that *some* people's moral statements do not express beliefs but desires (and their moral convictions are desires rather than beliefs). This position is consistent with the overall analysis pluralist framework. Whether we should accept such a mixed pluralism or a pure cognitivist pluralism will, again, depend on questions of the sort I have said that I cannot discuss here – questions about what determines whether a statement expresses a desire or a belief.

In this section I have pointed to possibilities for non-cognitivism and non-cognitivist elements that are not excluded by my argumentation for analysis pluralism. What I have sought to establish, however, is the possibility and consistency of a purely cognitivist analysis pluralism, and that such a view is made plausible by features commonly thought to support non-cognitivism.

#### 8.6 EXPLAINING METAETHICAL DISAGREEMENT

In the previous sections I have pointed to several merits of analysis pluralism. The main merit is the ability to account for the diversity in people's strong intuitions about the relative or absolute nature of moral properties, given a traditional methodology taking these intuitions seriously. Other features that I have argued analysis pluralism can account for are:

The belief-like features of moral judgements – they are beliefs.

The non-cognitivist view that it is not expressing beliefs with certain contents or characters that makes a judgement a moral judgement.

That moral judgements, even though they are beliefs, are strongly connected to motivation, and even, according to many people's concept of moral judgements, necessarily connected to motivation.

That people have different intuitions about the nature of the connection between moral judgements and motivation – the nature

of the connection is different on different people's concepts of moral judgements.

I would like to end by considering another merit of analysis pluralism; that it can account for the disagreement there is over how moral judgements should be analysed. I think there are at least four different causes of this metaethical disagreement. Everyone can acknowledge the two first of these. The first is that people have different methodological approaches. I have defended analysis pluralism given the assumption that in giving an analysis of moral judgements we are after a non-revisionist analysis in the sense that it doesn't conflict with what some people are ready to count as moral properties. I have been careful to point out that if we have other purposes with giving an analysis we might reach different results.

Another cause of the existing disagreement over the correct analysis of moral judgements is found in the fact that the argumentative chain leading up to any such analysis is bound to involve explicitly or implicitly taking a stand on many controversial philosophical questions. No doubt this is true for my argument for analysis pluralism as well. On one important point however, I have already taken such matters into account in my argument. I have argued that, as long as we are after a non-revisionist analysis, it does not matter which theory of meaning we invoke: the difference between people's strong convictions about the absolute or relative nature of moral properties makes it impossible for one analysis to fit everyone's moral judgements, whether we think that moral judgements should be analysed along the lines of an internalist, a social externalist or a causal theory of reference.

What I want to argue in this section is that analysis pluralism – as an account of the non-revisionist meaning(s) of moral terms – has the ability to explain the portion of metaethical disagreement that remains after taking these things into account. It can do so through pointing to two ways in which people who have tried to account for the meaning of moral expressions have started from mistaken assumptions.

First, consider Smith's explanation of metaethical disagreement. That metaethicists come to so different conclusions can, according to Smith, be ascribed to the fact that there is a built in tension between the different characteristic features of moral practice. On the one hand moral judgements appear to be beliefs. On the other hand, moral judgements are necessarily connected to motivation, which is something we could expect if they were desires rather than beliefs.

As I have argued in chapter 2 and the present chapter, it is possible to dissolve this tension. The solution lies in the idea – embedded in *de dicto* internalism and analysis pluralism – that we should distinguish between the meaning of moral judgements and the meaning of ‘moral judgement’ (or, in other words, that we should distinguish between moral concepts and the concept of moral judgements). Even if moral judgements have descriptive meanings and are beliefs, there can be a necessary connection between being a moral judgement and being accompanied by motivation by virtue of the meaning of ‘moral judgement’. If we get rid of the misapprehension that the necessary connection between moral judgements and motivation has to be accounted for by the content, character or nature of the mental state expressed by moral judgements, then there will no longer be a pressure to choose *one* of the two characteristic features of moral judgements to take seriously. (This is something that other, analysis monistic, forms of cognitivists can say as well, *if they explain the connection to motivation in the de dicto way.*)

There is also another way in which analysis pluralism implies that metaethicists in general have been mistaken: they have made the single analysis assumption. This can also account for some amount of metaethical disagreement. It is partly because people (metaethicists) have thought that everyone has the same moral concepts, that moral judgements mean the same when all people use them, that they keep disagreeing. They take their own strong intuitions about the nature of moral properties and think that this says something about how everyone’s moral judgements should be analysed. Absolutists think of their unwillingness, and relativists of their willingness, to say that relative properties can be moral properties, in this way; they both think that it is an intuition that says something about moral concepts in general. If they instead realised that their intuitions say something only about the concepts they themselves and people who share their intuitions have, then some amount of disagreement could be avoided. We can borrow, and develop, a picture from Smith to illustrate this point:

There are many different theories about the nature and content of moral judgement that aspire to explain and capture the truth embodied in internalism, and these theories share little in common beyond that aspiration.

Worse still, as I will argue in what follows, these theories are perhaps best thought of as lying around the perimeter of a wheel, much like Fortune’s Wheel, with each theory that lies further on along the perimeter representing itself as motivated by difficulties that beset the theory that precedes it. The mere existence of Internalism’s Wheel need not pose a problem for internalists, of course. They may believe that the truth about ethics lies wherever



Internalism's Wheel stops spinning. But a problem evidently does arise if Internalism's Wheel is in perpetual motion, for then the truth about ethics presumably lies nowhere at all on Internalism's Wheel.<sup>283</sup>

I will not try to do justice to Smith's picture as he intends it, but use it very freely for my own purposes. What I want to focus on in this picture of a metaethical wheel is the worry that there is no end to the spinning of the wheel. There would be hope to avoid this worry if there were one theory that is not beset by problems that make the wheel spin to the next theory. However, because of people's diverging strong intuitions about what can count as moral properties, I think that this is a futile hope, as long as we do not change the picture.

If we think of it as there being only one metaethical wheel, of course it is hard to get it to stop spinning. There are many people, with different strongly held intuitions about the nature of moral properties, who want to have their say about where the wheel is to stop. As soon as one person (say, an absolutist) lets the wheel stop at one theory, someone else (say, a relativist) comes and spins the wheel to the next, and so on. (This is not Smith's idea: in his picture it is generally accepted, but seemingly conflicting, characteristics that make the wheel spin.) But we can revise the picture. On the analysis pluralist picture, there is not *one* wheel but many. And each wheel stops in a specific place, on a specific theory. But the different wheels stop spinning at different theories. Remodelling the picture in this way has consequences for metaethical disagreement: we don't have to disagree over whether relativism or absolutism is correct – a relativist analysis holds for some people's moral judgements, while an absolutist analysis holds for moral judgements made by others.

It should be stressed that one prerequisite for this explanation to work, and for analysis pluralism to be possible in the first place, is my conclusion in part 1: that the common arguments in favour of either standard relativism and absolutism fail. The conclusion in chapter 2, that absolutism can explain moral motivation through *de dicto* internalism has already been referred to frequently in the present chapter. In chapter 3 I argued that arguments from diversity of moral opinions for standard relativism do not as they stand suffice to preclude absolutism. I said that they have to be supplemented with arguments to the effect that we can disregard certain people's strong absolutist intuitions – which is exactly what I argued in chapters 6 and 7 that we cannot. I argued in chap-

<sup>283</sup> Smith, 1996, pp. 69-70.

ter 4 that standard relativism implies that we do not genuinely disagree over moral matters in the sense that we intuitively think we do. But I also argued that this is no reason to disregard standard relativist analyses; standard relativists can explain why we have these intuitions about disagreement even if they are mistaken. That these common arguments in favour of standard relativism and absolutism do not settle the battle between standard relativist and absolutist analyses, made it possible to argue that one kind of analysis holds for some people's moral judgements and the other for moral judgements made by other people.

As I said above, I realise that the case for the analysis pluralist conception of moral practice in this book is bound to rest on a lot of controversial philosophical issues. It is, however, not necessary to accept this theory as a whole to appreciate that some of the ideas behind it can serve as a partial explanation of metaethical disagreement. One premise in the argument for analysis pluralism is that people have different strongly held intuitions regarding the relative or absolute nature of moral properties. It is indeed *possible* to accept this without drawing the further conclusion that people actually refer to different properties (even though I have argued that the further conclusion follows as long as we are after a non-revisionist account of the meaning of moral judgements). And this premise – about the diverging strong intuitions – is an explanation of why there is no analysis – absolutist or relativist – that will be accepted by everyone. This is something metaethicists have to take into account when they seek to analyse moral judgements: if one argues for, say, a relativist analysis, then some people will not accept it as an analysis of what intuitively counts as moral rightness or wrongness.

If we want our theory of moral judgements to account for such intuitions, this is a reason to take the extra step to analysis pluralism. This way we will reach a stable resting point in metaethics. We will have a metaethics that is no longer held captive by strongly held but divergent intuitions about moral practice – instead we will have one that accounts for them.

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