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Styles of Moral Relativism – A Critical Family Tree

Custom Is King – The Significance of Moral Diversity

Casting an eye back over the history of moral relativist thinking, one can discern a number of different branches to the family tree, each representing a different impetus to relativism, and so producing a different style of moral relativist thought. At root, however, is a broadly subjectivist parent idea, namely that morality is at least in part the upshot of a shared way of life, and shared ways of life tend to vary markedly from culture to culture. Differences of custom have been observed since the beginning of history. A well known passage from Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, in which he tells a story about Darius, King of the Persians, gives us an indication of how long human beings have been aware of, and intrigued or disconcerted by, the fact of moral difference:

When he was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter, so that they could understand what was said, he asked some Indians, of the tribe called Callataie, who do in fact eat their parents' dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing (Herodotus 440BCE; trans. Sélincourt, 1988, pp. 219-20).¹

Why might an awareness of moral diversity prompt the relativist conclusion that morality itself is relative to culture? (Or, in the terms sometimes used, why might an awareness of descriptive relativism prompt an inference to meta-ethical

¹ This passage is frequently quoted: see, for instance, Levy 2002, p. 89; and Baghramian, 2004, pp. 21-2.

relativism?) It does so principally on the assumption that in the moral domain the best explanation of diversity is relativity. Accordingly, there is a tendency to read moral relativism off the surface of foreign moral practices. However, this tendency is dangerous, for ‘moral practices’—in the straightforward sense of what goes on apparently within the bounds of the morality of a given culture—can be a matter merely of what certain types can get away with, and others have resigned themselves to, rather than what the collective endorses as morally permissible, let alone good. This question of endorsement has been raised in stark form by Mary Midgley in a discussion of the Samurai custom of *tsujigiri*, and Midgley’s point is further developed by Michele Moody-Adams (Midgley 1981; Moody-Adams 1997). As the story goes, there was a custom among medieval Japanese Samurai of ‘trying out’ one’s sword before battle, by testing its capability of slicing through a human torso with one blow. This test is said to have been inflicted at random on the hapless passer-by.

On the face of it, this might plausibly be presented as an example of just how radically different foreign or historically distant practices can be within the moral. It is the sort of example that is often used to expose our latent relativist sympathies by prompting the thought, ‘What was morally appropriate for a medieval Samurai is radically different from what is morally appropriate for anyone in our culture’. As Moody-Adams argues, however, this is a perfidious line of thought, for it begs the question by assuming that such arbitrary slaughter on the part of a Samurai *was* morally appropriate for him in his time. That is to say, it makes the unwarranted assumption that there were not articulate moral points of view from which the practice might have been challenged—people with social experiences that equipped them with adequate critical tools to protest the practice in its own time.

Moody-Adams expresses agreement with Midgley in this connection, affirming that ‘as Midgley suggests, the assumption that there was uniform cultural approval of the practice requires a further, problematic assumption: that endangered passersby would have generally *consented* to be sacrificed to the ritual’ (Moody-Adams 1997, p. 82). While consent may not be quite the issue—after all, I might withhold consent to many a moral practice my better judgement would endorse—still the general point is well taken. The worry about assuming that the existence of a

certain bloody practice on the part of Samurai warriors in medieval Japan signals the moral acceptability of that practice in medieval Japan, is that this assumption may amount to little more than a way of siding with the abuser. As Neil Levy puts the point, ‘we can appreciate the force of the claim that relativism sides with the strong against the weak. If we conclude that *tsujigiri* is permissible in medieval Japan, we are allowing the rapacious Samurai to dictate what counts as morality for everyone’ (Levy 2002, p. 112.) This is well put; indeed we should acknowledge, further, that the Samurai may have had the social power to get away with the abuse in a double sense, not only getting away with it in practice, but also in collective conscience, in so far as there may have been no collective hermeneutical habit of challenging it by naming it as brutal, dishonourable, murderous, or otherwise wrong. In such a situation, Samurai warriors would effectively possess the power to pre-emptively silence dissent, and so to *constitutively construct* their sword-testing killings as morally acceptable in their time—to make the practice *count as* morally acceptable. But this does not mean that it was, even then.

In any case, we should acknowledge that the scenario of such successful constitutive construction is improbable. The Samurai very likely did not have quite that kind of power, for as Midgley suggests, there would not have been sufficiently widespread moral endorsement of the practice, explicit or tacit—certainly the soon-to-be murdered party would not have endorsed it in any way, or anyone else likely to share his interests, either because they cared about him personally, or because they could see that they were at similar risk, or could imaginatively identify with those at risk. Such elementary exercises of the moral imagination were surely not beyond the folk who cohabited the medieval Samurai ‘moral culture’. And there’s the rub: what supposed ‘moral culture’ are we talking about here? Did these roaming, sword-wielding individuals really belong to an integrated and self-contained moral culture that cast their practices as honourable; or should we suspect this to be a fantasy of the relativist imagination? Moody-Adams makes a powerful case against the habit of positing ‘moral cultures’ conceived in this way as fully integrated and self-contained systems, for such monoliths are incompatible with the fact that the discursive space of morality is essentially contested:

Even traditional societies generate ‘liminal’ space (however ritually structured) that creates room for various kinds of cultural criticism. Any effort at transhistorical moral inquiry and reflection implicitly appeals to this liminal ‘cultural space’ for moral criticism (Moody-Adams 1997, p. 85).

Moody-Adams is surely right to suspect that some relativist writers are bewitched by exoticism. If one looks to grubbier examples in the present, such as the organized thuggery of the Sicilian mafia or the Chinese Triads operating in many cities today, there is far less temptation to infer moral equality for something called the ‘mafia moral culture’ supposedly owned not only by the mafia themselves but also their victims. Real, evolving moral cultures are never disconnected from the dissenting voices of those on the losing end, however muffled some of them might be. This is key to understanding why morality is an essentially critical domain in which many, often conflicting, points of view are fit for articulation. That is why we cannot automatically read deep moral difference off the surface of foreign moral practices.

All this reminds us that one must be very careful about what to infer, if anything, from the observation of surface differences of custom. Accordingly we must be equally careful about attributing such inferences to others. Michel de Montaigne is standardly interpreted as implicitly making just such an inference to relativism; but we shall see that the relativist’s pretension to him as a sixteenth-century French ancestor involves a careless leap of genealogy. Montaigne was the first essayist. He coined the term *essai*—literally, an ‘attempt’—in order to create a self-effacing rhetorical space in which to express his reflections, always insisting he was merely writing about himself, with no aspiration to authoritative comment on anything outside. Though the essays are unquestionably a self-portrait, the declared aim of mere self-revelation, combined with his stance of beguiling irony, allowed Montaigne to publicise his bold output without serious risk of being judged impious before God. In ‘Of Cannibals’, he does, as is so often observed, emphasize diversity of moral custom in a way that echoes Herodotus; and the essay apparently strikes many philosopher-readers, with an ear trained to pick up on anything sounding a bit like a meta-ethical thesis, as an oblique argument for the idea that custom is all there is to morality. Not just descriptive relativism, then, but meta-ethical relativism too. Neil

Levy, for instance, introduces perhaps the most frequently quoted sentence from Montaigne as follows:

Reflecting on this diversity, many European intellectuals came to precisely the same conclusion as had Herodotus before them. Moral disagreements reflect the differences between local customs, no more and no less. Thus, for example, Michel de Montaigne...reacts to reports of widespread cannibalism by just such a relativism. 'I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for indeed it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in' (Levy 2002, p. 91).

Moody-Adams also brings in Montaigne as a relativist:

'Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice,' Montaigne claimed, because 'we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in' ... Montaigne's observation reminds us that relativism about diverse moral practices is not a new development (Moody-Adams 1997, p. 13).

Maria Baghramian too reads Montaigne as a relativist, though she is careful to relate the relativism to his deep-seated Pyrrhonian scepticism, introducing him as 'The most notable proponent of both scepticism and relativism in the early modern period', and rightly emphasizing his combination of interest in diversity of customs with tolerance (Baghramian 2004, p. 51). Steven Lukes, despite a sensitivity to the ambivalence in Montaigne's essay, ultimately characterizes Montaigne as a relativist with inconsistently universalistic tendencies (Lukes 2008, pp. 31-2). With the exception of David Wiggins, who interprets Montaigne in what I believe to be the right spirit—that is, not as a relativist but as a sceptical essayist keen to emphasize the cardinal importance of cultural context when it comes to morals²—it seems that in much

² 'The philosophical point of paying heed to Montaigne's essay...is for us to study the interpretive power of contextualism as Montaigne practises it, and to perceive the

philosophical discussion Montaigne has been pinned not only as an important influence in relativistic thinking about morality (which indeed he seems to have become), but as himself advancing moral relativism. This last is however very unfortunate, since Montaigne does no such thing.

That such a rigid interpretation would falsify Montaigne's playful text is indicated even by the sentence immediately following the one so often quoted. The indicative sentence in question mockingly qualifies 'the country we live in' with the sardonic rejoinder: 'There we always see the perfect religion, the perfect political system, the perfect and most accomplished way of doing everything' (Montaigne, 1958, p. 109). Montaigne's point in the much quoted sentence is not that there are no universal or absolute standards for what is morally right. Rather, he is delivering a sceptical jibe at how his fellow countrymen tend to be hopelessly chauvinistic when it comes to making sense of the customs of cultures alien to their own—a disappointment to be understood in the context of his more general sceptical opinion that such epistemic failure characterizes the human condition. Part of the general diagnosis he offers is that we are too often dependent upon unreliable testimony. Indeed the essay opens with this theme, and recounts the story of Pyrrhus, King of Epirus, as he encountered the well-ordered Roman army for the first time:

King Pyrrhus remarked: 'I do not know what barbarians these are'—for so the Greeks called all foreign nations—'but the ordering of the army before me has nothing barbarous about it.'... We can see from this how chary we must be of subscribing to vulgar opinions; we should judge them by the test of reason and not by common report (Montaigne 1958, p. 105).

Naturally, Montaigne's overall purpose becomes clearer as the essay progresses. Indeed the essay ultimately makes it plain that it has nothing to do with advancing the meta-ethical thesis of relativism, or indeed any meta-ethical thesis. On the contrary, the essay is primarily a barbed lament directed against the hypocrisy of his own nation, which he finds not only too quick to judge foreign customs, but also culpably

reach of criticism across difference and the reach of agreement over difference' (Wiggins 2006, p. 349).

disinclined to turn its critical gaze upon itself and confront the horrifying excesses of a France wracked by religious civil war. The ironically fantasized *Other* to contemporary French consciousness in Montaigne's discussion is that recent addition to the European imagination, the intriguing savages of the New World. The practices at home which Montaigne is primarily concerned to bring to the reader's attention (about which he is notably candid, if brief, in contrast to the digressive pace and twinkling irony of much of the essay) are those most grotesque forms of violence perpetrated against the living in the brutal hostilities between Catholic and Huguenot parties. Acknowledging fully the moral abhorrence of cannibalism, he none the less dares to find that when understood in the light of reason it turns out to compare rather favourably with these home grown abominations:

I am not so anxious that we should note the horrible savagery of these acts as concerned that, whilst judging their faults so correctly, we should be so blind to our own. I consider it more barbarous to eat a man alive than to eat him dead; to tear by rack and torture a body still full of feeling, to roast it by degrees, and then give it to be trampled and eaten by dogs and swine—a practice which we have not only read about but seen within recent memory, not between ancient enemies, but between neighbours and fellow-citizens and, what is worse, under the cloak of piety and religion—than to roast and eat a man after he is dead (Montaigne 1958, p. 113).

To hammer the point home—making it still more abundantly clear, incidentally, that he is entirely open to the making of non-relative moral judgements, whether about the alleged customs of the New World or those of the old, and in the name of reason to boot—he adds: 'We are justified therefore in calling these people barbarians by reference to the laws of reason, but not in comparison with ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity' (Montaigne, 1958, p. 114). People who live in glass houses...

'Of Cannibals' employs an ironic conceit whereby the author poses as primarily interested in vindicating the alien customs of the New World (amusingly

romanticized by Montaigne³) when in fact his main interest is in criticizing barbarism at home. Although the essay, as Lukes rightly observes, contains ‘relativist-sounding passages’ (Lukes 2008, p. 32), at least to the analytical ear; none of these in fact forms any part of a case for moral relativism. The real point of the essay is neither moral-cultural description, nor meta-ethical thesis. Its message is above all political, for Montaigne’s primary purpose is to get away with making a political point about the horrors of his own distressed country. While the discussion of cannibalism reflects a genuine interest in the significance of moral diversity, it equally serves as a conceit that permits Montaigne to hold up a salutary mirror to a hypocritical French nation. Contrary, then, to a philosophical *idée reçue*, the sage of Gascony was not a relativist.

With Montaigne duly pruned from our family tree of moral relativism (though not, one hopes, thereby removed from philosophical attention), let us retrace our finger back to an ancient progenitor other than Herodotus, with a view to identifying more genuine branches.

Man Is The Measure – Subjectivist Roots

Now, Protagoras, ‘Man is the measure of all things’ as you people say—of white and heavy and light and all that kind of thing without exception. He has the criterion of these things within himself; so when he thinks that they are as he experiences them, he thinks what is true and what really is for him (Plato 1997, 178b; quoted in Baghramian, 2004, p. 26).

Protagoras is generally taken as the ancient origin for a different style of moral relativism, not this time the style inspired by the observation of moral-cultural differences read off as deep, but one inspired rather by something more purely philosophical: the proposition that properties taken to be objective features of the

³ Quoting Seneca, Montaigne imagines Plato full of admiration for the simple way of life led by the people of the New World: ‘How far from such perfection would he find the republic that he imagined: “men fresh from the hands of the gods”’ (Montaigne 1958, p. 110).

world are ‘really’ the product of human sensibility—the work of a ‘criterion’ within the subject.⁴ Various interpretations of the dictum are attributable to Protagoras via Plato, for it expresses a promiscuous subjectivism equally amenable to liaison with sensory experience, knowledge, truth, objects, and justice.⁵ The immediate upshot in relation to any of these is that what may seem objective to us is *really* subjective, and perhaps that we are actively misled in this by the innately objectivising nature of our experiences. Descendants from this kind of subjectivism are surely many, no doubt appropriately traced by way of Hobbes’ famous assertion:

But whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt. *Vile* and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, and Contemptible, are ever used with relation to the person that useth them: There being nothing simply and absolutely so (Hobbes, 1991; ch. 6, p. 39).

Subsequent subjectivists have tended to be moved by a sense, first, of the contrast between primary and secondary qualities, the latter alone displaying a dependence on human sensibility that calls for the label ‘subjective’; combined, second, with a sense that secondary qualities and moral properties are analogous in terms of their metaphysics and epistemology. Most notably, Hume’s moral subjectivism was fundamentally inspired by this combination of commitments, as was Mackie’s after him;⁶ though importantly, Hume was no moral relativist, his emphasis being on the

⁴ See, however, Richard Bett for the view that not only were the Sophists not generally relativists, but that *pace* Plato even Protagoras should probably not be taken as a relativist. Bett emphasizes Sextus’ interpretation, which he summarizes: ‘Protagoras held that things are really, in themselves, all the various ways they are perceived as being by different people... And this makes Protagoras not a relativist but, as E. R. Dodds long ago pointed out, “an extreme realist”’ (Bett, 1989, p. 167).

⁵ See Baghramian 2004, 1.2.

⁶ ‘Take any action allow’d to be vicious... The vice entirely escapes you, as long as you consider the object... It lies in yourself, not in the object... Vice and virtue, therefore, may be compar’d to sounds, colours, heat and cold, which, according to modern philosophy, are not qualities in objects, but perceptions in the mind...’ (Hume 1975). Mackie 1977, ch. 1.

extensive repertoire of humanly universal ‘natural virtues’, which contrasts with a small number of socially constructed ‘artificial virtues’ that prove the rule. Mackie did not quite argue for relativism either, though there was surely room for it, given his view of morality as ‘invention’. Subjectivism about moral value provides a fertile basis for moral relativism, but there can be no parthenogenesis. Something further is required.

This subjectivist tradition in moral philosophy does ultimately bring forth a range of historically significant relativist positions in twentieth-century moral philosophy, though here the tree divides into two branches. We might label these *Moral Historicism*, and *Moral Reasons*. The historicist line finds its prime advocate in Bernard Williams, though it would (as ever) be artificial to represent him as a lone voice in this regard. Notably one might mention Richard Rorty under the moral historicist head, as he often uses ‘historicist’ to characterize his brand of relativistic pragmatism. Rorty’s interest in history is, however, more *a priori* than historical, for his historicism falls out of a general sceptical stance towards all things presented as objective or universal. For this reason I shall discuss his view under the head of *Moral Truth*—a prior branching in our family tree, stemming not from the local subjectivism about value mentioned above, but from a subjectivism with global scope, under which morality is subsumed along with every other domain of human cognition. Rorty makes a double contrast with Williams because, first, Williams’ moral relativism is derived from a localized subjectivism specifically about value properties, and second, his interest in history derives from an imaginative engagement with the past (notably that of Ancient Greek culture) combined with a historically informed sense of the differences between ancient and modern.⁷ Our historicist branch, then, leads us to Williams’ moral relativism—the ‘relativism of distance’.

Moral Historicism

⁷ This interest permeates much of Williams’ work, but see in particular *Shame and Necessity* (Williams 1993).

I have introduced Williams in relation to a broadly Humean subjectivism about value, but it is instructive to note that he labels his own view negatively rather than positively, using instead the term ‘non-objectivist’. He has good reason, for he aims to distance it from some of the theses associated with the broad label ‘subjectivist’. Firstly, the term ‘subjectivist’ can indicate a semantic thesis about the meaning of moral sentences—that they report, express, or merely evince a moral sentiment—and Williams does not want to commit himself to any such thing (nor did Mackie, who for the same reason preferred to describe his view as a kind of moral ‘scepticism’). Secondly, subjectivism is commonly associated with the denial of moral truth and knowledge, but Williams gives a positive account of these things, albeit in non-objectivist terms. That is to say, moral knowledge is knowledge *within* an ethical outlook, and is gained through the correct application of the thick ethical concepts proper to that outlook. (Thick ethical concepts are moral concepts of the kind effectively introduced by Philippa Foot in a defence of the reasoned nature of moral arguments.⁸ In Williams’ treatment, they are further explained as ethical concepts that are not only ‘action-guiding’ but also ‘world-guided’ in that they have sufficiently substantial empirical content to permit robust conditions of application.⁹) Williams’ relativism of distance is intriguingly allied with moral cognitivism, and thereby with much of what relativism is normally conceived as threatening to undermine.

What is Williams’ view? His early statement, given in ‘The Truth in Relativism’ and adhered to later in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, remains the marker, as he never deviated from its basic argument: the truth in relativism is that over a certain kind of historical distance, specified in the idea of a merely ‘notional confrontation’ between two moral cultures, moral appraisal becomes inappropriate, because too much of its normal point is missing (Williams, 1981 and 1985). Two

⁸ See Foot 1958. See also Iris Murdoch: ‘if we picture the agent as compelled by obedience to the reality he can see, he will not be saying “This is right”, i.e., “I choose to do this”, he will be saying “This is A B C D” (normative-descriptive words), and action will follow naturally’ (Murdoch 1970, p. 42).

⁹ Williams rejects Hare’s prescriptivist account of moral concepts, which presents their descriptive and evaluative aspects as separable components. Instead he favours the view that these aspects are not separable, and in a note credits this idea to Murdoch and Foot.

moral cultures or ‘systems’ are in notional confrontation when they fail to be in ‘real confrontation’ (when one is not a ‘real option’ for a group of people in the other). That is, if a group from one system could not go over to the moral outlook of the other—really living it out in practice, with the associated moral psychology becoming internalized as their own way of life—then the relation between the two moral systems is not one of real confrontation, but merely notional confrontation. In a situation such as this, moral appraisal cannot play its essential role as part of deciding how one should live, and so becomes inappropriate:

A relativist view of a given type of outlook can be understood as saying that for such outlooks it is only in real confrontations that the language of appraisal—good, bad, right, wrong, and so on—can be applied to them; in notional confrontations, this kind of appraisal is seen as inappropriate, and no judgments are made (Williams 1985, p. 161).

Although in the early paper he did not rule out the possibility of synchronic notional confrontations over cultural distance, he makes it explicit in the later discussion in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* and elsewhere that in the modern era there can be no synchronic application of relativism: ‘Relativism over merely spatial distance is of no interest or application in the modern world. Today all confrontations between cultures must be real confrontations...’ (Williams 1985, p. 163). The only kind of distance that makes for an application of moral relativism, then, is historical distance: ‘Many outlooks that human beings have had are not real options for us now. The life of a Bronze Age chief or a medieval samurai are not real options for us: there is no way of living them’ (Williams 1985, p. 161).

The structure of the relativism of distance, then, is pre-conditional: real confrontation is a pre-condition of appropriate moral appraisal, so that over notional confrontation moral appraisal is inappropriate, and relativism applies. This structure allows the relativism to be expressed without self-refutation, for it avoids saying anything that would undermine the expression of the relativist thesis itself. By contrast, forms of relativism that infer from a premise of descriptive relativism to a conclusion that it is morally wrong to pass moral judgement on other cultures are famously embroiled in self-refutation, for their very assertion of moral relativism is

delivered as a non-relative moral claim. Williams levels this charge of self-refutation at the view he invents for the purpose, ‘vulgar relativism’; and some such charge is also, famously, the core of Plato’s much discussed attack on Protagoras.¹⁰ What is especially significant about the relativism of distance is its ability to maintain so much of what moral realists hope to preserve from the objectivizing character of ethical experience and argument: moral truth, moral facts, moral knowledge, moral rationality. In Williams’ relativism these things are not *as if*, *quasi*, or otherwise *ersatz*, but authentic. The availability of moral truth is the key. An unembarrassed commitment to the possibility of moral truth became historically available owing to that moment in metaphysics which saw the arrival of various forms of deflationism or minimalism about truth, rendering it as a metaphysically undemanding predicate.¹¹ From then on, moral propositions could be represented as straightforwardly truth-apt without needing to posit any ‘queer’ action-guiding moral truth-makers, rubbing along as part of the ‘fabric of the world’, to use Mackie’s evocative terms (Mackie 1977, p. 15).

Putting this together with the comparatively uncontested idea that there can be moral beliefs, it becomes quickly apparent that moral knowledge too is possible, even on Williams’ non-objectivism about value—just plug in the preferred conception of warrant, and there you have it. *We* can now know that caning schoolboys is abusive, or that coerced sexual intercourse in marriage is rape; *the Elizabethans* could know that Queen Elizabeth was chaste, or not, as the case may be. This, as I see things, is how Williams’ distinctive historicism kicks in. Moral knowledge, on his conception, is fundamentally a kind of knowledge that constructs a collective way of life; and ways of life change through history. This means that the Elizabethans’ moral knowledge of their queen is only available to us in so far as ‘chaste’ is still one of *our* moral concepts. If it is not (and on the whole it isn’t) then we cannot know *as a piece of moral knowledge* that Elizabeth had the virtue of chastity. It is transformed into an

¹⁰ See Williams 1972, p. 20; and Plato 1997 (*Theaetatus* 170d-171c). For a helpful discussion of the structure of Plato’s charge, see Baghramian 2004, 1.3.

¹¹ See Wiggins 1987; Wright 1992, ch.5; and the papers (including those by Wright and Williams) in Hooker 1996. For more background on minimalism, see Horwich 1998.

item, rather, of plain historical knowledge about *their* ethical way of life.¹² We might say that when an item of moral knowledge is put out of our reach in this way—Williams, perhaps provocatively, says ‘destroyed’—what history and reflection have removed from our lives, for good or ill, is the ethical force of the concept. As I see it, we can still apply the concept ‘chaste’ all right, imaginatively grasping its past role in disciplining female sexuality and conserving male heredity, or at any rate knowing it used to be a female virtue; but we can no longer do so with its ethical force in tact. That is to say, the concept no longer occupies the same place in our affective economy—it is no longer generally apt, for instance, to inspire feelings of shame in the agent, or of moral disapproval in others. (We might, for instance, think it highly unlikely Elizabeth was chaste, but be glad for her, and admire her genius in making the lurid obsession with female virginity work a little to her advantage in a gender-performative cult of the Virgin Queen.)

But where does this leave us in relation to the most compellingly universal moral examples, such as the practice of slavery? In what sense, if any, might we reasonably judge ancient Greek slavery to be unjust or otherwise morally wrong if the ancients—free and enslaved alike—did not conceive it as such? Wiggins asked this sort of question in a way that resonated critically with Williams. He put the issue in terms of a defence of moral cognitivism to the effect that ‘there is *nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable’ (Wiggins 1991, p. 70). The challenge to this cognitivism, however, which Wiggins himself raises, is ‘how to demonstrate the necessity to *speak* in this connection of ‘injustice’—or even of ‘slavery?’ (Wiggins 1991, p. 78). That is, how to argue against the historicist claim that careful historical interpretation will sometimes reveal that even if there is nothing else to think now, there surely *was* something else to think back then, for there is no trans-historical necessity to bring the practice of slavery under these sorts of moral concepts, or perhaps any moral concepts. Wiggins’ answer to this envisaged challenge is to say that ‘the opponent... would have himself to show the workability of the scheme of moral ideas that dispenses in the face of phenomena such as the slave trade and its historical effects with ideas like “justice”, “slavery”, “using human beings as

¹² Williams does not quite say this, but I believe it is a corollary of his view. I argue the point more fully in Fricker 2000.

means not ends”, etc.’. But then, in relation to this answer, it must be acknowledged that Williams did go on to make just such a robust historical case for the view that the Greeks thought of slavery not in such moralized terms at all, but rather conceived it primarily as a practically *necessary* institution, and as a calamitous piece of *bad luck* for those individuals who are born or become enslaved:

Slavery was taken to be necessary—necessary, that is to say, to sustaining the kind of political, social, and cultural life that free Greeks enjoyed. Most people did not suppose that because slavery was necessary, it was therefore just... The effect of the necessity was, rather, that life proceeded on the basis of slavery and left no space, effectively, for the question of its justice to be raised (Williams 1993, p. 124).

Williams’ relativist cognitivism staunchly resisted the sort of trans-historical universalism about even such moral fundamentals as slavery that Wiggins’ non-relativist (though always contextualist) cognitivism asserts. Although Williams’ relativism presents no obstacle to an assertion in the now that Greek slavery was unjust (or brutal, or cruel—there is no dependence here on Williams’ view that the concept of injustice is a special case¹³), the point is he regarded it as senseless to insist, beyond this, that the Greeks themselves should have regarded slavery as we do. Any such insistence could only figure as a piece of moralism, deriving either from specific historical ignorance, or else a general narcissistic refusal to acknowledge that there really have been other ways of life different from our own.

Williams’ relativism of distance, then, is part of a thoroughgoing historicism governing the existence of ethical value and availability of ethical knowledge for people in their time. The relativist thesis itself (the idea that moral appraisal is inappropriate over notional confrontation) is born of a dislike for the moralism that leads us to engage in moral appraisal over historical distances that do not sustain appraisal’s normal point. We could not go over to the Greek moral outlook, for the question of the moral status of slavery *has* arisen for us, and once it has arisen there is no going back; and, further, the answer to the question of the moral status of slavery

¹³ He considered the concept of (in)justice to be applicable even over notional confrontation, and so an exceptional case; see Williams 1985, p. 166.

is obvious, so that *now* there is indeed ‘*nothing else to think* but that slavery is unjust and insupportable’. An interest in the contingency and hence plurality of moral practices is at the heart of Williams’ historicism, but not in the sense we rehearsed at the outset with Herodotus, which is taken to suggest we should be so impressed by the astonishing diversity of moral customs that moral consciousness can but retreat into its own cultural shell. The relativism of distance is not a direct upshot of being impressed by moral diversity *per se*, for there is an indefinite amount of synchronic moral diversity across cultures in relation to which this relativism refuses application. The view is rather a reflective acknowledgement that over notional confrontation the practical point and therefore propriety of moral appraisal goes missing, owing to the fact that precisely at that distance, past moral practices become irrelevant to moral deliberation. At root, the relativism of distance is an oblique assertion of the idea—the signature Socratic idea with which *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* opens—that the fundamental question is how one should live. Williams’ relativism effectively indexes moral appraisal to its primary role in contributing to ongoing practical deliberation; and that is, most fundamentally, why he casts those ways of life to which we could not convert even if we wanted to as inappropriate objects of our moral appraisals.

I have argued elsewhere that the way Williams characterizes the distinction between real and notional confrontations does not draw the line of distance in the place he wants (Fricker 2010). The condition of real confrontation, that we could reconstruct the past outlook and live it for real in the present, is extremely socially and psychologically demanding, so that just about any past outlook lands outside the remit of appropriate moral appraisal—which is not what he intends. But, more than this, the question must also be asked: why should the possibility of moral conversion stand as a condition on appropriate moral appraisal? I have explained Williams’ reason as I understand it above; but I do not believe it is justified to confine practices of moral appraisal to the primary purpose of deciding how to live—of deciding, as he often puts it, ‘what to do about’ the cultural practice in question. Moral appraisal has other functions besides that one, not least the interpretive function of making sense of the past—ironically, a signature Williams concern. My suspicion is that the basic motive for the relativism of distance, namely Williams’ anti-moralism in relation to the past, would be better handled directly by specific critical attention to forms of

moralism themselves. This would allow him to attack them not for appraising what he must implausibly allege is simply beyond the remit of moral appraisal, but only for the moralism itself—whether it be the moralism of historically insensitive moral interpretation, or of excessive focus on the moral to the exclusion of other forms of value, or again that of blame being inappropriately directed towards individuals from the past.

Let us now leave the *Moral Historicism* branch of our family tree to trace a finger along the branch concerned with *Moral Reasons*. Here we meet Gilbert Harman's conventionalist relativism, which was first advanced contemporarily with Williams' historicist relativism, but which, despite a certain structural similarity, contrasts with it in many crucial respects. Most obviously, while the relativism of distance allowed that synchronic moral appraisal is always appropriate even between cultures with few shared moral concepts and reasons, the relativist position advanced by Harman posits shared reasons as a condition of all appropriate moral appraisal.

Moral Reasons

Harman's relativism is explicitly motivated by the question of shared reasons for action, or what in his early statement he called 'shared motivational attitudes' (Harman 1982). In that paper he presents his relativism as a hypothesis about the 'logical form' of sentences containing a distinctively moral use of 'ought'. He distinguishes four uses of 'ought'. There is the 'ought' of expectation ('the bus ought to be along in a minute'); the 'ought' of rationality ('the robber ought to have wiped his fingerprints before the getaway'); the 'ought' of general, non-moral regret ('the *tsunami* ought not to have happened'); and then there is the 'ought' of morality ('she ought not to have betrayed him'). Harman labels ought-statements of this last type 'inner judgements'. His hypothesis is that the logical form of moral statements is such that they have as a pre-condition that the judging and judged parties share 'motivational attitudes', or moral reasons. (Like Williams' relativism of distance, the structure of Harman's relativism is such that it sets a pre-condition of appropriate moral judgement—a pre-condition which ushers in relativism wherever it fails—and thus the view avoids problems of self-refutation.) This means that any time there are

not the requisite shared motivational attitudes between two parties, no moral judgement can appropriately be made, and relativism applies.

On Harman's view, then, in cases where the would-be judged party does not significantly share motivational attitudes with the judge, she or he is beyond the reach of moral judgement. The key example he uses is that of Hitler: 'the agent judged [Hitler] seems beyond the pale—in other words beyond the motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations' (Harman 1982, p. 193). According to Harman, all we can express in relation to Hitler involves the 'ought' not of inner judgements but only the unfocussed regret of judgements about states of affairs or situations. We may lament the historical fact of Nazi genocide thus: 'the holocaust ought not to have happened'. In so far as this is a consequence of his view, however, then I would have thought it made more of a counter-example than a positive illustration. For Hitler is a paradigm of the sort of agent whom we can judge morally, and whose deeds make him a proper object of moral criticism and outrage of a focussed, 'inner' variety. The idea that we cannot judge him morally *because of* his evil psychology as absurd. A morality for which evil is beyond its remit is no morality at all; and a meta-ethic that casts morality in this mould cannot be right.

We could defend a version of Harman's view by pointing out that if there is something to this idea of shared motivational attitudes being a pre-condition of moral judgement, then it cannot possibly be a question of *individuals* sharing them as judge and judged parties. It must be a question rather of *moral culture* in what I have elsewhere called the 'structural' sense (Fricker 2010, p. 167 *passim*)—that is, in the sense of a concept designed to capture the idea that the relevant moral interpretations were suitably available to the judged party, so that he is culpable if he fails either to grasp them or otherwise live up to them. Hitler will have had the usual social exposure to everyday moral precepts against the evils of spreading hatred and perpetrating mass murder, whatever story might be told about him as an individual to explain how he came to think the thoughts and commit the crimes he did. So, on this finessing of Harman's view, it would not be a consequence of it that the very psychology of evil placed the perpetrator 'beyond the pale' of moral appraisal, rendering them immune to moral censure. In so far as Harman holds that it does—and he does, for in the later work he reiterates the example in different but equivalent

terms (Harman 1996, p. 62)—one can only say that his intended condition of shared motivating attitudes is far too strong.

If Harman were to reply by appealing to the narrowly focussed nature of ‘inner judgements’ owing to their special logical form, then this merely shows up the spurious nature of the terms in which the argument is conducted. The emphasis on the so-called ‘logical form’ of an allegedly well-defined class of statements called ‘moral’ (‘inner’) is a formal fig leaf for a material claim about the pre-conditions of moral judgement. In fairness to Harman, he is entirely clear that he is presenting a ‘hypothesis’ that cannot be proved, but still, what remains spurious is the idea that moral statements *have* a distinctive logical form of a kind that could furnish a meta-ethical thesis. The claim that the logical form of moral statements presupposes shared motivational attitudes is nothing more than the material claim that there is something off key about making moral judgements in respect of people who do not share in one’s reasons. I believe that something along these lines is an eminently sensible thought in respect of certain types of moral judgement—certain judgements of blame, for instance¹⁴—but as a general statement about moral judgements it is royally disputable, and it distinguishes the claim not in the slightest to dress it up as an insight into logical form. In fact, it obfuscates the issue, because it can only mislead people into thinking that the puzzle of the relative or absolute status of morality is to be solved by trying to identify something called the logical form of moral judgements, when what we should be trying to do is explore which sorts of cultural and historical distances can or cannot sustain the various forms of moral appraisal and accountability.

It must be said that in later work Harman mounts the argument far less in terms of logical form, and instead focuses on relativism as an inference to the best explanation from the observation of moral diversity (Harman 1996, section 1.2). His is the classic inference from descriptive relativism to meta-ethical relativism (the move which, I argued earlier, Montaigne did not make). He then argues by way of a

¹⁴ I argue in Fricker 2010 that in circumstances in which the agent was structurally (historically-culturally) unable to form the requisite moral thought, judgements of blame are inappropriate.

powerful analogy: just as motion is relative to a given spatiotemporal framework, so moral judgements are relative to a moral framework:

The moral relativist supposes that there are various moral frameworks from which moral issues can be judged and that none of these frameworks is objectively privileged, even though one might be specially salient to a given person: for example, the moral framework relevantly associated with that person's values (Harman 1996, pp. 41-42).

A moral framework is constituted by 'a set of values (standards, principles, etc.), perhaps on the model of the laws of one or another state' (Harman 1996, p. 13). One could perhaps make explicit the continuity with Harman's early statement by adding that these shared moral conventions generate the shared motivational attitudes that stand as pre-conditional to moral judgement.

This formulation in terms of frameworks could help mitigate my objection to the Hitler example somewhat, insofar as it invites the 'structural' reading: it stops a lone moral maverick or evil-doer counting as exempt from moral judgement, for whatever an individual's moral depravity, one might suppose that the moral conventions of his culture, his *framework*, would still apply to him. It seems, however, that Harman does not intend the structural reading of 'framework', for he goes on to talk about moral frameworks not as social, collective entities but as individual moral outlooks. Distinguishing 'critic relativity' (relativity of the critic's values) from 'agent relativity' (relativity of the agent's values), he revisits the unfortunate Hitler example as follows:

The critic will not be able to say, for example, 'It was morally wrong of Hitler to have acted in that way,' if the critic is a moral relativist who supposes that Hitler did not have a compelling objective reason to refrain from acting as he did... (Harman 1996, p. 62).

Clearly, Harman intends 'moral framework' as most basically equivalent to 'individual moral outlook', so that it is a contingent question how far a given outlook is shared throughout society. On Harman's conception, Hitler's 'moral framework'

stubbornly places him beyond the reach of moral judgement by non-fascists, even the judgement of those whose lives his actions directly affected. But this is patently absurd. The idea that Nazi ideology qualifies as a ‘moral framework’ is an extreme version of the mistaken assumption that we saw Moody-Adams expose in relation to relativist attitudes to exoticism; namely, the assumption that local bodies of value automatically qualify as complete moral outlooks, all dissenting voices being deemed external. In nineteen-thirties Germany a Nazi ideology surely gained the ascendancy; but a moral culture is more than an incumbent ideology, more than what is got away with by the powerful. The moral culture of Germany in the time of Hitler included the cognitive resources of dissent and resistance expressible by its victims, and indeed among its more inchoately dissident insiders too.¹⁵

There is room for doubt, indeed, about the whole conception of a moral framework understood by way of analogy with spatio-temporal co-ordinates. I have already emphasized the presence of resources for contestation in any real moral culture. Stephen Darwall emphasized a different point of disanalogy:

A doesn’t simply believe that not helping those in need is wrong in relation to his values, principles, and norms. Rather he *accepts* those values and norms and, in doing so, thinks that going counter to them is wrong *period*....In the motion case, however, A and B have no such relation to their spatio-temporal positions...’ (Darwall 1998, p. 186).

The basic moral rules and principles that constitute a moral framework—imagined by Harman as a complex background premise to all our moral judgements—are themselves in the fray of moral attitudes and judgements susceptible to critical assessment, endorsement or rejection. The nature of moral judgement and interpretation is much more holistic than the ‘moral co-ordinates’ metaphor allows.

This mismatch between the Neurath’s boat of moral culture and the static metaphor of a moral framework is connected with the difficulty, for Harman, of accounting for moral change. What critical impetus makes moral attitudes develop

¹⁵ For a haunting story of quiet resistance see Hans Fallader’s novel, *Alone In Berlin* (Fallader 2009).

historically? Harman accounts for it in terms of ‘moral bargaining’. The idea that morality is an ongoing bargained compromise between people with different degrees of wealth and power is argued for largely on the grounds that it can explain why we regard the obligation not to harm others as a much stronger principle than the obligation to help others, for such a ranking obviously suits the rich and powerful (Harman 1996, p. 25). A similar line of argument is given in relation to the way our moral attitudes tend to favour the wellbeing of humans over animals. This mini-genealogy of the development of moral values, however, backfires. The idea that the driving impulse in moral change is that of the bargain—and the competition of interests that it represents—surely does reflect some of the *real politik* of moral life, but it cannot possibly capture the character of moral argument. Moral argument is moral *reasoning*, and although it is true that when moral arguments are made by the down-trodden then their arguments will *inter alia* be such as to serve their interests, it would not be a moral argument at all if its *grounds* were mere self-interest. The grounds of a moral argument must be some form of justice. Moral argument may involve sticking up for oneself, but it may equally, and in the same terms, be a matter of sticking up for others. The whole idea of a bargain does not belong to moral reasoning. Real moral debate may often be intertwined with bargain making, but it is not the same thing.

If, however, we allow Harman’s reduction of moral argument to bargaining, what are the implications for moral truth? Here Harman takes up a ready-made expressivist or projectivist position, so that moral truth, and its cognates such as moral reason and moral justification, are all dealt with in the familiar *as-if* or *quasi* mode. Indeed he refers to his general strategy of accommodating these concepts as ‘quasi-absolutism’. When we speak of moral truths, and no matter what we intend, we are really speaking of something *ersatz*. He uses capitals for the quasi-absolutist (QA) usage:

For example, in saying that raising animals for food is WRONG, Veronica expresses her approval of moral standards that would prohibit the practice. In saying that raising animals for food is not WRONG, Archie expresses approval of standards that do not prohibit raising animals for food (Harman 1996, p. 35).

In making this move, Harman is in company with many moral expressivists, and in line with a notion of ‘relative truth’ defended for instance by Foot in her non-partisan investigation of the coherence of moral relativism (Foot 2001). For Harman, the local conventions that constitute morality admit of *quasi*-truth, where this is to be understood as true-relative-to-the-subject’s-moral-framework. This question of truth refers us to the next branch of our relativist family tree: that of *Moral Truth*. We could picture Harman’s quasi-absolutism on this branch, but I have featured it on the *Moral Reasons* branch because of the more distinctive and more basic motivating role that the idea of shared reasons plays in his view. Furthermore, the relativism I shall discuss in connection with moral truth is fundamentally different from all those whose genealogy I have so far traced. These views have all stemmed from subjectivism specifically about *value*, conceived by way of contrast with an objective physical realm. The relativism I shall discuss under the head of moral truth, however, stems instead from a *global* subjectivism. The attitude to moral truth that it produces is therefore differently oriented from the one we have seen embraced by Harman. It is a globally sceptical attitude to the very idea of truth as we (allegedly) commonly understand it. This places morality on a strange par with non-evaluative factual discourse, and it means that the issues thrown up for morality have a different aspect. The worry that moral judgements might turn out to be less than they’re cracked up to be is no longer a matter of their objectivity comparing disappointingly with that of judgements about the physical world; but rather that the psychological demands of maintaining moral conviction turn out to be a special case of a quite general problem about sustaining convictions of any kind in parallel with a commitment to global scepticism about truth. The species of moral relativism we encounter as we look along the branch of Moral Truth is one whose deconstructionist energy connected philosophical relativism directly to the wider postmodernist *zeitgeist* of the seventies and eighties. I turn to the pragmatism of Richard Rorty.

Moral Truth

I use ‘ironist’ to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires—someone sufficiently

historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease (Rorty 1990, p. xv).

Rorty's 'ironism' is an intriguing form of moral relativism because its philosophical motivations are not special to matters of value, and yet morality none the less poses a special problem in his view—or at any rate, a problem for which he proposes a special solution. 'Ironism' is the solution; so what is the problem? The problem is: how to retain moral conviction if one believes morality has turned out to be radically different from what it seemed—not absolute but relative, not a system of beliefs aiming to match an independent objective morality but a contingent social construct or language game. The problem is one of preserving first order moral conviction in the face of moral scepticism at the reflective level (a general issue that Williams flagged up in terms of the risk of our moral commitments becoming unstable under reflection). It is a globally sourced version, then, of a problem which in its localized form confronts any moral relativist position, and more broadly any error theoretical account of morality.

Ironism is an error theory in all but name. The term 'error theory' of course comes from Mackie's moral scepticism, though it is a Humean sceptical trope played out in a new key. Hume held a parallel view concerning a range of things about whose existence he was sceptical—the idea of a necessary connection between cause and effect, for instance, or the idea of the self—but interestingly never in relation to moral conviction, which was not debunked but rather explained, indeed vindicated, in Hume's naturalistic approach. The Hume-style sceptical treatment was meted out to morality only by Mackie, whose naturalism was of a very different genus. Mackie diagnosed an objectivist error in moral consciousness; namely, an erroneous commitment to the strong metaphysical objectivity of moral value. The error is conceived—rather as Hume conceived our commitment to the necessary connection between cause and effect, et cetera—as irremediable, because so deep-seated in our psychological habits. Mackie regarded the objectivist presumption as integral to our moral experience and language. Taking the truth-aptness of moral statements at face

value, he is the most pessimistic of cognitivists, picturing the objectivist error as implicit in all such statements, and so finding them uniformly false. The point of the error theory is to reconcile the sceptical meta-ethics with the continuation of ordinary authoritative moral talk and experience, error and all. But how to go on? (Should we cross our fingers behind our backs whenever we express a moral conviction?)

Mackie's error theory depended on the idea that we cannot help the error, but while Hume before him could plausibly suggest that our minds cannot help but posit a necessary causal connection, or a self, or whatever it might be, it is thoroughly implausible to suggest that the very nature of moral language and experience irrevocably leads our minds to spread intrinsically motivating, metaphysically objective moral values on the world. I believe the proposal is both intellectualist and historically naïve. Intellectualist because it supposes that such a highly specific set of philosophical commitments could be built into our everyday moral talk and experience as such (not to mention such an *unpromising* bunch of commitments—few moral objectivists would own them); and historically naïve because to imagine that moral experience should be unchanging through every moral social setting—religious or secular, ascetic or libertine, traditionalist or relativistic—is to be in denial about the contingency of moral phenomenology. But I shall not develop these points, since our present interest in Mackie is confined to the parallel that his error theory makes with Rorty's ironist strategy. By dividing the moral subject into two personae, that of the 'private ironist' (the sceptical philosopher) and that of the 'public liberal' (the morally engaged agent), he aims to reconcile his pragmatist brand of scepticism with continued engagement in the business of caring morally about other people's suffering:

The core of my book [*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*] is a distinction between private concerns, in the sense of idiosyncratic projects of self-overcoming, and public concerns, those having to do with the suffering of other human beings (Rorty 1998, pp. 307-8, note 2).

But the threat to authoritative morality is not quite banished, because the two personae of private ironist and public liberal cannot be entirely separated. By Rorty's own account, there is a porous psychological boundary, so that ironists are never 'quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves' (Rorty 1990, pp. 73-4). Moral seriousness, or what I have been variously calling authority or conviction, is undermined. Given the commitments of the split personality, this must be right. There can be no hermetic seal between morally committed and sceptical stances in one and the same person. The failure to appreciate this instability was Mackie's own error. Rorty is more sanguine, and his conclusion is a shrug of personal resignation to accompany his easy, frank advice: Relax, and learn to live with the tension.

I do not see how we could live with so great a tension for long. It is fortunate, then, that we do not have to, for the tension in question is a chimera. It is generated only by Rorty's continued implicit commitment to the very conception (the 'metaphysical' or 'representationalist' conception) of moral truth that he urges us to jettison. He evidently still regards moral 'seriousness' as requiring some such metaphysical attitude (that is why ironists cannot quite take themselves seriously). Therein lies *his* error. The rhetoric is repeatedly that of the 'Truth cannot be out there' variety,¹⁶ but with the coming of age of deflationist accounts, one can only ask, Whoever would think that it was? Given a metaphysically undemanding conception of truth, and the consequent easy possibility not only of moral truth but moral knowledge too (all available on a subjectivist conception of value), Rorty's scepticism comes to look decidedly quixotic. In short, his principled wish to shake off representationalism regarding the true could have been well served by a disquotational conception; yet he tilted at anything going by the name of truth. He embraced instead a notion of 'conversation', designed to do service for truth and reason duly relieved of the burden of seriousness. He saw a need for this because he

¹⁶ 'Truth cannot be out there—cannot exist independently of the human mind—because sentences cannot so exist, or be out there. The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own—unaided by the describing activities of human beings—cannot' (Rorty 1990, p. 5).

assumed that anyone taking truth or reason seriously must be wedded to the representationalist conception he eschewed: ““Reason,” as the term is used in the Platonic and Kantian traditions, is interlocked with the notions of truth as correspondence, of knowledge as discovery of essence, of morality as obedience to principle, all the notions which the pragmatist tried to deconstruct’ (Rorty 1982, p. 172). But Rorty’s assumption quickly proved mistaken, inasmuch as alternative serious conceptions of truth and reason emerged in the evolving philosophical literature, a literature which he (ironically for a declared historicist) imagined as stuck in time, essentializing it in terms of the ‘Platonic and Kantian traditions’.

Rorty’s conception of ‘conversation’ is meant to do without seriousness because it styles itself as aspiring not to truth but only to ‘solidarity’. The aim of all such discourse, we are told, and the signature aim of the public liberal, is to ever-expand the circle of those we call ‘us’. But even solidarity is aspired to for a *reason*—grounds of justice, for instance, or equality. These are concepts that make an intrinsic claim to objectivity; they are the sort of thing that people argue for, rather than just bargaining with. Further, the objectivity-claiming discourse Rorty was entreating us to ditch was too often the only platform the powerless had to stand on. This point was powerfully made from a feminist perspective by Sabina Lovibond. Identifying Rorty’s pragmatism as a species of postmodernism, she posed the challenging rhetorical question: ‘How can anyone ask me to say goodbye to “emancipatory metanarratives” when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-or-miss affair?’ (Lovibond 1989, p. 12).

Rorty of course hoped we could continue to use even our grandest emancipatory moral concepts, if with a resigned nudge and a wink, in the name of a self-consciously ‘ethnocentric’ approach to ethical thinking. But embracing ethnocentrism adds nothing. It is just a device to put all our objectivity-claiming moral concepts in scare quotes, pre-empting accusations of seriousness in seeking solidarity, and so of hypocrisy or self-refutation. The relevant problem with Rorty’s moral ironism is indeed not that it is self-refuting (it isn’t), but rather that it would be psychologically unsustainable, given the intrinsically objectivity-seeking nature of moral argument. Rorty is aware of this worry, but he bills it as a purely practical challenge, ‘the *practical* question of whether the notion of “conversation” *can*

substitute for that of “reason” (Rorty 1982, p. 172). There is indeed an important practical question (Will we be able to keep up the business of moral conviction?), but there is also a philosophical complaint to be made: Rorty sells truth and reason short, by characterizing them as serious only on a representationalist conception. This reiterates the error I drew attention to earlier. Contrary to Rorty’s philosophical pessimism, anti-representationalists do not have to learn to take truth and reason non-seriously, for there are serious yet non-representationalist conceptions available. As before, ironism became not only psychologically unsustainable, but philosophically unmotivated.

We might want to retain something of Rorty’s commitment to the contingency of morality, even while we reject his ironism. A sensible historicism implies a degree of moral contingency, and contingency implies pluralism. Moral pluralism calls for strong forms of non-dogmatism and open-mindedness in relation to one’s moral views—what Isaiah Berlin described as a willingness to help ‘maintain a precarious equilibrium’ of competing values (Berlin 1959, p. 18). Openness to the revision of one’s moral ideas must of course be a desideratum for any moral thinker, on whatever meta-ethical view. But in Berlin’s case we greet a strong version of the point, because it is not intended simply as a warning against having too high an opinion of one’s own moral point of view. Rather, the point is made as an integral part of his commitment to pluralism about moral outlooks, a pluralism which organized his thinking about the moral and political order. For Berlin, moral pluralism entailed the permanent importance of keeping an open mind in the strong sense of regarding one’s set of moral commitments as one among a range of possibilities. Here I believe we can sense a deep connection between Berlin’s pluralism and the historicist approach to morality advanced by Williams. They embraced the contingency of morality, and the freedom it implied, in similar spirit.

And so the final branch of our relativist family tree as I have drawn it is that of *Moral Plurality*. Moral pluralism can find non-relativist expression, as it did in

Berlin's writing¹⁷; but it can also be advanced specifically as a form of moral relativism. So it is by David Wong.

Moral Plurality

If pluralistic relativism is going to work as a fully spelled out meta-ethical position, it must supply a convincing account of what constrains the plurality of acceptable moralities. David Wong aims to do just that: 'A distinctive feature of my naturalistic account is that it generates significant constraints on what could count as an adequate morality, given its functions and given human nature' (Wong 2006, p. 44).

His account echoes a brief genealogical story of morality told by the Chinese philosopher Xunzi:

On Xunzi's genealogy of morality, the ancient sage-kings saw the need to control the inborn tendency of human beings to seek gain, which consists in satisfying desires of the ear and eye. The fact that such desires have no natural limit makes for chaos when combined with scarcity of resources. The sage-kings invented within ritual and moral principles in order to apportion things, to nurture the desires of men, and to supply the means for their satisfaction (Wong 2006, p. 38).

As Wong notes, the argument also echoes a story that Plato puts in Protagoras' mouth to the effect that Zeus gave human beings the virtues of reverence and justice, and the bonds of friendship and conciliation, because without these virtues co-ordinated life in cities would be impossible. Both genealogical stories give narrative form to the fact that certain basic values or virtues are necessary conditions for social co-ordination and co-operation. More specifically, Wong breaks these down into a number of conditions on any acceptable moral system. It must: regulate intrapersonal

¹⁷ For a more recent exponent of non-relativist pluralism, see Raz, 2003. Maria Baghramian has also argued for the advantages of moral pluralism over relativism (see Baghramian 2004, 9.6).

psychological features of the agent; regulate interpersonal co-ordination; incorporate a norm of reciprocity; place constraints relating to balancing self- and other-concern; it must also be justifiable to those 'governed' by the moral norms; and finally it must require that people can handle disagreement constructively, something Wong labels 'accommodation'.

The requirement that any acceptable morality incorporate some intrapersonal function is best thought of in immediate relation to the requirement of interpersonal function. Obviously, someone whose selfish drives are insufficiently moderated cannot be a good social co-operator; and so a morality must impose pressures to shape individual agents' motivations in a manner that facilitates sociability. These two 'functions' of morality effectively give rise to the requirement of the norm of reciprocity (the proportional return of good for good) as a way of bolstering social cooperation in the face of self-interest:

Moral norms need to take into account the strength of self-interest in order to accommodate that motivation and to encourage its integration with motivations that more directly lead to acting on behalf of others. Moralities, then, should not merely restrain actions from self-interest or encourage the development of opposing motivations, though they do these things. They should provide outlets for the expression of self-interest that can be consistent with the expression of other-directed motivations (Wong 2006, p. 51).

The requirement that morality incorporate some way of balancing self- and other-concern (egoistic and altruistic impulses) is argued for in relation to evidence for the place of altruistic motives in evolutionary theory. Once again, the idea here is to bolster the interpersonal function; that is, to give some scientific support for the claim that any acceptable morality will ensure interpersonal cooperation rather than merely selfish behaviour. This does not add a new condition on morality, but rather lends empirical support to the interpersonal social-cooperative function that is the organizing idea of Wong's universalist constraint.

At this point it is worth raising a potential objection: Is the kind of cooperative social functionality that Wong argues to be a universal condition on acceptable

moralties really strong enough? Or, rather, can it be a strong enough requirement without invoking more substantive and local moral ideas? Take women. Was it, or was it not, a socially functional society in Britain that kept women in their place as disenfranchised, legally second-class citizens through the nineteenth-century, albeit often with considerable informal forms of domestic power? I do not know the answer to this question. Since the situation was unjust to women, it is tempting to deem it thereby a non-functional, insufficiently co-operative society. But that would probably be false. One's moral complaint is not really that the society failed in terms of *social cooperation*. On the contrary, men and women co-operated plenty, and while society as a whole may not have been optimal from the point of view of human resources, still it functioned all right. It is therefore a useful question to pose in relation to Wong's pluralism whether the condition of social cooperation can constrain morality sufficiently so that his view does not, on closer inspection, come to resemble a much cruder 'their rules are right for them' moral relativism.

Wong, however, has an answer to this worry, for this is where his condition of justification to those governed by the morality comes in. His discussion makes clear that he regards this constraint as requiring that any given moral system must be justifiable to all those subject to its norms, and that includes its down-trodden. To use my example, Wong would say that the nineteenth-century morality that deprived women of the vote was only acceptable in so far as it could have been justified *to them*, and without trading in falsehoods. But now a worry surely arises from the other direction: the condition of justification to the governed is a very strong liberal condition, not plausibly represented as straightforwardly deriving from the condition of social co-operation. This, however, may not be an insurmountable problem, so long as the condition is defended independently as a condition in its own right, without too much tension with the pluralist framework. The condition does indeed fit Wong's purpose in that it permits a plurality of moralities in just the manner intended: a community-based morality, for instance, might be one that could be justified to the least powerful, just as a more individualistic rights-based moral system might be justified to its least powerful members.

The final condition, stemming more directly from the requirement of social cooperation and coordination, is that of 'accommodation'. Moral cultures are sites of

internal moral plurality and dissent ('ambivalence'), and this means that a well-functioning society will be able to handle moral disagreement well:

Given the inevitability of serious disagreement within all kinds of moral traditions that have any degree of complexity, a particular sort of ethical value becomes especially important for the stability and integrity of these traditions and societies. Let me call this value 'accommodation'. To have this value is to be committed to supporting noncoercive and constructive relations with others although they have ethical beliefs that conflict with one's own (Wong 2006, p. 64).

Contemplating this condition of accommodation and the likelihood that it will often take the form of constructing moral *agreements* of various kinds (including agreeing to disagree), we might be moved to ask, Is this pluralism really a kind of relativism? The answer is surely Yes. Although it has a substantial universalist core, provided by the two requirements of social co-operation and justification to the governed, still the remainder has a relativist structure: people and their actions are to be judged according to the values of their culture. At this point, the argument made above in relation to the Samurai practice of *tsujigiri* returns, however, to complicate the picture. Even if Wong is right that after the basic moral constraint of social co-ordination, plus justifiability to the governed, the rest of morality is up for social invention in a manner that relativizes moral judgement, still we should interrogate any easy reference to this thing called 'moral culture'. As I argued in the first section, agreeing with Moody-Adams, there is almost always marginal moral-interpretive space for the expression of dissent and challenge to the moral *status quo*, and this puts pressure on the pluralist idea that two apparently different moral cultures really are deeply different. Wong, however, need not be on the defensive over this, for he builds in to his conception of moral culture that it is a site of ongoing disagreement—indeed this much is guaranteed by the fact of value pluralism, which naturally generates disagreement and a consequent need for accommodation. Accordingly his conception of moral cultures is such that they have an 'open texture', and that 'moralities themselves are uneasy, somewhat indeterminate combinations of values that are not easily held together' (Wong 1995, p. 396).

A picture such as Wong's makes for an attractive hybrid, capable of reconciling the universalistic dynamic in moral thinking with its relativistic aspects. It may well be that the best future for meta-ethics in relation to the universalist-relativist tension is to stop trying to press all of morality into one mould or the other, but to look and see more carefully what sorts of relativizations we are inclined to make in our most sensitive moral thinking, so that we might differentiate that which is contingent and relative from that which is humanly necessary and so universal. I suspect that the moral pluralist branch of our family tree, a close cousin of historicism, may prove to be the strongest relativist line.¹⁸

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