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David B. Wong
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1 Why Are People So Exercised about Moral Relativism?

Growing up Chinese American in the American Midwest, the ways of my family, including what was expected of me as a son, seemed painfully different from the ways of the families of my European American friends. Family seemed so much more important in my home. This did not mean that my European American friends had no responsibilities to their families, but in general, their duties rested upon their shoulders more lightly. My mother once said to me that she simply didn't understand (maybe she meant didn't approve of) the American obsession with happiness. She thought the most important thing was to fulfill one's responsibilities to others, and of course the weightiest ones were owed to family. I don't think she meant to deny the importance of a subjective sense of contentment (what I think she meant by "happiness"), but her point was that the subjective sense had to be earned through the performance of responsibilities, as best as one could. I respected her sentiments, and half of me agreed with her, but the other half wanted to be free to pursue happiness.

The question was about how I should live my life, and so it took on the greatest personal importance for me. When I began to take moral relativism seriously, some of those closest to me wondered whether I should find some other philosophical subject to write about. Many people think that moral relativism licenses any answer a person would be inclined to give, or any answer their society's culture gives. That is why "moral relativism" is often used as an epithet, a term of derision by people who assume that morality is a matter for reasoned judgment. I agree with this assumption, but depart from the oft-associated, but very different one that for any moral question there is a single correct answer to be found and that conflicting answers are incorrect. Others, and I am among them, have come to question the latter assumption by reflecting on the nature of moral disagreement. The kinds of disagreement that can be most effectively adduced in support of moral relativism typically involve values that come into conflict, each of which are compelling in their own right (consider liberty versus equality). The experience of moral conflict can be interpersonal, in which different sides have different views as to which value is most compelling given the circumstances. Conflict also can be intrapersonal. That is, one can be internally divided between two moral viewpoints, as was the case for me after my discussion with my mother.

The mere fact that people disagree, intrapersonally or interpersonally, is not in itself a reason to think that there isn't a single correct answer to be found. Insufficient evidence to resolve a disagreement is compatible with there being a single correct answer. The interpretive frameworks that people bring to assessing the evidence can differ markedly, producing conflicting views, but

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this too is compatible with there being a single correct answer. The motivation that people have for adopting beliefs, moral and otherwise, and whether they are aware of their motivation or not, is often that these beliefs are held by others with whom they identify or align themselves. Beliefs can help people protect their self-esteem, and this can lead to motivations to overlook evidence that undermines these beliefs and focus on evidence that supports them. Take the belief that people are solely responsible for what they have achieved in life, which plays a key role in certain conservative views about distributive justice. If one has enjoyed reasonable success, one may strongly believe that one did so on one's own, focusing on the genuinely difficult situations one had to work one's way through, but not so much keeping in mind the help others provided along the way. This is a very familiar way of coming to an ill-founded belief, and philosophers point to such epistemic pitfalls to argue that moral disagreement provides little or no evidence against metaethical universalism (e.g., see Brink 1989). But one can agree that such pitfalls exist, and still reject the idea that they "explain away" all important moral disagreement.

In what follows, I make a case for this rejection and for accepting some versions of moral relativism. The path begins with a discussion of how to frame the issue of moral relativism. What exactly are the views being debated for which certain kinds of moral disagreements are adduced as evidence?

2 How Should Theses about Moral Relativism Be Framed?

In philosophy, so much depends on how you frame the question. The best way of framing the question enables interlocutors to fully consider the main considerations that have motivated the contending sides, and to evaluate the full array of possible conclusions that could be justified by those considerations. A less-desirable framing would narrow the range of motivating considerations or the possible conclusions that could be reached. With this in mind, "metaethical moral relativism" is defined here as the thesis that there is no single true or most justified morality (with some adaptation, this formulation is from Harman 2000, 77). Morality here is taken as a guide to what sort of actions and attitudes are required, prohibited, and permissible, and much of its subject matter concerns how one is to relate to and affect others, though it can also specify for the individual what it is to live a worthwhile life. The disjunction, "true or most justified," is meant to allow for the possible position that morality is not the sort of thing that is true or false (as an order or admonition might not be true or false), but nevertheless can be justified, perhaps in greater or lesser degree (as an order or admonition might be more or less well taken). Relativism, thus defined, is opposed to what I shall call "universalism": the view that there is a single true or most justified morality.

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This view is sometimes called "absolutism," which seems the natural opposing term for "relativism," but I will use "universalism" since the other term is often used to refer to another type of normative view that there are moral prescriptive truths that hold without exceptions, such as "Never lie."

The type of moral relativism thus defined is "metaethical" as opposed to "normative" moral relativism. The metaethical thesis does not purport to tell us what is morally right or wrong or what a morally good life is. Normative moral relativism is the subject of Sections 17–24, but we will have occasion to address some normative questions about what we ought to do throughout this Element. Metaethics addresses metaphysical and epistemological issues that often arise when we confront puzzles and difficulties in trying to answer the first-order normative questions about what to do or how to live. In particular, puzzling about the – sometimes seemingly intractable – moral differences between people and even within the belief system of a single person can lead to belief in metaethical relativism.

Metaethical moral relativism, as defined here, embraces a capacious set of possibilities. It contrasts with more specific definitions that are usually more extreme: for example, the view that the truth or justifiability of a morality is determined by whatever standards or practices are established within a group or even by a single person. This is metaethical relativism as "anything goes." While the definition proffered here includes the extreme version as a possibility, it also includes what one might call a moderate form of relativism or a strong form of pluralism: the view that more than one morality is true or most justified but that not all moralities are true or most justified. It will be argued in Sections 3–16 that this latter view is most consistent with the best explanation of both similarities and differences in moral belief and practice, with empirically grounded theories of the major roles they play in human life, and with recent empirical evidence as to laypeople's attitudes toward moral objectivity.

3 Relationship and Community, Autonomy and Rights

Many people have experienced the kind of conflict I experienced. Some of them are immigrants or the children of immigrants (as I am), to a developed country. One way of describing the conflict in a general way is to say that it obtains between duties arising from relationship and membership in community, on the one hand, and on the other hand, rights to personal autonomy that provide a protected space to live as one pleases. The film *A Great Wall* (1986) depicts an interpersonal conflict of values occasioned by a Chinese American family's trip to China to visit the father's sister and her family. The daughter from the Chinese family learns the concept of privacy from the son of the Chinese

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American family, and deploys the concept in objecting to her mother's opening and reading her mail before handing it to her. The mother reacts to her daughter's indignation with bafflement: Why should she need permission to learn what is going on for her daughter?

These value conflicts come under the more general heading of relationship and community, on the one hand, and on the other hand, autonomy and individual rights. For example, the right to freedom of speech can come into conflict with the value of promoting and protecting relationships of mutual concern and trust. A case can be made for restricting speech when it seriously threatens basic forms of shared understanding that form part of the framework of mutual trust. Not only can this framework be undermined through speech that intimidates and foments hatred, but it can turn the value of speech against itself through causing those it victimizes to be silenced for fear of identifying themselves as members of the targeted group (consider the brutal psychological terrorism often waged over social media these days). Sometimes historical events tilt the weight of judgment in favor of restriction – see, for example, the illegality of Holocaust denial in many European countries – and sometimes acts of intimidation are so egregious that they clearly merit the punishment of law, as in the case of the students at the University of Mississippi who both hung a noose and draped the Confederate battle flag around the statue of James Meredith, the university's first black student (Srvluga 2015). Even if in such cases it is fairly clear what should be done, there are many cases in which it is not. It is important to recognize that the values on each side of the conflicts mentioned can be in relationships of mutual support as well as discord. The absence of relations of mutual caring and respect has historically in the United States led to the willingness to prevent disfavored groups – for example women, African Americans, Native or First Americans, and those coming or descended from people from Asian countries (depending on the historical period and the country of origin) – from being accorded equal status or citizenship, or from being able to exercise their rights to vote and assemble for political participation. Supporting the value of relationship can support the rights of those with whom one is in relationship.

There is comparatively little attention paid to conflict between relationship and autonomy in academic moral philosophy, at least when compared with conflict between the value of acting for the greatest good of the greatest number and the rights of individuals to have their most compelling interests protected, even if sacrificing those interests is for the greater good. The dominance of the argumentative dialectic around the latter conflict in modern Western moral philosophy explains this disparity of attention. The fact that so much of the oxygen is consumed by the dialectic is itself revealing of an assumption shared

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by the opposing sides: that the individual is taken as morally basic, whether it be the welfare or happiness or utility of the individual, which under one of the most dominant forms of consequentialism is to be aggregated and maximized, or some trait individuals possess, such as rationality or the possession of basic interests, in virtue of which they have rights. By contrast, moral conflicts of the first kind involve at least one side taking relationship as a foremost value. Moralities that emphasize the value of relationship in prominent ways are found all over the world, and are at least as pervasive as moralities emphasizing rights or promotion of utility. Conflicts involving the value of relationship with the other two kinds of value need not involve one side denying that the other side's values are values at all. Indeed, it need not involve denying that the other side's values are important. It can involve a difference in the value priorities of the different sides.

As implied by my first example derived from personal experience, there are cultural differences in these value priorities. Cultures in which relationship is given high priority include not just the ones expressed by Chinese Confucian ethics, but Ubuntu ethics associated with South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Malawi. There are Indigenous ethics, such as those of many Native American peoples, for example the Ojibwe, Chippewa, and Anishanaabe. Not only do these ethics generally have in common the high priority they place on having relationships of the right sort (e.g., both Confucian and Ubuntu ethics stress that being a realized person is to be in relationship with other persons; see Metz 2011), but the relational ethic can in some of its forms acknowledge the organic interdependence of all life and is extended toward parts of the environment that go beyond the human: plants, animals, and the land and water. These parts are sometimes conceived and treated in ways similar to one's human kin (Coulthard 2014; Whyte 2018; Murdock 2020; Hourdequin 2021). To return to the Chinese tradition, Daoism emphasizes the human relationship to the rest of nature and points to what can be learned from the operation of natural processes that contrast with the rigidity and fixedness of conventional human conceptualizations of the way things work (Hourdequin and Wong 2005).

Within contemporary Western moral philosophy, Alasdair MacIntyre (1988, 2007), Michael Sandel (1998), and Charles Taylor (1985, 1989) have presented distinctive and sophisticated critiques of consequentialist and deontological normative theories. It is not within the project of this Element to discuss their theories, but it is sufficient to point out here that their preferred normative theories each give prominent place to an ethic of relationship and community. There are significant differences between these three thinkers in the extent and manner in which they believe the values of relationship can be made compatible with ethics that emphasize rights and autonomy. Those working in care ethics present

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a similar alternative, at least on a very general level, to consequentialist and deontological normative theories. Uniting the diverse work of thinkers such as Annette Baier (1986), Carol Gilligan (1982), Virginia Held (2006), Eva Kittay (1999), Nel Noddings (1984), Sara Ruddick (1989), Joan Tronto (1993), and Margaret Urban Walker (2007) is accordance of greater priority to the value of relationships and the recognition that this emphasis on relationship poses a significant alternative to the two dominant traditions of modern Western moral philosophy. Though the care ethic is strongly associated with feminist ethics, Chenyang Li (1994) has drawn attention to the parallels between the care ethic and the Confucian ethic, which is the philosophical crystallization of the cultural tradition my mother was rooted in. There are a great many differences between Confucian and care ethics, as Li would acknowledge, but he is also right to point out that they share an important point of difference from the dominant mainstream of modern Western moral philosophy.

When taken together, these conflicts involving relationship and community on the one hand, and (personal) autonomy and individual rights on the other hand indicate that there is a central issue that occurs repeatedly in normative moral thought and practice. That it does so says something about the complexity of what human beings value and what they need. The reader may still be unconvinced that there is need to delve further into this conflict. To take an example that is likely not to be purely hypothetical, some people among the likely audience for this Element may take the position that it is sufficient to dismiss relationship-centered moralities simply because they can come into conflict with rights-centered moralities. These people might take that position because they are so firm on the absolute correctness of there being certain rights that should not be violated. The next section argues that there are both epistemic and ethical reasons to delve further by addressing barriers to proper understanding of relationship-centered moralities on the part of those who subscribe to rights-centered moralities.

4 Epistemic Reasons to Delve Further into the Conflict between Relationship-Centered and Rights-Centered Moralities

Recent literature on the proper epistemic response to disagreement with another person is focused on situations in which the other is one's epistemic "peer." Factors that go into assessing peerhood include whether the parties are roughly equal in the relevant cognitive abilities they bring to the issue in dispute; whether there is unequal bias on the issue; and whether they have the same evidence. The question is then raised as to whether peer disagreement with another gives one reason to think one is mistaken in holding one's own position.

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A typical example features friends, after dinner at a restaurant, calculating how much of a tip each should leave the server. They agree to divide equally a tip of twenty percent of the total bill, and do the math in their heads, but they end up with different amounts. One well-known position on this kind of example is that the disagreement of one's peer gives one as much reason to doubt the correctness of one's answer as one has to stick with one's answer (Christensen 2007).

There are a variety of other positions on the correct epistemic stance to take, but the point to be made here is that the moral disagreements just discussed raise a rather different question: whether one has sufficient information to make a reasonable judgment as to whether the parties to the disagreement *are* peers. Do the opposing sides have the same evidence? While ordinary facts, such as how much the total bill is, can certainly count as part of the evidence in moral disagreements over what is right and wrong, such facts get taken into account from the standpoint of perspectives composed of configurations of values. The opposing sides have perspectives that significantly differ from each other, even when there is considerable overlap in the values. Given that people arrive at their positions in a disagreement on the basis of their value perspectives, we should know with some specificity what those perspectives are and what evidence they have for adopting them. In the peer disagreement literature, one option for appropriate epistemic response to the restaurant tip case is suspending belief as to what is the correct amount. In the sort of cases of moral disagreement under discussion here, the appropriate response is further sustained and concerted inquiry. This is in fact the uptake of Christensen's influential article on the import of disagreement for the activity of knowledge seeking: that in many cases we should take moral disagreement as the opportunity to improve on our knowledge (Christensen 2007).

Given the practical urgency of acting on *moral* belief in particular, suspension of belief may not be a morally viable option. As will be discussed in Sections 18–20, declining epistemic confidence in the justifiability of one's moral beliefs may appropriately affect *how* one acts on them. The immediate point at this stage in the argument, however, is that further inquiry is required as a matter of epistemic rationality. While it is possible to simply stand unmoved on the basis of one's strong moral intuitions (such as intuitions about what rights people have and the scope of those rights as they collide with other moral considerations), one should know that others have had similarly unshakable intuitions very different from one's own. Within the nonmoral realm, there seem to be few intuitions people tended to have about the geometrical properties of physical space that seemed as unshakable as the axioms that set up Euclidean geometry (e.g., that the shortest distance between two points is a straight line and that there is only one line going through a point not on another line and that

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is parallel to that other line). Yet current mathematics regards these axioms not as necessary truths about physical space but as hypotheses to which there are alternatives. Alternative geometries have physical application and are part of a revolution in how space is scientifically conceived. We would do well to test our current intuitions against the intuitions that have driven other value perspectives. As a practical matter, we may have to act on our values at any given time, but that does not prevent us from conducting inquiry into the moral traditions of others.

We do not know how our epistemic situations compare to those of others who hold these other value perspectives. To the extent that one has not seriously investigated other traditions, and also veins of thought and practice within what could broadly be deemed one's own tradition (think of care ethics and defenses of more relationally oriented ethics within the modern Western tradition), one should have one's confidence dented in the singular truth or justifiability of one's own value perspective. The various ways that one can misjudge, accept stereotypes, and simply not make enough of an effort to understand heighten the epistemic challenge. Studies reveal tendencies to exaggerate the similarities among members of a group and to be biased in favor of our own groups and denigrate other groups (see Tajfel 1970; Tajfel et al. 1971; Tajfel and Turner 1979). We should take such results as a caution about our tendency to make quick judgments about the immorality of others.

The epistemic argument I have just made is intended to be a universal argument addressed to the question of what is the epistemically rational response to the types of moral disagreement mentioned. Given the normative importance of knowing how others decide on and morally justify their ways of acting, we should conduct inquiry into the traditions that ground their decisions as a matter of thoroughness and conscientiousness. Further, knowing that our evaluations of others tend to be biased and provincial, we should try to correct course through exercising our curiosity. To be clear, pressing one's inquiry into the reasons that others might have for their moral positions is not in itself an argument for metaethical moral relativism. It could just as well result in the conclusion of metaethical universalism. The point is that both those disposed toward relativism and toward universalism should be looking into the most difficult and challenging moral disagreements to see if a single correct answer looks like it might eventually emerge. The metaethical moral relativist is prepared to argue that a single correct answer does not emerge and that we have little reason to think that one will.

Philosophers who are unsympathetic to metaethical moral relativism sometimes look down on the motivations of its proponents. The motivations purportedly show a kind of intellectual laziness, an unwillingness to try "to get to the

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bottom of things."[1] I don't deny that this is sometimes the kind of motivation to be found behind the view. At its best, however, moral relativism is motivated precisely by the desire to get to the bottom of things. From this point of view, it is the universalist who stops inquiry too soon, who is too ready to fall back on what seems self-evident and clear to them, at a point when they could inquire further into how other people have thought differently in ways that challenge that stopping point. In this guise, relativism is motivated by a sense of humility before the wide and variegated expanse of human experience and aspiration (in fact, the claim here is that it is rational to feel this sense of humility), and by a desire to learn from others, including those in different historical eras and different societies, those strange neighbors down the street, and difficult Aunt Julia across the table at the big family gathering. Far from being motivated by intellectual laziness, it is spurred by a willingness to challenge one's own deepest assumptions by discovering the different assumptions that others make. It is fed by the desire to discover not only what one's own best arguments for one's moral commitments are, but to discover what the best arguments of others are for their moral commitments. It rests on the resolve to balance as best as one can such motivations against the importance of standing for one's sense of what is right and just and good.

5 An Ethical Argument for Extended Inquiry into Rivals to One's Own Ethical Views

There is another, separate, and additional argument to be made for extended inquiry into the best arguments of others, and it in fact appeals to one's own sense of what is right and just and good. Because inquiry is an activity and therefore practical in itself and also in many of its ramifications for further action, it is subject to moral evaluation and prescription. In her work on epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker has observed that "epistemology as it has traditionally been pursued has been impoverished by the lack of any theoretical framework conducive to revealing the ethical and political aspects of our epistemic conduct," and similarly, she observes, it is "equally a pity that ethics has not traditionally taken our epistemic conduct into its remit" (Fricker 2007, 2).

Here, we take up Fricker's appeal by pointing out that in mischaracterizing, simplifying, and stereotyping other people's moral traditions, we not only demonstrate a lack of respect for them but may also replicate beliefs that have served as rationalizations of our society's exploitation and oppression of these others.

[1] This phrase and the idea behind it as applied to relativism is taken from an interview of this author by Richard Marshall, online: www.3-16am.co.uk/articles/the-pluralist, accessed November 27, 2022.

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Even if we do not ourselves personally or intentionally engage in such rationalization, we may be the unwitting inheritors of casual dismissals of the traditions of others, and risk burying what was done in the past and its ramifications into the present. Furthermore, as argued later in this section, we may have personally benefited from past misdeeds. I want to make clear that in presenting a normative argument for consistent and concerted inquiry into the moral traditions of others, I do not presume that the ethical premises upon which it rests are universally true for everyone. I ask only that the reader reflect on whether the argument holds force for them. I suspect that for a great many readers, it does, or should have, given my sense of what their values are.

Consider that many in the societies containing potential readers of this Element and others like it have benefited (intentionally or not, knowingly or not) from the exploitation and oppression of many of these others, in the past and present. This claim is addressed to those likely to be subscribed to moral traditions in which it is now recognized that it was quite wrong to have exploited and oppressed members of other societies, many of which contained moral traditions that prioritize relationships. Exploitation and oppression were justified by characterizing the civilizations of these people, including their moral traditions, as savage, barbaric, and inferior. Some of these characterizations could be determined in short order as plainly false and blatant rationalizations to which relatively few currently subscribe, but others are stereotypes that continue to be accepted by people who are widely thought to be far better informed and fair-minded, and this may frequently be the case, which doesn't mean they can't be wrong.

Into the first category of the plainly false and blatantly rationalizing falls an 1859 speech by a proslavery lawyer by the name of O'Connor who claims that

> to that condition of bondage the Negro is assigned by Nature. . . . He has the strength, and he has the power to labour; but the Nature which created that power has denied him either the intellect to govern or the willingness to work. . . . And that Nature which denied him the will to labour gave him a master to coerce that will, and to make him a useful servant in the clime in which he was capable of living useful for himself and for the master who governs him. (Millett 2007, 178)

Paul Millett remarks that this is a thoroughly Aristotelian defense of slavery, which in the modern context is applied to the races (Millett 2007, 178). Aristotle asserts that there are natural slaves suited by nature to be the possession of others and to be their instruments of action (Aristotle 2016, *Politics* 1.1, 1254a7–18). The soul is by nature the ruler of the body, and the intellect rules the appetites. Analogously, the male naturally rules over the female (1254a34–1254b15). And the use of slaves and tame animals is not

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