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## MORAL RELATIVISM<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT.** Moral relativism comes in many varieties. One is a moral doctrine, according to which we ought to respect other cultures, and allow them to solve moral problems as they see fit. I will say nothing about this kind of moral relativism in the present context. Another kind of moral relativism is semantic moral relativism, according to which, when we pass moral judgements, we make an implicit reference to some system of morality (our own). According to this kind of moral relativism, when I say that a certain action is right, my statement is elliptic. What I am really saying is that, according to the system of morality in my culture, this action is right. I will reject this kind of relativism. According to yet another kind of moral relativism, which we may call epistemic, it is possible that, when one person (belonging to one culture) makes a certain moral judgement, such as that this action is right, and another person (belong to another culture) makes the judgement that the very same action is wrong, they may have just as good reasons for their respective judgements; it is even possible that, were they fully informed about all the facts, equally imaginative, and so forth, they would still hold on to their respective (conflicting) judgements. They are each fully justified in their belief in conflicting judgements. I will comment on this form of moral relativism in passing. Finally, however, there is a kind of moral relativism we could call ontological, according to which, when two persons pass conflicting moral verdicts on a certain action, they may both be right. The explanation is that they make their judgements from the perspective of different, socially constructed, moral universes. So while it is true in the first person's moral universe that a certain action is right, it is true in the second person's moral universe that the very same action is wrong. I explain and defend this version of ontological moral relativism.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Moral relativism comes in many varieties. One is a substantial *moral* doctrine, according to which we ought to respect other cultures, and allow them to solve moral problems as they see fit. I will say nothing about this kind of moral relativism in the present context.

Other kinds of relativism are *metaethical* doctrines. According to these doctrines, there are *more than one way* correctly to answer a moral question. At least this is how I am going to use the term ‘relativism’ in the present context. This means that I do not count expressivism and emotivism and prescriptivism as relativist doctrines. According to expressivism, emotivism, or prescriptivism, there is *no* moral truth. According to these doctrines, there exist *no* moral facts. I prefer to classify these doctrines as *nihilist*. Relativism is the doctrine that there exists *more* than one truth about some moral cases.

Certainly, an expressivist or emotivist can say things like: “It is true that one ought always keep one’s promises”.<sup>2</sup> On expressivism or emotivism, however, this is just another way of expressing a certain emotion. On expressivism, emotivism, or prescriptivism, there are no moral facts (no true moral propositions). On these doctrines, there are no moral propositions whatever. Moral opinions are feelings, or resolutions, and so forth.

In the present context I will focus on metaethical forms of moral relativism and set nihilism to one side. Moral (metaethical) relativism, in turn, comes in at least three forms.

One kind of moral (metaethical) relativism is semantic (or ‘indexical’) moral relativism, according to which, when we pass moral judgements, we make an implicit reference to some system of morality (our own). According to this kind of moral relativism, when I say that a certain action is right, my statement is elliptic. What I am really saying is that, according to some (adequate) moral framework or system S, to which I adhere, for example the one prevailing in my culture, this action is permitted.<sup>3</sup> I will reject this kind of relativism.

According to another kind of (metaethical) moral relativism, which we may call epistemic, it is possible that, when one person (belonging to one culture) makes a certain moral judgement, such as that this action is right, and another person (belong to another culture) makes the judgement that the very same action is wrong, they may have just as good reasons for their respective judgements; it is even possible that, were they fully informed about all the facts, equally

imaginative, and so forth, they would still hold on to their respective (conflicting) judgements. They are each fully justified in their belief in conflicting judgements.<sup>4</sup> I will comment on this form of moral relativism in passing.

Finally, however, there is a third kind of (metaethical) moral relativism we could call ontological, according to which, when two persons pass conflicting moral verdicts on a certain action, they may both be right. Neither of them make judgements with any implicit reference to any system of norms. They both use their moral vocabulary in an absolute sense. An objectivist non-natural moral analysis (in the style of G.E. Moore or Henry Sidgwick) of what they say gives a correct representation of what they are doing. And yet, for all that, they pass conflicting judgements. The explanation why they can both, in an absolute sense, be 'right' in their judgements, is that they inhabit different moral (socially constructed) universes. So while it is true in the first person's moral universe that a certain action is right, it is true in the second person's moral universe that the very same action is wrong. I intend to explain and defend this version of ontological moral relativism.

## 2. MORAL UNIVERSES

### 2.1. *How Are We to Think of Moral Universes?*

A moral universe consists of a system of common sense morality. We may compare common sense morality to grammar. And we should remember that it is possible to distinguish between descriptive and regulative grammar. In descriptive grammar we observe how language is actually used. We formulate hypotheses, and we try to find general answers to questions about language use. But we may also discuss a language from a regulative point of view. We may try to answer questions such as: is it correct to use certain words in a certain order? We may want to articulate general principles also in regulative grammar. However, these principles are not descriptive of the language in question. Rather,

they answer the question: what makes a certain way of using language a proper or correct one? They provide *reasons* for answers to this question.

In regulative grammar we take for granted that there are facts of the matter. There are right and wrong ways of using language. These are facts. These facts do not exist independently of us, of course. We may think of them as social constructions, i.e. as constituted by us. If we were to speak differently, then different facts would obtain. And yet, for all that, these facts are in a sense objective. We may be ignorant about them. By sound argument we may be set straight with respect to them.

I do not intend to defend any detailed account of how social constructions become possible. It should suffice here to say that, as far as I can see, John Searle seems to be on the right track in his characterisation and defence of social constructivism.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth observing that there are two different kinds of answers to the question what 'makes' a certain use of language a proper or correct one. One (regulative) kind of answer does indeed stipulate a reason for a judgement about the case: it is wrong to put the words in a certain order because, in the language in question, the noun phrase must precede the verb phrase. This is the kind of reason stated in a principle or rule of regulative grammar. However, the same question, i.e. the question what 'makes' a certain use of language a proper or correct one, can also be understood as an ontological question about what *constitutes* right and wrong in a language. And then the answer must be along the following lines: the correctness of a certain way of using the words is constituted by the fact that this is how the words are actually used in the linguistic community in question. But this is not the end of the matter. It is also crucial how experts on grammar assess this way of using words. If they condone this way of using the words, this contributes to this way's being a proper one. And, of course, one reason why the experts condone a certain way of using the words is that this is how the words are being used. But it is also true, to some extent, at

least, that the fact that this way of using the words is condoned by the experts contributes to the explanation of why the words are used this way.

In a similar vein we may think of (conventional common sense) morality (in a society). Conventional common sense morality is learnt by children in a manner similar to how they learn their mother tongue. They learn that it is right or wrong to perform certain actions. Why is it right or wrong to perform a certain action? Once again there exist two ways of understanding and answering the question. A certain rule can be given, providing a reason to perform, or not perform, the action in question. Or, the question may be understood as an ontological question as to what constitutes right and wrong action. Once again, the answer to the latter (ontological) question has something to do with both how people actually behave, but also with how moral experts, or even people in general, tend to judge this kind of behaviour. These facts, in turn, may have, and certainly must have, some kind of natural explanation, for example one in terms of evolutionary biology.

Socially constituted moral norms seem to come to us in the form of a moral universe. This means that we think of them, ideally, at any rate, as complete. We demand of the norms making up our moral universe that, in principle, they answer *all* moral questions (even though the answers may be hard to come by for us) in an unambiguous way. And the set of answers to these questions is the moral universe (a set of moral facts). Now, this is an ideal. In real life it may well turn out that there are moral questions that get no satisfactory solution. But then the typical reaction of a critical person is to try to develop such answers and have them accepted by others. This means that in the moral universe pursued by the moral reformist, who is bent on moulding common sense morality, not only answers to actual problems are sought for but also answers to hypothetical cases. For there seems to be no better way of testing alternative moral hypotheses, than to resort to thought-experiments.

In general, if we want to find out about what constitutes right and wrong action in a certain society, we should focus

more on how people justify their actions than on what they do. A crucial feature of morality is that we can use the morality a person explicitly adheres to when we want to criticise his or her actions, once they are at variance with this morality. But, at the same time, if everybody tend to perform a certain action, condemned by common sense morality, this may mean that, at the end of the day, this action is actually condoned by common sense morality. Common sense morality is in much way a malleable and changing entity. And some moral reformists may well play a crucial role when common sense morality develops.

How are we to distinguish moral (socially constituted) facts from other kinds of (socially constituted) facts, such as facts concerning etiquette, the existing legal situation, and so forth?

I suppose one distinguishing fact is that moral facts are more basic. Moral considerations seem to override other kinds of consideration. In fact, only moral considerations provide us with, in Kant's sense, categorical norms. Even if, linguistically speaking, it is proper to put a comment in one way and improper to put it in another way, this does not mean that one *ought* to put it in the proper way. In a similar vein, even if a certain action is legally prescribed, economically advantageous, and so forth, this does not as such mean that we *ought* to perform it. This fact may be hidden, to some extent, by the fact that we may believe that we have a moral obligation to obey the law. Some may even believe that we have a moral obligation to use language properly. However, without such obligations taken for granted, law and regulative grammar lack categorical normative force.

Moreover, to be accepted as a 'morality' a normative outlook must not be too idiosyncratic, i.e., it has to *shared* to some extent, it has to be supported by a kind of *common sense*.

It is a moot question to what extent, within an existing common sense morality, we can really find principles explaining all actual cases of right- and wrongdoing. This problem has a clear parallel within grammar. However, even if, in the final analysis, experts must take up a rather 'particularistic'

view, and concede that they find no deterministic principles capable of explaining all cases of right- or wrong-doing (or proper or improper grammar), we all tend to believe that, in many cases, there are correct answers to these questions. Even if we cannot tell for certain why this is so, we know that it is wrong to perform certain actions (or we know that certain grammatical constructions *are* ill formed).

Furthermore, in some cases where we feel that we cannot articulate deterministic principles, we tend to believe that we can settle cases by arguing 'casuistically', from paradigmatic cases to actual cases. Of course, all this is compatible with the possible fact that there are some cases that are ultimately undecidable. However, as was stressed above, since we conceive of our common sense morality as constituting a moral universe, critical people do not stay satisfied with this kind of observation. They try to improve on their morality in order to render it, in the relevant sense, 'complete'.

It would perhaps be far-fetched to claim that, just as there are different languages, there are completely different moralities (in different societies).<sup>6</sup> However, I think it safe to claim at least that, just as there are somewhat different dialects or even idiolects existing within a linguistic community, there are somewhat different moralities existing in different societies.

Here is a possible example. In most (all) actual societies (with their corresponding moral universes) women are in many respects treated worse than men. However, while in some societies such unequal treatment can be defended on the ground that, by treating women worse than men, all get what they deserve, such a defence is not possible in another society (with another and different moral universe, where the value of women and men is constituted as equal).

Or, should we adopt some constraint to do with the content of a moral universe and claim that the former universe is not *moral*? This is something we do when we pass *moral* judgements, of course. If we feel that men and women are of equal worth we may hesitate to speak of the view that men are more valuable than women as a 'moral' one. We will

speak of it as *immoral*. However, when pursuing metaethics, it might be a good idea not to include any requirement that a socially constituted system of norms should have any content in particular in order to count as a 'moral' universe. The crucial thing is that the norms composing it have an overriding nature and are not too idiosyncratic.

All this means that while, from the perspective of one existing common sense morality (society), an action may be right, it may yet, for all that, be wrong, when judged from the perspective of another existing common sense morality.

Here a comparison with John Mackie's position may be instructive. Ontologically speaking, Mackie is a moral constructivist. Semantically speaking, he is an objectivist. But he believes that all objective positive moral judgements are false. His error theory is a strange view. If there are socially constituted moral facts, why not think of moral language as descriptive of them? This is what I have here suggested. If Mackie had followed this line, instead of adopting his idea that all positive moral statements are false, his theory had been more coherent. After all, in the final analysis, when pursuing normative ethics Mackie himself seems to be a moral constructivist of a kind.

To substantiate this claim we must find a way of disarming Mackie's argument from queerness, of course, while retaining his argument from relativity. However, it is not difficult to find faults with his argument from queerness. His idea that moral notions are internally 'prescriptive' can be jettisoned, and we then arrive at an externalist version of moral objectivism free of queerness.

### 3. BACK TO SEMANTIC RELATIVISM?

But does not all this mean that we are back to a semantic relativism of a naturalistic, indexical kind? Is the claim made above not just that, when a person in one society asserts that a certain action is right, what this person is saying is that, from the perspective of the set of moral rules operative in his or her society, this action is right?

No, this is not the proper way of understanding the claim. Note that we have distinguished between descriptive and regulative grammar; in a similar vein we ought to distinguish between descriptive and normative ethics. So, when a person asserts that a certain action is right, this assertion is indeed normative. The assertion is that the action in question is right, period. The analysis of the assertion is non-naturalist. No implicit reference to the system of norms is made; an objective claim, with reference to socially constituted moral facts, is being made. We may say that this assertion is true in the moral universe in question if and only if the action in question *is* right. The *explanation* of why it *is* right, simpliciter can be given, however, with reference to (the content of, not the existence of) principles in this system of morality – to the extent that moral principles can be formulated within this system of morality. The claim as such makes no reference to the existence of these principles. It is normative and categorical and objective and allows of non naturalistic analysis.

What are we to say about a situation where two persons from different cultures make conflicting judgements about a certain action?

Well, in order for this scenario to be possible, at least one of the systems must have a general scope. If both systems restrict their judgements to actions within their respective societies, no conflict will emerge. However, while this policy of live, and let live is comparatively common in a linguistic context (especially between different languages but also, to some extent, between different dialects), this kind of *moral* relativism (with such a restricted scope) is rare. We tend to judge, from the point of view of our own morality, the manners of others. This is rendered possible by the fact that two different moral universes may share (a part of) the one and only existing actual empirical universe. If a certain concrete action is part of both moral universes, it may be right in one of the universes while wrong in the other universe. And, as I have stressed above, if we conceive of ourselves as inhabiting a moral universe, there will be a drive towards completeness. We want answers to *all* moral questions, also those arising in alien cultures.

Suppose the two persons are actually making conflicting moral judgements about the very same action. Let us suppose, for example, that while one person asserts that a certain action, such as the circumcision performed on a young woman in the society to which this person belongs ought to take place, another person, belonging to another society, asserts that this very same action ought not to take place, how are we to understand their conflict?

This is indeed a conflict. So we should avoid interpreting the judgements as elliptical, with an implicit reference to each person's own system of norms (somehow corrected). They are both to be taken as issuing categorical judgements about the very same action. And these judgements are indeed, we may assume, true in each moral universe. And they are 'objective' in the sense that they may be true, irrespective of whether anyone knows about this. But does not this mean that they cannot be contradictory?

I believe we should say that these people do not, strictly speaking, contradict each other. And this is due to the fact that their respective judgements differ in meaning. In saying so, we assume a moderate amount of externalism about meaning, of course. Each person, in each universe, refers to a simple property, but the properties differ between universes. One judgement is true in virtue of facts obtaining in one universe; the other is true in virtue of facts obtaining in the other universe. People inhabiting different moral universes may agree, of course, that it is true (in their universe) that a certain action is right, if and only if this action is right, but this, seemingly identical truth condition, has different meaning in different moral universes. We cannot analyse this meaning in any natural terms. In each universe, the notion of obligation is simple and not definable in any non-moral terms. However, even if the truth-conditions of each judgement are in a way inscrutable, they differ. And this means that these persons do not contradict each other after all. The reason is that they have constituted to themselves different moral universes. They need not themselves be aware of this, of course. Each may think that there is one true morality (theirs).<sup>7</sup>

If we reject externalism about meaning we may perhaps say that moral terms mean the same in different moral universes; the same proposition is true in one universe, but false in another universe. I don't accept this view of meaning, however, so I will not pursue this rather startling idea any further.

What has now been said seems to imply that we face a kind of semantic relativism after all. And in a way we do. However, this is a new and subtler form of semantic relativism (as compared to the traditional variety described in the opening paragraph) since, taking norms to be categorical, it is compatible with the fact that the judgements in question are in *conflict*.

How are we to conceive of this conflict? Well, even if the judgements are logically compatible, they, and not only those who issue them, are in conflict in a *practical* sense. This practical conflict is rendered possible by the fact that these normative judgements have not only truth-conditions, but satisfaction conditions as well. The claim that the woman in question ought to be circumcised is satisfied if, and only if, the woman is actually circumcised. And note that this satisfaction-condition is *the same* in all moral universes (since it is not cast in moral terms).

The normative claims that the circumcision ought to take place, and that it ought not to take place are, therefore, even if logically consistent (because issued from different moral universes using the word 'ought' in different ways), still incompatible. There is no way to *satisfy* both these claims.

This practical inconsistency explains why persons belonging to different moral universes, making moral judgements that are, from a strict logical point of view, consistent, may feel a need to sort out their conflicts. Even if they need not feel any intellectual drive to do so, they may well, for practical reasons, find it urgent to reach an agreement.

It is certainly true that even a semantic relativist of the indexical kind, who interprets moral judgements as elliptical, with an implicit reference to a system of norms (where 'this is wrong' means, for example, that *according to the norms in my society, this action is considered wrong*), may speak of a kind

of *tension* between the judgement made by one person, belonging to one society, to the effect that a certain action is right, and the judgement made by another person, belonging to another society, to the effect that it is wrong. It is probable that these persons have attitudes and interests that conflict. However, since, upon closer inspection, their respective *judgements* are descriptive (not normative), their judgements as such cannot conflict in the way the judgements issued from different moral universes can do. The latter, in contradistinction from the former, have not only truth-conditions but satisfaction-condition as well. This is why we can say that it is sometimes not possible to *satisfy* conflicting moral judgements, issued from different moral universes.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. MORAL EXPLANATION

Furthermore, while it is hard to see how we could offer moral explanations, if semantic relativism of the naturalistic, indexical, variety were true, this is something we can do on the (objectivist) version of relativism here defended. If ‘This is wrong’ means that, *according to a certain (adequate,) framework or system of norms S, this is not permitted*, then there seems to be no way of explaining what it is that makes the action in question wrong. There may be a causal explanation why the action has come to be prohibited, but there is no possibility of finding any moral explanation of its wrongness. However, on the version of relativism here defended, we may easily find a moral explanation of why the action in question is wrong, provided the moral universe is rich enough to provide such an explanation. We may say, for example, that it is wrong since it means that an innocent person is harmed (provided it is wrong to harm innocent persons in the universe in question). But this fact cannot explain why, according to S, it is not permitted. The (social) fact that it is not permitted by S, if it can be explained at all, must be explained in terms that seem to be morally irrelevant. The explanation might be, for example, that the action in question is condemned in the system because the system condemning these kinds of actions have had a

certain function, explaining why it has been selected, and so forth. Such an explanation is interesting from a sociological point of view but irrelevant from a *moral* point of view.

Perhaps a moral relativist of Harman's or Wong's kind would like to object that a moral framework (in one of Harman's formulations) or an adequate moral system (in Wong's formulation) will or is likely to contain a norm for harming innocent persons. Why is it a more satisfying explanation to refer to facts in a socially constructed moral universe about the wrongness of harming innocent people than it is to refer to the norm of an adequate moral system that prohibit the harming of innocent people?<sup>9</sup> But my point is not that one explanation, *qua* explanation, is better than the other. If the person who makes the explanation in question is clever enough, there is no limit to how good each explanation can become. However, a crucial difference still remains between them. One is cast in moral terms. The explanans of the kind of explanation I defend is moral in character. The 'covering law' included in the explanans is a moral statement (principle) proper. The explanation can be spelled out in the following manner. It is wrong to harm innocent people (principle), say, and this is an innocent person (we assume) who has been harmed (we observe). Hence, this action was wrong. It was wrong because it meant that an innocent person was harmed.

The kind of explanation that Harman and Wong can offer can be just as good, but it is different in kind. It doesn't rely on any moral premises at all. It says something like the following. This action is wrong. This means that the action is forbidden in a relevant moral framework or adequate moral system. Why is it forbidden? Well, the most plausible hypothesis is perhaps that this has to do with the functioning of moral frameworks or adequate moral systems. They have developed the way they have because they help people in a society or group to correlate their actions. This moral framework or moral system serves this function well and that is why it is in place (this is the 'covering law' included in the explanans). This may be a perfectly sound and informative (causal) explanation. And yet, it is not a *moral* explanation.

## 5. LOGICAL RELATIONS BETWEEN MORAL JUDGEMENTS

According to the kind of moral absolutism here defined, there are indeed moral judgements, capable of being true or false. It is true that the meaning of words such as 'right' and 'wrong' tend to vary between different moral universes, but within each moral universe there exist true and false moral judgements. This means that we can conceive of logical relations in terms of truth. A moral argument is valid if, and only if, necessarily, if the premises of the argument are true, then the conclusion of the argument is true as well. To obtain the right moral implications we need to clarify the normative terminology, of course. But this can easily be done, for example in the following manner. A particular action is right if and only if it is not wrong. And an action is obligatory if and only if it is wrong not to perform it. Since rightness, wrongness and obligatoriness are, even if socially constituted, yet objective and genuine properties of particular actions we need only standard first-order predicate logic to get our deontic logic off the ground.

Objectivist relativism therefore means an advantage over the kind of moral relativism defended by Gilbert Harman, in that it retains normal logical relations between moral propositions. Harman's semantic relativism does not. At least this is how things seem to me. But Harman himself thinks otherwise. According to Harman, his brand of moral relativism retains ordinary logical relations between moral judgements. Is he right about this?

According to Harman, in order to grant truth-conditions to our moral judgements, we have to conceive of them as elliptical, with a reference to a moral framework of some sort. This means that they are descriptive judgements. When I say that it is wrong of P to do D, I say, if we spell it out, that, according to the moral framework with which I'm associated, it is wrong of P to do D. This allows us to say that moral judgements are true or false, of course. But does it also allow us to derive moral implications from standard implications among relativised propositions? I think not. For

suppose a relativist says that it is wrong of P to do D, while maintaining that it is right of P to do A, while acknowledging that, by doing A, P does D. Could this person be set straight with reference to his moral framework? We cannot take for granted that this is possible. As a matter of fact, his framework may well contain all these judgements.

I suppose Harman would claim that this means that there is an inconsistency in this moral framework, and he wants such inconsistencies to be eliminated from the framework before we assign truth-values to moral judgements with reference to it. But then the question arises what it means when we say that the *framework* is inconsistent? According to Harman, the moral judgements that constitute the framework lack truth-values.

We may here speak of practical inconsistencies, of course. A practical inconsistency is detected, as we have seen, when we realise that, in some situation, it is not possible to satisfy two normative judgements. If the framework contains both the idea that it is always wrong to tell a lie and the idea that it is always mandatory, at all means, to save lives, and we run upon a situation where, only by telling a lie, a person can save a life, then we know that the framework is, practically speaking, inconsistent. The mere possibility of such a situation means that the system is inconsistent.

However, Harman owes us an explanation *why* we should avoid practical inconsistencies in our moral framework. If the norms making up the framework are neither true nor false, the purpose to be filled by the framework must certainly be practical. We have it for a purpose. Suppose it fulfils its purpose, in spite of containing some practical inconsistencies. Why change it? And if one wants to change it, *how* should one change it?

Harman could argue that, under the circumstances, there is no need to change the system. The corrected system is to be seen as a mere theoretical device. Our moral judgements can be understood and given truth-conditions with reference to it.

I suppose Harman's answer to the latter question, as to how the system should be changed, when we construct our

system we need to refer to, when we give truth-condition to moral judgements, would be to make minimal changes in the actual, inconsistent framework, in order to get rid of the practical inconsistencies. However, there may more than one way of doing this. Or, there may exist no way of doing this while having the framework fulfilling its purpose.

Furthermore we want to say that there are moral inconsistencies that do now show up in practice. There is a way to satisfy both the norm that one should not work on a Sunday and the norm that one may either work on a Sunday or not. Both norms are satisfied if, as a matter of fact, we do not work on Sundays. However, we feel that these norms are inconsistent. But there is no way for Harman to account of their inconsistency. So I conclude that moral relativism of Harman's variety does not retain standard logical implications among normative judgements.

Could not the same thing be said about socially constructed normative properties? Could not a socially constructed moral universe contain contradictions? I think not. When we take our moral judgements to be true or false, we may conceive of moral inconsistencies in the 'ordinary' way. Two inconsistent norms cannot both be true. And we will thus, in our pursuit for truth, have an incentive to get rid also of moral inconsistencies. When we think of moral facts as constitutive of a moral 'universe', it becomes imperative that all moral truth can be combined into one single and true (consistent) conjunction describing this universe. And our well-known epistemic goal of believing a proposition if it is true, and of not believing it if it is false, applies to our moral beliefs just as well as to other aspects of our belief system.

## 6. SOCIAL CONSTITUTION AND THE 'IS' — 'OUGHT' QUESTION

If there exist socially constituted moralities, does this mean that moral truths can be derived from descriptions of our actual behaviour? It does not. On the account here given, the gap between 'is' and 'ought', between fact and value, remains.

It is true that, by making certain judgements, and forming certain expectations, we come to constitute a certain morality within our society. However, constitution is one thing, logical implication quite another thing. Constitution is not a logical relation.

However, when there exists a relation of constitution, must there not exist also a relation of explanation? And does not such an explanation take the form of a deductive argument? In particular, can we not explain a certain moral fact (a particular obligation) with reference to the fact that we behave in a certain (systematic) manner? And doesn't this mean that we can derive an 'ought' from an 'is'?

No, we cannot. This is not to take the idea of constitution seriously. In order to explain the particular moral (normative) fact we must have recourse to (socially constituted) *moral* principles. The moral facts we constitute are of an ontological kind in their own right. What follows from the description of our behaviour is merely the fact that we *tend to accept* certain moral propositions, not that these propositions are true.

This may sound odd, but this is the way socially constituted (institutional) facts behave with respect to brute facts. And this is indeed why we speak of socially constituted facts as forming an ontological category in its own right.

Note however that this ontological difference between brute and social facts is consistent with social facts being *supervenient* upon brute facts so that, unless there is a 'brute' difference between two situations, a socially constituted fact cannot exist in one of them but fail to exist in the other.

## 7. MORAL RELATIVISM AND MORAL REALISM

It should be noted that if moral ontological relativism, of the kind here described, is true, then epistemic moral relativism is trivially true. It is obvious that, if conflicting moral judgements, made by people living in different moral universes, may be *true*, then each advocate of each one of the conflicting views may have equally good reasons to support his or her favoured position. But what should a 'transcendental'

moral realist of Moore's or Sidgwick's brand say about the view just outlined?

It is true that, most philosophers who have advocated some kind of social constructivist view of ethics have been 'nihilists', in the sense that they have denied that there are any moral facts, existing independent of our thinking and acting.<sup>10</sup> Social constructivism has been resorted to by them as a kind of ersatz realism. However, this does not mean that social constructivism is inconsistent with strong moral realism. Indeed, I think it would be foolhardy of a 'transcendental' moral realist, who believes that there are objective moral reasons and facts existing independently of us to deny that different (conventional) moral universes of the kind here described exist as well. Moral realists should be prepared to accept that, when some people pass moral verdicts on actions, they express their views from the perspective of the conventional morality into which they have been socialised. So normative ontological relativism is made true by the existence of this kind of socially constituted or constructed conventional morality. However, a moral realist, who believes that there exist moral facts independently of our conceptualisation or actions, should be expected to want to add to this picture that, once the existing different moral universes have been described, there is a way of transcending them all. One more question remains to be asked and answered: which one, if any among competing moral claims, is the uniquely *correct* one? They must be supposed to ask for reasons that are not only categorical and objective but also such that they are in no way of our making.

When the moral realist of Moore's or Sidgwick's variety poses this question, using the standard moral terminology in the way he or she does, it is quite possible that the question cannot be answered with reference to any principles designed to rationalise any actual conventional morality. And, more importantly, the answer to the question, if such an answer exists, cannot be taken to be constituted by us. On the contrary, it is assumed that the answer is 'out there', to be

found, in the same way that answers to questions posed by physicists are thought to be 'out there' to be found.

Suppose the moral realist is right about this. Let us suppose that the moral realist is right in insisting that, when different conventional moralities have been identified, there is one more question to be asked and to be answered: which one (if any one) of two competing moral claims, is the correct one?<sup>11</sup> What does this *mean*?

Well, it is obvious that the moral realist is here using the moral vocabulary in a slightly different sense from the senses used in the two competing conventional moral universes. But it is no coincidence that *all* the parties to this controversy translate the relevant words into 'right', and 'wrong' in their own terminology. For even if these terms, when they occur in different moral universes, take on a somewhat different meaning, they all share an important function. They are all categorical and they do all guide choices.

This is not to say that 'internalism' must be true in any strong sense of any of these terminologies. I have already indicated that it should be rejected. In particular, of the realist vocabulary I think internalism is true only to the extent that people who use this terminology *tend* to want to do what they believe is right. However, this is enough to give them practical reasons to do what they believe they have moral reasons to do. And it is not far-fetched to assume that this is true also of people who abide by their respective *conventional* moralities. And this, then, explains why they all translate the moral terms the way they do.

What does all this mean for how we should understand the moral conversation between a moral realist and a person who has never contemplated this 'further' question about absolute rightness, merely passing moral judgements from his or her conventional moral universe?

The obvious answer is that we should understand this difference of opinion in a way similar to how we understood the conflict between people belonging to different (conventional) moral universes. The moral realist and the person issuing moral judgements from the perspective of a particular

conventional moral universe pass moral judgements that are logically consistent (because they have different truth-conditions); however, these judgements are, since they are categorical and normative, and therefore without implicit reference to any moral universe, truly conflicting. In many cases these persons will find that there is no way of *satisfying* the moral demands put forward by the other party. So there will be a drive somehow to solve the conflict.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Global ontological relativism is a self-defeating position, or so I would be prepared to argue. However, the existence of many different conventional moral systems or moral ‘universes’ prepares the way for a more restricted kind of *moral* ontological relativism. I have argued that such moral ontological relativism is true. Here Nelson Goodman’s daring metaphor of ‘world-making’ is indeed appropriate.

It is noteworthy that even a moral realist who believes that there exists one uniquely true morality ‘out there’, to be found by us, may concede that moral ontological relativism of the kind here described is true. The moral realist need not reject relativism, but only add a realistic element to the picture.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Charles L. Stevenson, *Facts and Values* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), Ch. 11, in particular p. 219, about this.

<sup>3</sup> This version of relativism is famously defended (in several places) by David Wong and Gilbert Harman. It should be noted that Harman doesn’t put forward his theory as a claim about what we actually mean by a word like ‘right’; rather, *if* we want to understand the use of ‘right’ in moral context as contributing to claims that have truth-values, *then* this is how we should understand these uses.

<sup>4</sup> I know of no philosopher who has actually defended this (indeed quite defensible) position.

<sup>5</sup> See John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality*. It goes without saying that I do not agree about any detail in Searle's analysis, but that does in no way affect the argument in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Some moral relativists may be prepared to make this claim, but I find it exaggerated; in general, relativists tend to exaggerate the degree to which different moral communities hold on to different basic moral positions. It seems to me that much apparent moral disagreement can be explained away as depending on different *empirical* beliefs.

<sup>7</sup> This is true of semantic, indexical kinds of relativism as well, of course. Neither Harman nor Wong need to insist that it is obvious to speakers referring to different frameworks or systems, that this is what they are actually doing.

<sup>8</sup> A way for the semantic relativist (naturalist) to account for disagreement could be to incorporate an expressivist element in the meaning or function of ethical statements, of course. I owe this observation to an anonymous referee for this journal. However, by so doing it may be hard for the relativist to explain why not go expressivist through and through and give up the claim about descriptive (indexical) meaning altogether.

<sup>9</sup> I owe this objection to an anonymous referee for this journal.

<sup>10</sup> For example, this seems to me to be a correct diagnosis of John McDowell. See for example his 'Non-Cognitivism and Rule-Following', in Steven H. Holtzman and Christopher M. Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: to Follow a Rule*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981.

<sup>11</sup> Note that even if the moral realist is right about this, there may be no way of finding out the answer to this question. If this is not possible, a kind of strong moral epistemic relativism seems to emerge. On this version of epistemic relativism a unique moral truth exists, so two conflicting moral opinions cannot both be right. And yet, for all that, two people may have equally and perfectly good reasons to believe in their favoured solution to the moral problem.

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