Through Thick and Thin:  
A New Defense of Cultural Relativism

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Introduction

Moral diversity and moral disagreement have long been considered as the basis for moral relativism. Moral diversity leads some relativists to deny that moral discourse is factual. In their opinion, our ethical commitments are to be explained by appealing to noncognitive mental states such as desires rather than to belief in independent moral facts. Desires, unlike beliefs, do not track truth, and therefore, agreement, convergence, or progress in the normative realm need not be expected. Indeed, the combination of antirealism (there are no moral properties) and noncognitivism (the source of moral commitments is noncognitive) seems clearly to be implied from the relativist approaches of both Lewis and Harman.

Let us outline the relationships between relativism, antirealism, and noncognitivism by a quick sketch of one common version of moral relativism borrowed from Harman. Harman's version of relativism is composed of three main claims. (1) If a person does not accept a moral demand D that applies to him (e.g., to avoid a certain instance of immodest behavior), this will be due to ignorance of the relevant facts, a failure to reason something through, or some sort of mental defect or disorder

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like irrationality, stupidity, confusion, or illness. (2) There are two people, A and B (both subject to some moral demands), such that a moral demand D applies to A but does not apply to B because B does not accept D. (3) There is no more basic moral principle $D^*$ such that $D^*$ applies to A and B and explains why D applies to A but not to B.

The difficulty seems straightforward: at least on the face of it, if A is subject to D and B is not, there must be something true of A but not of B that accounts for the difference between them; there must be a principle that implies that, since A has certain features lacking in B, A is subject to D whereas B is not. The statement describing such features along with their moral implications would constitute the moral principle $D^*$ that applies to A and B and explains their different relationships to D. Harman's answer is as follows:

A but not B may be subject to D because it is rational for A to accept D, but not rational for B to do so,... and this is sometimes due simply to the fact that A and B start out accepting sufficiently different moral demands in the first place.4

This answer cries out for further elaboration. After all, it seems that once A accepts D as morally basic, A must believe that B should accept D as well—otherwise A won't conceive his own subjection to D as moral. But if moral relativism is valid, A must be wrong.

"Standard relativists"5 bite the bullet: A is mistaken, they urge, if he believes that B is subject to D. A possible explanation of A's mistake, offered by standard relativists, is that A thinks that some moral objective fact (e.g., that immodesty is bad) justifies his acceptance of D. But this is not so: there are no such things as moral properties or moral facts. In insisting that D applies to B, A fails to realize that the source of his own commitment to D is noncognitive. Accepting D is rational for A, not by virtue of objective facts but due to his particular set of desires; for B, who does not share this particular set of desires, it is not. This response may not be necessary for defending Harman's relativism; still, it is a very natural one. We shall call this position "standard relativism."

But many philosophers find this combination of premises too high a price to pay. Our task in this paper is to construct and defend a version of relativism that in assuming considerably less most will find considerably more attractive. Indeed, cultural relativism has to premise some form of antirealism, but it should do so far more selectively, we believe. Ethical commitments and moral behavior are justified by people's cognition of objective normative facts. Cultural relativists, as we want to understand them, do not deny this. They insist, however, that there is an important sense in which ethical
outlooks might be in conflict. They claim that these outlooks are, in a sense we shall try to specify, incomparable. And it is only here, in their attempt to compare the incomparable, that people commit themselves to nonexistent moral comparative properties.

More specifically, our argument comprises two main stages. First, we present a version of relativism that purports to remain realist with regard to thick ethical properties and is antirealist only with regard to thin ethical properties. We then go on to claim that this version of relativism can be defended by an argument whose central premise follows from the skeptical theory of meaning Kripke attributes to the later Wittgenstein. In other words, we elaborate an argument the conclusion of which is a Mackie style error theory with regard to comparisons of forms of life. In ranking forms of life, people attribute to ethical outlooks comparative moral properties that, cultural relativists argue, do not exist. In short, our argument aspires to refine and better pinpoint the antirealist aspect of standard relativism by specifying where exactly the phenomenon of normative diversity should compel us to be skeptical about the reality of the normative.

1. How To Be a Cultural Relativist

1.1 Morality through Thick and Thin

Imagine a “conservative” and a “liberal” community who happen to share the same territory. Their relationship is “accidental”: they happen to live next to each other, but they share different cultural heritages and carry different historical memories. Suppose, moreover, that the ethical outlook of the conservative community is shaped by such concepts as family honor, tradition, and modesty that are not used at all by the liberals, whose ethical outlook is shaped by concepts such as spontaneity, freedom, and creativity. They are “thick normative concepts,” thick in that they characterize the particularity of the normative thought and discourse of the two communities. They play major roles in structuring their histories and are crucially central in shaping their unique anthropological constitution. They are normative, or action-guiding, in the sense that they constitute facts “that supply concrete justifications for acting one way or another.... They function as reasons, in the basic, normative sense of considerations that speak in favor of a given course of action.”

Following Williams, Scanlon, and others, relativists argue for the primacy of the thick. (The reverse, however, is not always the case. Scanlon, to take the obvious example, seems to grant primacy to the thick without becoming a relativist.) There is no one substantive property—the property of being good or
valuable—that in and of itself provides reasons for action. That is to say, there is no master property that constitutes or explains the concrete value of particular actions. Rather, reasons are provided by what are regarded as the natural properties of actions and things.10 After all, there is a vast diversity of things that we take to be good or valuable. “Why do moral agents require special procedures for deliberating about what to do? Won’t it suffice to apply our general procedures of normative reflection to such concrete values (and dis-values) as loyalty, suffering, betrayal, need, dependence, autonomy, and choice?”11 The main argument for the primacy of the thick draws on the nature of practical deliberation: what motivates us are not truths about the good or the bad but rather concrete judgments about what would hurt one’s feeling, or be demeaning or cruel or helpful etc.12

Abstract concepts expressed by words like “good,” “right,” “desirable,” and “rational” are thin. Generating thin concepts requires no anthropological involvement; they are designed to describe human agency and its ethical aspects, rather than any particular exemplification of them.13 That is, despite fierce adherence to their respective positions, members of both communities agree that, wrong as they think they are, people behave in the light of what they think is good. Thus, everyone who understands the phrase “better than” would agree that if x rates a-like conduct better than b-like conduct in C-like circumstances, then all things being equal, x would choose a rather than b in C. Hence, people in both communities find thin concepts helpful for describing themselves and others as agents, as ethically committed people who have goals and final ends.

Note that “good,” “right,” and “rational” function not only as thin predicates in the above sense roughly depicted but also as placeholders, as tools for shortening long stories composed of thick judgments. To say that something is good is merely shorthand for saying that certain of its substantive properties constitute concrete considerations that speak in its favor. As placeholders, such predicates also serve to express decisions between conflicting thick considerations. If immodest behavior becomes necessary for defending one’s honor, a member of the conservative community might rate it right, obligatory, or good. “Right” or “good” function here as shorthand for the second-order moral rules of ranking first-order obligations by which such conflicts are adjudicated. When they function as placeholders, thin predicates stand for different properties in communities that employ different thick concepts. They play the same semantic role in all communities qua their role as placeholders rather than by virtue of their extensions.

Here, however, we shall be interested in their role as thin concepts rather than as placeholders. To emphasize again, in addition to the different roles they play within different
normative outlooks, they also have a crucial role to play in describing the goals people set for themselves in ways that are unrelated to any particular communal framework.\textsuperscript{14}

1.2 Moral Diversity

With these distinctions between the thick and the thin in mind, different sets of thick normative concepts can be said to constitute different "ethical outlooks"—or different "conceptions of the good." We assume that people share a "form of life" insofar as they utilize, at least to a significant degree, the same set of thick concepts. Sharing a form of life in this respect does not imply, of course, that the members of the community will never find themselves in disagreement as to what should be done at a given moment. What it implies is that in any such case they will be able to state their disagreements by appealing to their shared vocabulary of thick concepts.\textsuperscript{15}

We further stipulate that different forms of life are in conflict if enough of the thick beliefs that constitute the shared ethical sensitivities of the one generate thin judgments that contradict the thin judgments generated by the thick beliefs of the other. More precisely, consider a certain mode of behavior, call it $b$, which is at once a paradigm case of immodesty and a paradigm case of creativity and spontaneity. Assume, for the sake of simplicity, that part of being considered a paradigm case of immodesty is that if a person holds $b$ to be immodest, then he also holds that, all things considered, $b$ is undesirable.\textsuperscript{16} And similarly for creativity, if one considers $b$ to be a paradigm case of creativity, then he deems it to be, all things considered, desirable. Under these assumptions, adhering to both judgments necessarily involves holding two contradictory beliefs.

Our stipulation is this: forms of life, in which there are enough $b$-like cases, are in conflict. Note that no contradiction follows from our characterization of conflicting forms of life. We are not assuming inconsistently that $b$ is, all things considered, bad (due to being immodest) and that $b$ is, all things considered, good (due to being spontaneous) but only that conservatives (liberals) who believe that $b$ is paradigmatically immodest (spontaneous) would, all things considered, believe it to be bad (good).

Assuming such moral diversity in fact exists (we address arguments to the contrary—such as David Wiggins’s—in section 1.4 below), what are its theoretical consequences? To stay with our schematic example, a general theory of moral diversity should be able to account for the disagreement between liberals and conservatives with respect to $b$. On the face of it, the two communities differ as to whether or not $b$ is morally desirable. But such a theory must go beyond their first-order moral choices and give a reasonable account for their moral con-
ceptualization of their very diversity. In other words, it must deal with the question of whether the liberals deny the conservative thick judgment that \( b \) is immodest, and, conversely, whether the conservatives reject the liberal assessment of \( b \) as spontaneous.

A negative answer to both questions could be reasoned for as follows: one might quite plausibly assume that possessing a concept consists in the capacity to apply it correctly to paradigm cases. Call this the "paradigm case maxim": *If one understands the predicate "F," one believes that Fa, if a is paradigmatically F and one is acquainted with a.* (Confronted by children torturing their pets—a paradigm case of cruelty—one would expect a person who understands the word "cruel" and is acquainted with pets to form the belief that the children are acting cruelly.) Now recall that to pass the thick judgment that \( b \) is immodest, consists, among other things, in deeming \( b \) to be undesirable (which is simply to assume that the concept of modesty is normative or "action guiding"). It follows that a liberal who believes that \( b \) is spontaneous, but possesses the concept of modesty, will be expected to also deem \( b \) to be immodest. But this would commit her to believing absurdly that, all things considered, \( b \) is both good and bad.

An immediate and natural response might be to claim that, while a liberal can be fully capable of recognizing immodesty and therefore possess of the concept of immodesty, recognition per se does not constitute a normative, reason-giving judgment for everyone. Being the liberal she is, for *her*, such a judgment, though fully comprehensible, carries no normative content. Such a move is in line with the so-called prescriptivist analysis of thick normativity. Prescriptivists maintain that thick normative judgments are conjunctions of descriptive and normative elements. The claim that \( b \) is immodest or cruel is conceived by them as comprising a value-free description of \( b \), in conjunction with a *thin* moral proposition about every action that satisfies the description. No absurdity is involved in the liberal's judgment, the response would go, since when a liberal assents to "\( b \) is immodest" she should be understood as believing a *descriptive* proposition expressed by the statement, without assenting to the normative import it has for her conservative neighbors.

Prescriptivism, however, fails to fully capture the feature of thick normative belief that we are most interested in. Remember that what requires explanation, as we stated our problem at the outset, is the nature of the liberal's belief that \( b \) is immodest. Immodesty, as understood by conservatives, like spontaneity in liberal discourse, is a genuinely descriptive predicate, which, as Williams has it, "may be rightly or wrongly applied, and people who have acquired [it] can agree that [it] applies or fails to apply to some new situation ... the use of the
concepts is ... controlled by the facts or by the user's perception of the world." And at least on the face of it, in applying these concepts, people do not make value-free judgments. Rather, they perform single, unified acts of value-laden perception. Even when the liberals of our example perceive behavior as modest it strikes us inadequate, at least phenomenologically, to describe them as merely entertaining a purely descriptive proposition.

Even if there are some underlying descriptive facts upon which thick normative properties supervene, people who perceive and think in terms of thick concepts are typically unable to identify them. There may be some measure of theoretical merit to carving up the use of thick normative concepts into purely descriptive and purely normative components. But such distinctions are quite irrelevant to accounting for what it is for someone to possess a thick concept, to have it at his or her linguistic disposal, as it were. To repeat our assumption, for a liberal to possess the notion of modesty is (also) for her to be capable of identifying and forming the belief that b is modest. And to analyze such belief as belief in a value-free proposition is to distort its very meaning.

Note, however, that adopting this line of argument does not commit one to the reality of thick ethical properties. Philosophers like Blackburn and Gibbard grant that judgments that feature thick ethical concepts are world-guided, so far as their descriptive content goes, while objecting insistently to granting any form of factuality to their normative import. Perhaps the belief that b is modest cannot be viewed as a conjunctive belief, still, such a belief is to be explained by a perceptual interaction between a certain kind of non-normative facts and people with a particular volitional nature. Blackburn and Gibbard hence remain antirealists and still concede to everything we have been saying about the nature of thick normative beliefs. We do not to take issue with their normative antirealism here. Our aim in the present study is to propose a version of relativism that remains invariant to the question of the reality of the thick normative properties, while denying the reality of thin normative properties. We need not argue for the reality of thick properties.

On the other hand, we need a clear picture of what it is for our liberals to be able to understand the notion of modesty and to be able to apply it. Hence, we need a picture of what it is for them to believe that a (paradigmatically immodest) mode of behavior is immodest. The prescriptivist account fails, we have argued, because for a liberal to believe that b is paradigmatically immodest is for him to entertain more than a merely descriptive proposition.

But the main reason for rejecting the prescriptivist's phenomenology is that there seems to be a much better way of accounting for our conservative-liberal debate. When on trial for
publishing illegal material, Oscar Wilde was asked whether he didn’t think that a certain scene in his *Importance of Being Earnest* should be rated obscene. From the prosecutor’s point of view, it was a paradigm case of obscenity. Wilde replied that obscenity was a notion he didn’t use. Now, it is clear that Wilde knew very well what the word meant and implied; he merely refused to apply it in an evaluative role. This strongly suggests that one can grasp a thick evaluative concept not merely as a value-free description but as *someone else’s* evaluative category, even if it does not shape one’s own ethical thinking. In Wilde’s case, understanding the meaning of “obscenity” consisted in a capacity for understanding and predicting how *those who do use the notion* apply it. Such a capacity might be as perceptual, and as directly world-guided as Bernard Williams would have it be.

Indeed, it is our contention that one is capable of grasping the meaning and of learning to correctly apply the thick normative concepts of different communities, without them having to shape one’s own ethical thought in similar ways. Wilde understands very well what “obscenity” means but refrains, in principle, from using it himself. True, understanding another person’s normative concepts involves some measure of sharing her normative outlook and the perceptual sensitivities it demands. Yet, an outsider might acquire these sensitivities by willfully undertaking to observe another community and, for a time, to experience their way of doing things without ever having to adopt their ethical outlook. This is how Oscar Wilde identifies obscenities, by “listening in” on those who use the concept, while refusing to do so himself. A natural way for Wilde to express his agreement with the prosecutor’s judgment—that a certain passage is obscene—and, simultaneously, to distance himself from the concept of obscenity would be to use the prosecutor’s word by placing it within quotation marks. He would say, “indeed, the passage is ‘obscene,’ but ‘obscene’ is a word I do not use.”

In light of the Wilde example, we suggest that the conservative/liberal debate is about which set of thick concepts to use and how to shape one’s ethical thought, rather than a debate about the viability of this or that “first-order” normative proposition. A conflict between forms of life is a disagreement with regard to which set of thick ethical concepts one should use. This is to say that the liberals think that *b* is morally good (while the conservative that *b* is morally bad). Yet the liberals do not deny that *b* is immodest (after all, it is paradigmatically immodest). Nor do they deny that immodesty is bad (after all, the concept of modesty is essentially action-guiding). In their view, *b* is good despite being “immodest,” not because they do not fully grasp the concept of modesty, but because they hold that one should not use it.
1.3 Cultural Relativism: The Philosophical Thesis

The philosophical thesis that is advanced by cultural relativists (as we suggest understanding them) is based on this account of moral diversity in the following way. Faced by the liberal challenge, conservatives claim that a form of life within which the notion of (say) modesty shapes normative thought is better than those forms of life that lack it. In so doing, conservatives attribute to their own form of life the additional property of being better than that of the liberals. Relativists deny the existence of any such property. Note that relativists do not deny that predicates like "good" or "right" express concepts, but only in cases, where they are used as if they were regular predicates by which we can attribute morally comparative properties to ethical outlooks. In other words, the argument aims at establishing a contrast between the relevant uses of "good" on the one hand and those of "red," "heavy," or "square" on the other. The latter predicates are used by various communities and can be found in many different languages. Their application is governed by the same standards by most. Applied to ethical outlooks, "better than" or "good" enjoy similar universal use but are not governed by similar universal standards. For reasons we shall explore in the section 2, relativists take this difference to yield antirealism.

Harman’s relativism now seems very plausible. There is a demand D, "avoid b-like behavior," which applies to conservatives but not to liberals—and there is no moral principle D* (that applies to both) that explains why. The reason is that the moral demand, "avoid b-like behavior," applies to conservatives because b-like behavior is immodest. D, however, doesn't apply to liberals because they don't use the concept of modesty. Should liberals use it? Well, if they should, it is, presumably, because doing so is deemed to be morally preferable than not doing so. But to express such a preference is to attribute a moral comparative property to a form of life. And if our modified version of antirealism is correct (as will be argued shortly) such properties do not exist. Before that, however, a different kind of objection needs to be met.

1.4 Are There Cases of Moral Diversity?

Are there really rival forms of life in the sense defined here, or is our story just another philosophical caricature? Many philosophers opt for the second option. Wiggins, for instance, claims that there is only one possible moral assessment of children torturing cats—that it is cruel. Williams agrees that those who possess the notion of cruelty will necessarily adhere to such a judgment but denies there being anything in the situation to cause someone who does not yet possess the concept of cruelty to use it.
Wiggins remains unconvinced. There is only one moral perspective, he maintains: it is impossible for a person to have a conception of the good yet lack the notion of cruelty. Williams "would have to show the workability of [an alternative] scheme of moral ideas ... he will discover that workability of moral ideas cannot be judged idea by idea." Wiggins considers the question of the possibility of alternative moral attitudes to paradigm cases to be merely rhetorical, that is, one to be answered univocally in the negative. 25

If there is only one normative perspective, a person capable of forming a conception of the good cannot really refuse to use any normative concept. Thus, if Wilde's case is a paradigm case of obscenity, then, in Wiggins's view, there are only two options: either Wilde should agree that the passage in his play is obscene and thus prima facie objectionable or that, on his view, there is nothing bad in obscenity (i.e., that obscenity is not a normative concept at all). Since the latter option is implausible, according to Wiggins, Wilde should be viewed not as rejecting the moral claim implicit in his prosecutor's judgment but as arguing that it is weak, or that, all things considered, it is irrelevant in light of a higher good achieved by the play. Wilde, on such a showing, does not contest the principle that obscenity for its own sake is clearly bad.

In essence, the Williams/Wiggins debate is about historical narratives; they have different views as to how ethical diversity should be described. Wiggins's monism rests less on an argument than on a confident assertion that in their moral judgments all moral people aspire to a single ethical system to which no alternatives in fact exist.

We do not deny, of course, that many disagreements are far less dramatic than the one we have been describing. Very different communities will often share a battery of thick ethical concepts yet understand them to have somewhat different extensions or to differently represent the moral considerations that they entail. Thus consider a less extreme scenario in which a liberal actively uses a concept of modesty. It differs from the conservative's notion with regard only to certain specific modes of behavior and to the overall moral weight liberals attach to undisputed cases of immodesty. In such scenarios, conflicts are due not to differences in the two communities' thick moral vocabulary but to disagreements about how to interpret a shared vocabulary and the precise weight that should assign to various considerations it picks out as morally relevant. Wiggins claims that, in principle, these are the only ways in which communities ethically diverge.

We believe that Wiggins is mistaken. There are, we insist, many extreme cases of moral disagreement between communities that arise from real differences between their moral vocabularies. In other words, there are communities
whose disagreement is most naturally interpreted as a disagreement about the moral value of using certain concepts. Such communities will disagree, often bitterly, as to whether a form of life that is structured around certain concepts is better than one that lacks them. With respect to these cases, we shall argue in what follows that cultural relativism can be articulated as skepticism regarding the reality of comparative thin properties of forms of life. The very viability of our relativistic argument depends, however, on whether Wiggins is right or wrong in asserting that such cases do not in fact exist.

Refuting Wiggins's position, as he himself indicates, is a matter of counterexample rather than of counterargument. Here is one. Consider the opposition central to (Berlin's interpretation of) Machiavelli's *The Prince*, between the Christian praise of righteousness and the ideal of fame typical to Roman culture. Indeed, in certain societies the religious values of holiness, quietism, and humbleness constitute a complete, closed ethical perspective that leaves members of other ethical communities wholly unaffected. *Pace* Wiggins, such examples, it seems to us, are both convincing and in abundance. If this is correct, and we assume it is, the thick/thin distinction, as was drawn here, seems to be the best tool for describing the gulf between incompatible conceptual schemes.

Needless to say, the conservative/liberal debate outlined above is highly schematized and utterly unrealistic. The role played by thick and thin concepts in the real world is far more complex and considerably more nuanced than we make out. But the schematization is helpful; it captures one of the deepest aspects of ethical thought. What is strictly true about the conservative/liberal debate is approximately true about the largely incompatible forms of life that populate the real world.

2. In Defense of Cultural Relativism

We have pointed out that moral diversity and disagreement have led philosophers to doubt the factuality of moral discourse. What we seek to argue in this section is that such relativistic intuitions are best explained and justified by appeal to the conceptual relationship between *meaning* and *agreement*. The untraditional picture of meaning Kripke advances on behalf of the later Wittgenstein is, perhaps, the clearest statement for this conceptual connection: meanings and (hence) concepts can only be attached to words apropos given "forms of life" or "sets of agreement within a community." Put differently, the relations between what we call cultural relativism and the nontraditional conception of meaning suggested by Kripke are crucial in that they explain why the phenomenon of normative diversity leads philosophers to ponder the very reality of moral properties. Hence, in addition to the rough outline of normative diversity defended above, our argument for cultural relativism also
presupposes a particular version of Kripke's skeptical solution to the rule-following paradox he finds in Wittgenstein. In what follows we neither defend this conception of meaning—we grant it for the sake of the argument—nor do we present it in full.

2.1 Kripke's Rule-Following Paradox

The paradox Kripke attributes to Wittgenstein has more than one version, and there is a fair amount of disagreement as to whether it represents Wittgenstein's views at all. Without entering that rather heated debate, we present here a version of the paradox best suited to our needs. We begin with a simple thought experiment. Consider two functions, one expressed by the conventional "plus," the other, "quus," defined in terms of the "plus" function as follows:

\[
\text{For } y \text{ or } x > 1,000,000, \text{ quus}(x, y) = 4, \text{ in all other cases, quus}(x, y) = x + y.
\]

After studying hard, the twins Castor and Pollex acquire the ability to add numbers. They do well in their studies and regularly come up with the expected answers to every arithmetic test they are given. Being only six years old, however, the sums they are dealt in these tests are always relatively small. As they grow older and their mathematical skills improve, it becomes apparent that Castor uses quus whenever he says he is adding. He insists, for example, that "1,000,000 + 1 = 4," and it proves useless to tell him otherwise. When asked to extend to all sums what he does when adding figures smaller than a million, he assures us that that is exactly what he does. He has no objection to conforming to the accepted way of adding numbers, once it is explained to him. Yet, he insists that in doing so he will be applying a new concept. The twins were trained together, by the same teachers and the same methods; they were exposed to the same "data" and examples and acquired and developed their concepts by observing the linguistic behavior of the same people. And still, they seem to have acquired different concepts.

Unless our little story is inherently incoherent, the immediate question it raises is epistemological: how can one ever know in advance what a person means exactly when he or she says "plus"? But according to Kripke's Wittgenstein, doubts run much deeper. The most perplexing question, argues Kripke, is not whether a person's concepts can ever be known by observing his behavior but whether there is anything to know at all! On the face of it, it looks as if one of the twins possesses the appropriate meaning of "+" while his brother fails to do so. Kripke's main efforts are directed to showing
that there is no such fact about Pollex that distinguishes him from Castor.

Kripke himself puts it thus: “agreement is essential for our game of ascribing rules and concepts to each other ... the set of responses in which we agree, and the way they interweave with our activities is our form of life....” The rule following paradox raises the question, How is this agreement to be explained?

On Wittgenstein’s conception, a certain type of traditional and overwhelmingly natural explanation of our shared form of life is excluded. We cannot say that we all respond as we do to “68+57” because we all grasp the concept of addition in the same way.... There is no objective fact ... that explains our agreement in particular cases. Rather our license to say of each other that we mean addition by “+” is part of a “language game” that sustains itself only because of the brute fact that we generally agree.

Kripke’s way of addressing the paradox is a striking example of reversing the order of explanation so common in philosophy since Hume. To recall, Hume rejects the conviction that we are justified in judging that an a-like event will follow a particular event b because of the causal relations between a-like and b-like events. It is the other way around—a is causally related to b by virtue of our tendency to expect the occurrence of an a-like event after experiencing a b-like event—an expectation that is based on regularity, which is, according to Hume, merely a brute fact.

What is known as “the skeptical solution” to the rule-following paradox follows a similar format: the fact that it is the right answer does not explain the fact that people tend to respond with “125” to “67+58=” The fact that people attach the same meaning to “+” cannot explain why their answers to arithmetical exercises tend to coincide. Rather, he argues, it is the wide agreement among them that makes it the case that individuals attach the same meaning to “+.” All we can say is that “[t]he community attributes a given concept to an individual so long as he exhibits sufficient conformity, under test circumstances, to the behavior of the community.” This is what having a concept or grasping a sense comes down to, nothing more than behaving linguistically in conformity with the community’s received standards.

One lesson can be safely deduced from what we believe are the more solid aspects of the argument. Considered in isolation, there is no sense in which a person can be said to be following a rule or ascribing meaning. To use Kripke’s words again:

It turns out that the skeptical solution does not allow us to speak of a single individual, considered by himself and in isolation, as ever meaning anything.... [there is no] condition in
the world which constitutes my meaning addition by “plus”—there is no such fact no such condition in either the “internal” or the “external” world.\textsuperscript{34}

But if this is true, then questions such as “What are the rules that a community, as a whole, follows?” or “When would we say that the ‘community’ is mistaken in applying a concept?” are also rendered meaningless. The “community’s behavior” is a blunt given in this respect.\textsuperscript{35} There can be no point in questioning or attempting to justify the community’s linguistic behavior by appealing to underlying rules or standards.\textsuperscript{36}

What, then, is the difference between Castor and Pollex? If Castor and Pollex disagree regarding the right answer to “67+58=?” only one of them can be right—the one who conforms to the shared practice.

All that is needed to legitimize assertions that someone means something is that there be roughly specifiable circumstances under which they are legitimately assertable, and that the game of asserting them under such conditions has a role in our lives.\textsuperscript{37}

Any individual who claims to have mastered the concept of addition will be judged by the community to have done so if his particular responses agree with those of the community in enough cases, especially the simple ones ... an individual who passes such tests in enough other cases is admitted as a normal speaker of the language and member of the community.\textsuperscript{38}

It is important to note that, according to this notion of meaning, there is no unambiguous, unequivocal answer as to whose standards we should use in determining a speaker’s concepts. This is made clear by considering a totally isolated speaker. The fact that someone stranded like Robinson Crusoe is physically isolated does not imply that he cannot follow rules or have concepts. Physically isolated individuals can be said to follow rules; only an individual considered in isolation cannot be said to do so. Hence, attributing concepts to Robinson Crusoe involves selecting the community with reference to whose practices they are to be attributed. But which is the relevant community for determining the rules Robinson Crusoe should be understood as following? In his case the answer is pretty obvious. But there is no standard and straightforward general answer to such a question—and this in itself bespeaks the fundamental indeterminacy that the community-based conception of meaning normally allows. If one’s behavior or biography does not direct us to a linguistic community, nothing can. And if there is no such community that is clearly relevant to his case, there simply can be no straightforward answer as to which concepts he applies.
2.2 An Argument for Cultural Relativism

This conception of meaning supports the type of cultural relativism construed above. Recall that we have argued that the liberal/conservative debate with regard to the undesirability of immodest behavior stems from a more basic debate as to which set of thick ethical concepts is morally preferable. At the heart of their numerous particular first-order moral disagreements, liberals and conservatives are fundamentally divided as to whether the form of life within which, say, the concept of modesty shapes normative thought is better or worse than the form of life within which the concept of creativity was generated. The thin predicates ("... better or worse than ...") utilized in this debate are capable of being formed by any individual sophisticated enough to reflect on human agency and to distill what is essential to being an agent (among other things, having ends and moral commitments) from his or her own particular experience.

Our thesis is that the juxtaposition of this account of moral diversity and the kind of community-based conception of meaning we have roughly outlined yields the conclusion that thin concepts—when used to express comparative properties of ethical outlooks—do not express properties at all. The liberals and conservatives of our thought experiment are in error, if they suppose that morally comparative judgments regarding ethical outlooks are factual.

The argument runs as follows: according to the community-based conception of meaning, a predicate expresses a concept (that is, using this predicate is rule governed) only if its correct use can be vouched for by the standards of a given a community of users. To say of thin predicates that they express real properties of ethical outlooks is to say that their extension is governed by what the competent speakers of the relevant community take to be their correct application. But since the community relevant to the type of usage of thin predicates comprises, by definition, different communities whose ethical outlooks are in conflict, it follows that there can be no shared standards from which the correct application of thin concepts can be studied.

Here is the argument in a more structured form:

1. According to the community-based conception of meaning, a predicate expresses a concept (that is, using this predicate is rule governed) only if its correct use can be vouched for by the standards of a given a community of users.

2. With regard to the thin predicates used, say, by liberals and conservatives in comparing their ethical outlooks, the relevant community minimally comprises the combined community of both liberals and conservatives.
3. This latter meta-community uses thin predicates to compare moral outlooks but, again by definition, exhibits no agreement as to how such comparisons should go.

4. In light of 1, when used to compare ethical outlooks, thin predicates simply do not have any extension.\textsuperscript{39}

The advantage of arguing thus is immediately visible: on our construal, thick ethical properties are real and their application is both action-guiding and world-guided. Relativism results from antirealism only with respect to the thin ethical properties employed in comparative moral assessments of closed fully fledged ethical outlooks and can now stand unhampered by much unnecessary antirealist baggage other than a bare and (relatively) reasonable minimum. This minimum is enough for motivating the following form of relativism: there might be a moral demand D (avoid b-like behavior) that applies to A while not applying to B, just because A is initiated into an ethical outlook in which D is in use. Suppose that D is “avoid immodest behavior.” This moral demand does not apply to B if B does not use the concept of modesty, since he has no moral reason to use it.

One natural objection to the argument might focus on premise 2. It could be stated as follows. Suppose we take a community of utilitarians who use “good” and “better than” in accordance with the utilitarian moral theory. The same goes \textit{mutatis mutandis} for a community of deontologists. Clearly, both groups are using thin moral concepts in a way that pins down their extension. Yet goodness for the first group is tied to facts about the effects of actions upon overall welfare. Their use of thin ethical concepts is guided by utilitarian concern. And the same can be said (again, \textit{mutatis mutandis}) for the deontologists. There seems, then, to be a definite and shared judgment each group makes comparing its own normative outlook to the other. And, in performing it, the two groups appear to express a definite moral comparative property that each of them attributes to its own form of life. If this were true, premise 2 would be refuted.

Note first that, in the scenario described, it is conceded that the respective uses of the two groups’ thin concepts are thoroughly relativized. Whereas the extension of one’s use of “better than” is determined by utilitarian criteria, that of the other is determined by deontological criteria. Rather than view the two groups as trying to use one concept, as we propose, such an objection implies that they are using different concepts entirely. Indeed, the objector avoids a Mackie-style error theory regarding comparative thin normative properties. A closer look reveals, however, that the price to pay for such a strategy is far too high.

In the last analysis there is no sense at all in which the two groups can be said to be \textit{trying} to designate the same compara-
tive property. Hence the objector renders them gravely wrong with regard to each other's thoughts. When an imagined utilitarian argues that her own normative outlook is better than that of a deontologist, she believes that the deontologist denies this very proposition. She believes that they genuinely disagree. Yet, if the objector is right, this is an error; the deontologist has never entertained the proposition the utilitarian attributes to her! We conclude (and our objector must agree) that radically different ethical outlooks have no comparative properties with regard to which their adherents can be said to disagree.

It might still be argued, however, that the community-based conception of meaning leaves moral absolutism untouched. Recall that this conception of meaning allows freedom in stipulating a community with reference to whose practices concepts are attributed. Given, on the one hand, the universal use of "better than" (applied to forms of life) and the lack of any set of actually practiced universal standards by which to interpret it, on the other, perhaps the meaning of "better than" should be fashioned by appeal, not to actual communities but to the perfect one—to the "Kingdom of Ends." Perhaps diversity shouldn't lead us to deny extension to thin predicates (as expressing comparative moral properties of ethical outlooks) but, rather, urge us to raise our sights and speculate on how the morally perfect community would conduct itself and on the ways its members would use these terms. If so, the community-based conception of meaning would lead us not to relativism at all, but to a form of realism with respect to the ideal!

However, there are serious reasons for rejecting the Kantian option. Recall that we have assumed that every intelligent person can form thin concepts. And suppose that a set of fitting standards for applying thin normative concepts existed. Then people who failed to apply them correctly would be considered mistaken. Hence if two conceptions of the good are incompatible in the sense defined above, we would be forced to conclude that (at least) one of them is radically mistaken.

But what is it to even talk of a mistake under such circumstances? In cases of erring in applying color concepts, erring in a simple calculation, or erring as regards to the location of one's wallet—we assume cognitive explanations: lack of normal conditions for recognizing colors in the first, negligence or incompetence in the second, a lapse of memory in the third. Ultimately, the cognitive causes for these errors are elucidated by the neurology and physiology of memory, visual capacities, and mathematical skills. Such explanations are required even when different communities use conflicting sets of color-concepts (they use the phrase "x has the same color as y" differently as a result of dividing the spectrum differently). Scientists have a neutral vocabulary—the language of
wavelengths—to formulate the differences. With the help of these formulations, anthropologists, physiologists, and psychologists might describe and explain how different networks of color concepts fit into one world.

Could we expect such an explanation for errors in applying the notions of “good” (used as a comparative property of forms of life)? Could there be a cognitive explanation for a group’s failure to use a network of thick normative concepts? Williams’s answer is negative: there is no “practicable theory” of error or account of how each party fails to perceive things that other parties perceive. “We could not, as in the case of secondary qualities, fit together into one world the qualities that they are supposedly perceiving and those that we are supposedly perceiving,” says Williams.\(^{41}\) Subsequently, it would simply be wrong to attribute to people who use the predicate “good” a concept that they systematically err in applying—since no explanation of such an error is available.\(^{42}\)

A similar argument can be elaborated as follows. Compare “good” to “+. At a certain point, Kripke wonders whether quuss-like behavior is at all intelligible to us. On the one hand, we can imagine a community within which it feels natural to continue a series in quus-like fashion. After all there are no facts about meaning, the grasping of which necessitates continuing a series in one way rather than another. Still,

it is supposed to be part of our very form of life that we find it natural and indeed inevitable that we follow the rule of addition in the particular way that we do ... then it seems that we should be unable to understand “from the inside” ... how any creature could follow a quus like rule. We could describe such behavior extensionally and behavioristically, but we would be unable to find it intelligible how the creature finds it natural to behave in this way....What it seems may be unintelligible to us is how an intelligent creature could get the very training we have for the addition function, and yet grasp the appropriate function in a quus like way.\(^{43}\)

Now, as we have described moral diversity, if a paradigmatic case of immodesty is said to be good in a liberal community, the conservatives would take this judgment to be a quus-like use of “good.” The same goes for the liberals—from their standpoint, the conservatives apply “good” in a quus-like manner. Hence, the concepts they express by these predicates cannot be the same. This contradicts our assumptions with regard to thinness. It turns out that the concept expressed by the liberals’ “good” was not formed by conservatives despite being sophisticated enough to reflect on human agency as such. The lesson we urge relativists to draw is that thin predicates, as we have defined them, do not express concepts at all.
It follows that the shared usage of thin predicates cannot be explained by designating shared extension. Once this is realized, the community-based conception of meaning would prompt us to account for the semantics of such expressions by searching for uses of them that are universally rule-governed. And these are not hard to find. Clearly members of every community, whatever ethical profile it has, agree that if x rates a-like conduct better than b-like conduct in C-like circumstances, then, other things being equal, x would choose a rather than b in C. According to the community-based conception of meaning, this suggests that from a semantic standpoint, in some contexts, the phrase “x thinks that a-like actions are good” is more basic than “good.”

As we have noted, Williams is accused of oscillating between the horns of a false dilemma. Putnam, for instance, complains that, according to Williams, our values are either merely contingent or else products of a search for the best ethical outlook from “an absolute point of view.” That is, we have to painfully digest the fact “that this outlook is ours just because of the history that has made it ours.” But, Putnam says, our outlook might be “more or less warranted without being absolute.... What goes missing in Williams's entire discussion is the possibility of pragmatism.” We have shown, however, that given the plausible analysis of radical normative diversity, and given our notion of error in applying the concepts we possess, community-based conceptions of meaning render relativism a real threat even to pragmatists like Putnam. The argument that we have put forward is not prejudiced by any absolute conception of the world nor does it overuse (what philosophers conceive as) the model of scientific justification.

Conclusion

It seems plausible that human beings become initiated into the realm of thick ethical considerations by their ethical upbringing. The lesson from our argument is that one's adherence to a certain set of thick ethical concepts—one's overall conception of the good—cannot be explained or justified by morally thin comparative judgments. Hence, properly modified, Harman's general formulation, that there might be a moral demand D that applies to A but not to B, just because A was initiated into one ethical outlook rather than another, is well motivated.

But this raises a more general worry. In the absence of substantive thin concepts and in view of the existence of rival ethical outlooks, our upbringing within a culture might be conceived as blind training. And this might lead to a form of relativism according to which reasoning becomes irrelevant when we “raise the question of how we get from one vocabulary to another, from one dominant metaphoric to another....”
Had thin ethical concepts been substantive, we could have boasted the existence of a "grand story"—a theory of ethical diversity, capable of accommodating the entire spectrum of humanly possible schemes of thick ethical concepts. We do not find these grand stories necessary for accounting for our ethical intuitions and practices. But what about our local, specific stories? To what extent are the thick beliefs that constitute a form of life subject to ongoing modification, elaboration, and revision? Should the notion of a form of life be understood as marking the limits of reflection (as Rorty would have us believe)? Does the fact that an ethical outlook cannot be ranked worse than another suggest that reflection itself is limited by the particular configuration of a community's thick moral concepts? Are the (fairy-tale) liberals of our (fairy-tale) example incapable, in principle, of ever considering, say, religious attitudes toward sexual permissiveness, as more than "unnatural" quqs-like applications of the notion of good? We shall leave these questions for future consideration.47, 48

Notes

1 See Lewis's dispositional theory of value, where value is defined through "our" second order desires. In essence, Lewis's theory is a weak version of antirealism with regard to value. The relativistic threat is explicitly acknowledged. See David Lewis, "Dispositional Theories of Value," *Proceeding of the Aristotelian Society*, suppl. 63 (1989): 113–37.


3 We here follow Harman's "What is Moral Relativism?" reprinted in his *Explaining Value*.

4 Ibid., 34.

5 Although different from Harman's version, David Wong's defense of relativism, for instance, combines both noncognitivism and antirealism. See his *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984).


8 In order to avoid attempts to dismiss the possibility of conversion between the two communities by deeming it to be a "dead option," we imagine them sharing the same territory and in constant contact. Under such conditions some will surely rate such conversions a dead option but others may well not. Compare Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism," reprinted in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1981), 140–3.

9 R. Jay Wallace, "Scanlon's Contractualism," *Ethics* 112 (2002): 434. For the full discussion see, T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998) chap. 1, sect. 9; we cite Wallace since although the examples and arguments
advanced by Scanlon suggest that what is really at issue is the relation between general and specific normative and evaluative concepts. Scanlon's presentation of the issue is slightly different. Additionally, Scanlon's own commitment to the primacy of the thick is doubtful. See also Gerald Dworkin's discussion of Scanlon's position in his "Contractualism and the Normativity principles," *Ethics* 112 (2002): 471–82.


13 Although we generally follow Williams's lead in defending the thick/thin distinction, we find a major aspect of his discussion unconvincing. Williams characterizes thick normative thought as nonreflective—while we think that adherence to a network of thick concepts might be thoroughly reflective. See, for instance, Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 147–8, where he claims that reflection (made with the help of thin concepts) destroys ethical knowledge (formulated by thick predicates). Our account bears resemblance to the one Michael Walzer proposes in his *Thick and Thin: Moral Argument at Home and Abroad* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), chapter 1. For an interesting criticism see Samuel Scheffler, "Morality through Thick and Thin," *Philosophical Review* 96 (1987), 411–34.

14 We have no intention of pursuing a full-blown, general semantic account of thin predicates but only to list certain of their features that any such theory would be required to explain.


16 By defining incompatible forms of life in this way, we try to silence an attempt to view b as is prima facie desirable due to being creative and prima facie undesirable due to being immodest. For an analysis of prima facie judgments and their role in practical reasoning, see Donald Davidson, "How Weakness of the Will Possible?" in his *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

17 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 141.


19 The more common version of the Wilde story describes him as having been accused of "blasphemy" rather than " obscenity." See Robert Brandom citing Jonathan Bennett in *Articulating Reasons: An
Yitzhak Benbaji and Menachem Fisch

Introduction to Inferentialism (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 70. But in the case of blasphemy, one can certainly imagine someone thus accused who claims to not have use for the concept, but to use it positively!

For a similar analysis see Brandom, Articulating Reasons, 69–71.

For a technical elucidation of practice using others’ words and applying others’ concepts see Yitzhak Benbaji, “Using Others’ Words,” The Journal of Philosophical Research (forthcoming), and his “A Demonstrative Analysis of ‘Open Quotation’” (in progress); for the metaphysical consequences of this cognitive ability, see his “Using Others’ Words and Drawing the Limits of the Thinkable,” Dialogue (forthcoming).

We find this presumption very appealing, but we don’t argue for it here.

See Samuel Scheffler, “Morality through Thick and Thin,” who claims that Williams himself is not fully committed to this view.


Kripke’s challenge as we construe it cannot be met by McDowell’s “platonic naturalism.” According to McDowell, our concepts are observable to those who are absorbed in “our” form of life. Yet this does not answer the question posed by the “+” case, which is deliberately constructed to involve differences of meaning that fall outside the normal boundaries of perceivable conduct. If the two functions differ only with respect to huge numbers, chances are that we will never know whether our colleagues add or quad. See in this respect Crispin Wright’s response to McDowell’s argument in his Truth and Objectivity (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 92. For another attempt to block Kripke’s argument with primitivism, see Goldfarb, “Kripke on Wittgenstein and Rules,” 548–9.


Ibid.

Ibid., 96.

For different readings of the community view and of the arguments against the solitary conception of meaning, see Paul A. Boghossian, “The Rule-Following Considerations,” Mind 98 (1989): 519–22.
Through Thick and Thin

33 These very sketchy remarks do not constitute a theory of meaning—and as many have noted, it is far from clear that any coherent sketch for an account of meaning has been really laid down. See esp. Goldfarb, “Kripke on Wittgenstein and Rules.”

34 Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, 69–70. As noted above, much of the discussion of Kripke’s book focuses on the viability of his interpretation of Wittgenstein. Such, for the most part, is the nature of McGinn’s response. However, McGinn makes it clear at points that one of his reasons for doubting the ascription of the “skeptical solution” to Wittgenstein is that the very idea of the impossibility of a private rule makes no sense. For a recent restatement of this argument, see McGinn, *The Making of a Philosopher: My Journey Through Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), chap. 5, esp. pp. 146–55.

35 This aspect was justly emphasized by McDowell, “Wittgenstein on Following a Rule,” 334–6.


38 Ibid., 91.


40 This line of thought is implicit in Putnam’s pragmatism: “truth is to be identified with ... idealized justification, as opposed to justification on the present evidence” (*Realism and Reason, Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 3 [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985], xvii).


42 For a defense of this line of thought see also Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), chap. 4. For an attack on it see, R. Dworkin, “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Believe it,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 25 (1996): 105–08; we find Dworkin’s defense of absolutism unconvincing. According to him, it is not the case that mistakes have cognitive explanations. In many philosophical debates, he argues, we don’t tend to presume cognitive shortcuts, despite being convinced that our opponent is mistaken. Yet, the dis-analogy between the cases is straightforward: conservatives take *b* to be paradigmatically bad. If liberals are mistaken with respect to such an obvious truth, there must be a cognitive explanation for their mistake.


44 See note 13 above.

45 Bernard Williams, “Philosophy as a Humanistic Discipline,”


48 We would like to thank Hagit Benbaji, David Heyd, Avishai Margalit, Gideon Rosen, Michael Walzer, and an anonymous referee for helpful comments and discussion.