One of the chief virtues claimed for moral relativism by its champions has often been that it promotes tolerance of, usually understood as non-condemnation of and/or non-interference with, the beliefs and practices of others, in particular members of other cultures. Melville Herskovits, one of the leading advocates of relativism in its mid-century heyday in American anthropology, typifies this tendency, stressing that, “...in practice, the philosophy of relativism is a philosophy of tolerance,” commenting, “...that a larger measure of tolerance is needed in this conflict-torn world needs no arguing.”\(^1\) Such claims seem to find considerable credence in contemporary society at large, but they are usually dismissed by philosophers with even more contempt than that which greets the relativist thesis itself.\(^2\) Bernard Williams refers to the inference from relativism to tolerance as “vulgar relativism,” calling it “...possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy.”\(^3\)

I will argue that Williams – and the philosophical consensus in his favor\(^4\) – are too quick in their dismissals of “vulgar relativism.” Contrary to the received wisdom in philosophy today, some versions of relativism can provide significant grounds for non-interference with other societies in many contexts. I defend this claim along lines similar to those proposed by David Wong:\(^5\) while it is true that no meta-ethical theory by itself entails a substantive principle of tolerance, some relativist theses, when conjoined with independently plausible moral principles concerning when interference is justified, yield the conclusion that interference is not justified in many cases in which we might otherwise expect to find it justified by those same principles. However, it turns out that Wong’s defense of the inference from relativism to tolerance\(^6\) is also too quick. Only some types of relativism provide particular grounds for toler-

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and Wong’s own brand of relativism does not belong to those
types (though the version criticized by Williams does). Even those
types of relativism which best sustain inferences to tolerance do so
only with important qualifications. And those types of relativism are
probably not the ones best supported by the arguments from moral
diversity suggested by the anthropologists who issued the call for
tolerance on these sorts of grounds in the first place.

I take ‘moral relativism’ to refer to any of a family of meta-
ethical positions which hold that the truth-value of some or all moral
claims (or alternatively, the obtaining of some or all moral facts)depends on the norms – actual or idealized – of given individuals or
groups, and that there can be more than one adequate set of norms,
giving rise to conflicting consequences; relativism denies, for those
questions held to fall within its scope, that there are any moral facts
which obtain independently of those norms (hereafter, ‘objective’
moral facts). Following the anthropologists criticized by Williams,
I will focus principally on what we may call ‘cultural relativism,’ a
type of relativism according to which the relevant norms vary among
cultures, though the issues about the relation between relativism
and tolerance will be much the same if moral truth is taken to depend
on individual, or other sorts of group, norms.

More sophisticated versions of cultural relativism will allow for
the possibility of moral error or moral progress within a culture,
where these are to be judged by the underlying values of the culture
in question. On such versions, moral truths for a given culture will be
those which capture that culture’s deepest commitments, or perhaps
those to which members of that culture would assent at the limit of
inquiry under idealized conditions, or something of the sort.

But this specification still leaves important ambiguities in the
claim that right and wrong is relative to cultural standards. Partic-
ularly relevant will be a distinction drawn by David Lyons between
‘agent-relativism’ and ‘appraiser-relativism’ (hereafter ‘age-rel’ and
‘ap-rel’). The distinction concerns whose standards a given moral
judgment will be deemed relative to. According to age-rel, the
norms which determine the rightness or wrongness of a given action
will be those of or applying to the agent performing the action.
According to ap-rel, the relevant norms will be those of or pertaining
to the person making the judgment of rightness or wrongness. The
distinction can be illustrated with an example concerning cross-cultural moral judgments. According to age-rel, I would be making a false claim if I were to condemn the head-hunting practiced by the Ilongots of the Philippines as wrong; though head-hunting would be wrong for me, given the moral standards of my culture, it is right for Ilongots, given their traditional moral standards. But according to ap-rel, when making a moral judgment I implicitly invoke the standards of my own culture, so that I am correct when I condemn Ilongot head-hunting as wrong, though, by the same token, the Ilongot who holds that head-hunting is right is likewise making a true claim. Thus, while age-rel recognizes no general moral truths of the sort ‘it is wrong to do X,’ nor even ‘it is wrong to do X in a situation of type S,’ age-rel does recognize objective facts as to what it is right or wrong for a given agent to do in a given situation, viz., that which accords or conflicts with the agent’s moral system. According to ap-rel, in contrast, there are no objective facts even of this nature; there is merely what would be right or wrong for the agent to do according to the moral system of the person making the judgment.

I will argue that arguments for non-interference with other cultures based on relativism and independently plausible moral principles work better when the relativism in question is a version of age-rel. But even for age-rel, my defense of the inference to tolerance will be subject to the qualification that the success of the argument will depend in part on just how the relevant auxiliary principles appealed to are to be understood, which is likely to depend in turn on more fundamental questions in moral theory. I also address several objections to this strategy of arguing for tolerance, including the worry that accepting relativism might itself undermine the otherwise plausible auxiliary principles in question. The inference from age-rel to tolerance is discussed in §1. In §2 I argue that ap-rel is unlikely to provide greater reason for tolerance than would a plausibly humble realism. In §3 I suggest that the anthropological case for tolerance may still be suspect, on the ground that if there is any case to be made for relativism based on moral diversity between cultures, it will be more likely to support ap-rel (or weaker versions of age-rel less apt to support the case for tolerance).
Through anthropologists’ relativism is seldom spelled out with much precision, age-rel is the theory most strongly suggested by anthropologists’ formulations – see, e.g., Herskovits again: “...the relativistic point of view brings into relief the validity of every set of norms for the people whose lives are guided by them, and the values these represent.” Age-rel has also seemed to some philosophers to be the version of moral relativism most worthy of being taken seriously – this is Lyons’ own view.

When philosophers decry the invalidity of the inference from relativism to tolerance, it is usually crude versions of age-rel which are at issue, as in Williams’ discussion. Williams summarizes the anthropologists’ argument for tolerance as follows: “...‘right’ means (can only be coherently understood as meaning) ‘right for a given society’ ...and ...(therefore) it is wrong for people in one society to condemn, interfere with, etc., the values of another society.” Williams’ criticisms of the inference from age-rel to tolerance may be summed up under two charges: (a) the conclusion in no way follows from the premise, and, more strongly, (b) the conclusion is inconsistent with the premise.

I pass briefly over the second charge, that “the view is clearly inconsistent, since it makes a claim in its [conclusion], about what is right and wrong in one’s dealings with other societies, which uses a nonrelative sense of ‘right’ not allowed for in the first proposition.” Why should we take “right” in the conclusion in a non-relative sense? Granted, the classic anthropological defenders of relativism have sometimes presented the call for tolerance as if it were some sort of trans-cultural absolute, and this is often true of popular relativist defenses of tolerance as well. But a more charitable reading might disregard such formulations as rhetorical excess, or as the result of failure to formulate the position sufficiently carefully. Relativism is not inconsistent with the claim that interference with other societies is wrong, if the latter claim – like any other substantive moral claim – is taken to express a claim about what is right or wrong according to our standards. Indeed, on a charitable reading, there is not even any ambiguity, as the relative sense is the only sense in which, according to the relativist, the tolerance thesis could be true.
What then of the charge that relativism fails to provide grounds for tolerance? It is this charge which is the principal target of this paper. It is often argued that, far from enjoining tolerance, the relativist thesis undermines any ground for holding that intolerant behavior is wrong. If the standards of our society call for killing anyone who is different from us, then that, according to age-rel, is what we should do. Thankfully, it seems implausible that our society actually subscribes to such a principle of intolerance, especially if we recall that, according to any but the crudest versions of age-rel, neither the principles which might be abstracted from actual behavior, nor even the principles actually subscribed to by members of a society, constitute what the relativist will count as a society’s moral standards — there is room for internal reflection and criticism. Still, the foregoing seems only to reinforce the anti-vulgar-relativist’s point that if we have reasons — according to age-rel — for tolerance, it will be because our society happens to subscribe to a principle of tolerance, and not as a consequence of age-rel.

Williams may well be right that “…it cannot be a consequence of the nature of morality itself that no society ought ever to interfere with another, or that individuals from one society confronted with the practices of another ought, if rational, to react with acceptance.” But the fact that few significant consequences follow from age-rel alone makes it no different from general principles of any kind: no predictions about the behavior of a given moving body follow from the law of gravitation alone. Given plausible — by our lights — auxiliary principles, age-rel can provide reason for non-interference with other cultures. For example, we may believe that it is permissible to interfere with others’ actions only when they are wrong, or even that we are sometimes obligated to try to prevent wrong actions. Given either of the former auxiliary principles, a convincing argument for the age-relativist thesis that cannibalism is right for certain groups, will take away our grounds for interference.

It is important to note that many of us probably actually subscribe to something like the foregoing auxiliary principles. It seems at least roughly right that it is permissible to interfere with others’ actions if and only if those actions are wrong. The relevant principle will need some refinement: is interference with wrong actions always permissible? how wrong must the action be to warrant inter-
ference? how certain must we be of its wrongness? might it be justified under certain circumstances to interfere with actions which are not wrong? etc. Still, regardless of just how we answer these questions, it seems plausible that – according to the actual moral standards of our society – whether an action is wrong has significant bearing on whether it is permissible to interfere; if so, age-rel – which tells us that certain actions which we would otherwise have thought were wrong are not in fact wrong (for those who perform them) – will affect our judgments of when interference is permissible.  

Similarly, while the scope and best specification of the obligation-to-interfere principle will be controversial, many of us are likely to find it plausible that at least we ought to try to prevent very wrong actions, if we can do so with good prospects for success and with little cost. In contrast, when arguments against the relativism-tolerance inference conjure up some hypothetical super-intolerant society, whose intolerance is endorsed by age-rel because it is sanctioned by that society, the example is largely a product of philosophers’ imaginations. The relativist’s argument for toleration should not be viewed in the abstract, but in its actual dialectical context – a context in which its intended audience is likely to believe in something like the foregoing auxiliary principles concerning when interference is justifiable, and hence should find age-rel to provide reason for tolerance after all.

A hostile summary of my argument here might have it that I have shown only that age-rel can provide grounds for tolerance for those who already subscribe to a principle of tolerance (or who would so subscribe at the limit of inquiry). In a sense, this is right, but it is wrong that the relativist premise then makes no difference with respect to tolerance. While it may not affect whether, or to what extent, tolerance is a good thing, it will make a difference as to when it is appropriate to apply a principle of tolerance, because it makes a difference as to which actions count as wrong.

Suppose, for example, that we have good reason to believe that cannibalism is permitted (or even encouraged) by the standards of society C. Suppose further that we subscribe to the following principle:
OWA-PIP: Interference with others’ actions is permissible if and only if those actions are wrong.

Ordinarily, we take ourselves to be fairly certain that cannibalism is wrong; so, by OWA-PIP, it is permissible for us to act, if possible, to prevent cannibalism among members of C. But, if age-rel is true, cannibalism, when practiced by members of C, is not wrong, and so, it is not permissible for us to act to prevent it. Similarly, given a principle which holds that interference with wrong actions is sometimes obligatory, accepting age-rel would take away our grounds for thinking it obligatory to interfere with C’s cannibalism. Thus, given plausible principles about when it is permissible/obligatory to interfere, in some cases accepting age-rel would give us reasons for increased tolerance, by taking away the grounds for the permissibility/obligatoriness of interfering.

This is not to say that such reasons for tolerance need always over-ride all other considerations. Age-rel, conjoined with the appropriate principles – internal to our moral system – governing permissible interference with others’ actions may direct us not to interfere with the cannibalism of members of C. But our moral system may also include other principles, e.g., that we ought to protect innocent people from harm, which have the consequence that we should interfere. It will then be a question internal to our moral system which of the reasons for and against interference is weightiest and should in the end be acted on. Even so, age-rel will have made a difference to our deliberations about when to interfere, and may sometimes tilt the balance against interference.

Unfortunately, matters get still more complicated, for different characterizations of the relevant principles governing permissible and obligatory interference will yield very different conclusions concerning the implications of age-rel. Suppose, for example, that we take obligations and permissions to interfere with wrong actions to be derivative of more fundamental obligations and permissions to prevent harms. Then, the more fundamental principle regulating permissible interference might be something like this: ‘Interference with others’ actions is permissible if and only if interference is necessary to prevent greater harm.’ A similar principle might be thought to regulate when interference is obligatory (perhaps with the amendment that the harm to be prevented be on balance much
greater than the harms inherent in, or caused by, interference). Now, while age-rel would cancel my prima facie obligation/permission to prevent the wrong action of cannibalism by members of C (for they would not be committing wrong actions by engaging in cannibalism), it does not seem that it would similarly cancel my prima facie obligation/permission to prevent the harm of being eaten from befalling the intended victims of cannibalism. Even if we suppose that being eaten counts as a harm only in my moral system, still that moral system will be the one, according to age-rel, which determines the rightness or wrongness of my actions (or omissions).

Which version of the principles regulating interference will be deemed correct, and consequently, what implications age-rel will have for the permissibility/obligatoriness of interference, looks likely to depend on more general decisions about moral theory. Consequentialists would presumably be likely to endorse interference principles which focus on preventing harms, so that age-rel will make little difference. (But for consequentialists tempted by relativism, the theory which most naturally suggests itself might be one which locates the relativity in what counts as a harm or a benefit. On such a theory, it would seem sensible to weigh harms and benefits not according to the standards of either agent or appraiser, but according to the standards of the parties affected.26 It is not clear, though, that a theory which makes harm or benefit relative to the party affected is all that relativist – the theory which emerges would be a close relative to preference-utilitarianism – not usually viewed as a relativist theory.)27

From a deontological perspective in moral theory, in contrast, principles such as OWA-PIP are more likely to be viewed as fundamental, so that duties of non-interference are likely to prevail for the deontological age-relativist in the cannibalism case. (This is not to say, of course, that a deontological theory needs to embrace such a principle. I am suggesting only that, given our initial assumption that something like OWA-PIP is a plausible principle, the fact that our general orientation in moral theory is deontological would not provide reason to abandon or reinterpret such a principle.)28 Thus the implications of age-rel for tolerance seem likely to depend in significance measure on which general moral theory correctly describes our moral system.
The argument for tolerance from age-rel and independently plausible auxiliary principles is further complicated by the worry that acceptable of relativism might undermine the very auxiliary principles appealed to. It is worth distinguishing at least two possible grounds for such a worry. The more general ground has to do with the thought that if – as relativism would have it – one set of moral principles is ultimately no better than another, then our principles concerning when interference is permissible or obligatory are ultimately arbitrary, no better than their negations. Consequently, there is really no compelling reason to refrain from interfering with cannibalism if we are inclined to interfere, nor, for that matter, is there ever any compelling reason to interfere if we are not so inclined. But if this objection is right, relativism undermines not just the relevant principles concerning interference, but *all* moral principles, or rather, relativism undermines our sense that moral principles make a serious claim on us. While some relativists might be willing to accept, or even welcome, such a consequence, for most philosophers – including most relativists, this worry constitutes an objection to relativism, which needs to be met by showing how accepting relativism can be compatible with taking moral claims seriously. Most relativists think this can be done; this is not the place to attempt such a defense, though I will sketch a few possibilities later. If we allow the relativist her assumption that her position is consistent with recognizing the force of moral claims in general, then the foregoing worry does not provide reason to think that the principles required to argue for tolerance should in particular be undermined.

The second ground for worrying that age-rel would undermine the relevant auxiliary principles is more specific to those principles. Even if age-rel allows us to continue to take seriously the force of our own moral principles, it might be thought that the plausibility of such a principle as ‘It is permissible to interfere with another agent’s actions if and only if the agent’s actions are wrong’ depends on assuming some objectivist conception of right and wrong. If saying that cannibalism by a member of C is right amounts to nothing more than saying that cannibalism is sanctioned by the norms of C, then the question whether his cannibalism is right or wrong may lose much of its significance for our deliberations. How we answer this
worry may depend in large part of how we address the more general worry that accepting relativism undermines the claims of morality.

It will be useful to begin with a distinction drawn by Thomas Scanlon between “debunking” and “benign” relativisms. On ‘debunking’ versions, “Morality is merely a matter of social convention,” or, in the words of Ruth Benedict, another classic defender of relativism in anthropology, “morality ... is a convenient term for socially approved habits.” ‘Benign’ relativisms, on the other hand, offer a positive account of the parameters to which moral requirements are relative, such that these parameters vary from one society to another in a way that can be seen not to undermine the seriousness of moral requirements. Debunking versions seem likely to take away our reasons for attaching much weight to the question of whether members of C are right to engage in cannibalism, but this consequence comes with the moral general undermining of the claims of morality already discussed.

If there is a case to be made for a relativism which allows us reasons to respect the demands of morality, perhaps those reasons for respect will extend to the demands placed by other moral systems on the agents to which they apply. Consider, for example, one such account: a given moral system is to be understood as one of various acceptable solutions to the problem of how to allow a group of people to live together peacefully. Although, within certain parameters, it may be largely arbitrary which system a given society adopts, once that system is adopted, there will be good reasons – having to do with achieving the aims of morality – for members of that society to adhere to that system. The demands of a moral system may be compared to rules of the road: it is an arbitrary convention that in the US one drives on the right side of the road, but, given the existence of that convention, there is good reason for drivers in the US to observe it. If the relativist accepts an account of this sort, and if her own system values the peaceful thriving of societies in general – as our moral system presumably does, then age-rel should not undermine principles which hold that whether an agent is acting wrongly is an important consideration in determining whether interference is justified. Similar conclusions are likely to apply for other versions of ‘benign relativism,’ e.g., to a relativism which takes morality to be concerned with promoting the individual
flourishing of human beings, but holds that human nature is sufficiently plastic that what it is for an individual to flourish will be largely constituted by the particular values of her society.  

One other possibility is worth considering. Imagine a version of relativism, incorporating aspects of non-cognitivism, which understands basic moral statements as expressing commitment to certain values, rather than belief in certain moral truths, and then goes on to hold that statements about what is right or wrong for a given agent (or of what she ought to do, etc.) are statements about what follows from that agent’s (considered, refined, ultimate) commitments. On this view, it would not be so much that the rightness of certain moral principles (for me) gives them motivating force (for me), but that their motivating force (for me) is expressed by my calling them right. To hold certain moral principles is simply to be committed to certain values. Accepting this understanding of moral semantics is not reason to abandon commitment to one’s own values. It might, however, undermine the force of principles like OWA-PIP – if the rightness of cannibalism for society C turns out to consist only in its being in accord with principles which motivate members of C, it is not clear that this gives me any reason to refrain from interfering. If opposition to cannibalism is an important motivating value for me, it is not clear why my opposition should be undermined by the (unsurprising) discovery that cannibals are motivated by a system of values which endorses cannibalism.

In short then, whether acceptance of age-rel will undermine the auxiliary principles required for the case for tolerance will depend on why and how morality is supposed to be relative to agents’ norms. A ‘benign’ relativism is unlikely to undermine the relevant principles; a ‘debunking’ relativism is likely to undermine them, but no more than it would undermine all moral principles. It may also be possible to formulate a version of age-rel, focusing on commitments to values, which might tend to undermine principles like OWA-PIP, without undermining all moral commitments.

One other objection to the agent-relativist defense of tolerance is worth considering: does it not accord too much weight to the moral standards of other societies, at the expense of our own standards? Consider, for example, a slightly more complex scenario, involving a third society as well: according to the moral system of vegetarian
society V, eating meat is wrong, and eating human meat is particularly bad. Suppose now that it is part of society C’s moral system that C has a duty to impose its cannibalism on other societies. Then, according to age-rel, it would be right for members of C to force members of V to engage in cannibalism, which is to say, it would be right for members of C to force members of V to perform actions which are wrong for them. It seems paradoxical that our commitment to tolerance should make it wrong for us to intervene to prevent this sort of intolerant behavior by C.

Several responses are available here. It might be argued that, although a principle permitting interference with wrong actions would not justify interfering in such a case, we subscribe to other moral principles as well, which give us obligations, or at least permissions, to interfere to protect non-cannibal societies from C. Or this case might suggest that our actual principles governing permissible interference to prevent wrong actions are more complex. A suitably refined principle, e.g., that we should act so as to minimize total wrong-doing, might imply that whether an action is right for the agent will be relevant for assessing whether it is right for us to interfere – so that age-rel will make a difference to our judgments as to when interference is permissible, without prohibiting interference with imperialistic cannibals justified by their own moral system. In any event, questions about how to respond to norms sanctioning intolerance are likely to prove difficult not just for age-relativists, but for anyone committed to a strong principle of tolerance of other societies’ norms.

Further questions arise if we now imagine societies C and V also to become convinced of the truth of age-rel. Would age-rel imply the absurd consequence that members of C should accept the vegetarianism of V, while members of V should, in the interests of promoting right-doing, encourage C to interfere with V? Geoffrey Harrison makes a charge similar to this in the course of his argument that relativism has no implications for tolerance: “If the argument in favor of tolerance works for one it should work for the other. They should both try to allow the other to do what they consider to be wrong. One is reminded of two men ushering each other through a doorway. Neither can be so impolite as to go through first. They both starve to death.”

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But the version of the inference from age-rel to tolerance which I am defending withstands such objections. What implications accepting age-rel will have for C and V will depend on the further particulars of their moral systems, but there is little reason to expect such absurd consequences. As already noted, to say that re-evaluating certain actions of other societies as right may affect one’s ideas about whether or when one should interfere is not to say that such re-evaluations should override all other considerations. In particular, we should not expect that duties to assist others in doing right should override one’s own duties to do right. Members of V who believe that members of C are acting rightly in trying to enforce cannibalism on V are still likely to take themselves to be entitled, if not obligated, to resist such enforced cannibalism.38 Meanwhile, Society C’s belief that it has a duty to export cannibalism seems unlikely to survive C’s coming to accept that cannibalism is wrong for other societies.39

The question of the implications of age-rel for tolerance turns out to resist simple answers. While it is right that age-rel by itself has no normative consequences, it does not follow that whether age-rel is right has no bearing on whether or when one should or may interfere with the actions of other societies, governed by different norms. But whether age-rel makes a difference, and how much difference it makes, will depend on the particulars of the relevant interference principles of the potential interferer’s moral system, which in turn are likely to depend on the more general principles of her moral system.

While age-rel can make a difference as to when tolerance is appropriate, it is less clear that the same is true of ap-rel, according to which I am to judge the rightness or wrongness of the actions of any agent by my own group’s standards. I will judge the same actions right and the same ones wrong whether I am an ap-relativist or a moral realist. Consequently, the choice between ap-rel and realism will make no difference as to when it is permissible or obligatory to interfere, based on the plausible auxiliary principles proposed earlier concerning permissible and obligatory interference.
It is not the case that ap-rel could make no difference, no matter what auxiliary principles governed interference. Any proposition could justify interference, given the right auxiliary principles: discovering that the moon is made of green cheese will provide reason for tolerance to those who subscribe to the auxiliary principles, ‘If the moon is made of green cheese, it is wrong to interfere with agents of other societies.’ The question is whether there are any plausible auxiliary moral principles such that ap-rel provides reason for tolerance when conjoined with them.

David Wong has proposed such a principle, in the context of an argument similar to the one advanced above, that inferences from relativism to tolerance may be valid, if they are understood as including some independently plausible ethical principle(s) as suppressed premise(s). But, though Wong does not explicitly consider the distinction between ap-rel and age-rel, the position he defends, and which – given plausible auxiliary principles – he takes to provide grounds for tolerance, is a version of ap-rel. Wong’s proposed auxiliary principles are a bit more sophisticated than OW A-PIP; the most important is what he calls the ‘justification principle’: “... one should not interfere with the ends of others unless one can justify the interference to be acceptable to them were they fully rational and informed of all relevant circumstances.” Such a principle, Wong argues, can plausibly be derived from influential ethical theories, e.g., from a Kantian theory, on the ground that “To do otherwise is to fail to treat them with the respect due rational beings,” or from a Millian brand of utilitarianism, which holds that autonomy is essential to an individual’s well-being.

Given the justification principle, Wong argues, his version of relativism gives us reason for tolerance where we might otherwise think that interference is justified. If members of cannibal society C, to revert to our earlier example, appraise actions according to standards which uphold the permissibility of cannibalism, and if – as ap-rel implies – those standards are as adequate as ours, then our interference with cannibalism could not be justified to members of C. Therefore, according to the justification principle, it would be wrong, if ap-rel is true, for us to interfere with C’s cannibalism.

It is true that a reason for tolerance of C’s cannibalism is provided by the conjunction of ap-rel and the justification principle.
ever, the same grounds for tolerance would be provided by the conjunction of the justification principle and the rational irresolvability of our disagreement with C about the permissibility of cannibalism.

I take it that a crucial step in typical arguments for ap-rel based on observed differences between the moral beliefs of different cultures will be to establish that many moral disagreements between cultures are in some appropriate sense rationally irresolvable (meaning roughly that further reflection and inquiry would not settle the disagreement, even if the disputants were fully rational by their own standards). The irresolvability of those disagreements will then be argued to be a reason to deny the existence of objective moral facts about this issue or in general; given the non-existence of objective moral facts, it will then be argued that moral claims can best be understood as statements about what is and is not sanctioned by the standards of or pertaining to the person making the claim, yielding a conclusion of ap-rel. While it will be controversial whether the necessary steps can be filled in convincingly, the point is that the anthropological case for ap-rel needs to begin by establishing the rational irresolvability of (many) cross-cultural ethical disagreements.

Given this starting point, further meta-ethical claims about what follows from rational irresolvability are doing no work in providing additional reason for tolerance: the conclusion that we should not interfere follows equally, given Wong’s justification principle, if we deny that there are objective moral facts without moving to a relativist semantics, or if we accept rational irresolvability without denying objective facts, e.g., if we suppose that there is an objective fact as to whether cannibalism is morally permissible, but that it is impossible – or even just that we are not currently in a position – to make a rational determination as to which party is right about cannibalism.

It might seem that the relativist thesis is still doing work, in that the scope of the relevant principles of tolerance will be more limited for the fallibilist realist than for the ap-relativist. If realism is right, then there is an objective fact as to which disputant is right; therefore, this fact should eventually be discoverable, at which point the justification principle will no longer provide ground for tolerance. In
contrast, if ap-rel is right, there is no such discoverable fact; rational irresolvability, and the consequent applicability of a principle of tolerance, can be expected to be permanent.

To see that the contrast between a permanent, metaphysically grounded irresolvability and an epistemically grounded irresolvability which is only temporary is misconceived, it will be helpful to distinguish two senses of rational irresolvability, and to clarify their relation to relativism. A disagreement could be rationally irresolvable in a weak sense if we are currently unable to settle the question in a non-question-begging way. A disagreement could be rationally irresolvable in a strong sense if we could never – given actual human capacities – settle the question, no matter how much evidence we collected, how long we reflected, etc. It is the latter, stronger, sense of rational irresolvability which is associated with relativism, not, however, as a consequence of relativism, but rather, as noted above, as a presupposition of relativism. It is not that relativism provides reason to expect disagreements to be irresolvable, and hence to think that our moral principles could not be justified to those with whom we would interfere; rather, it is the perception that many moral disagreements look irresolvable (in the strong sense) which provides the impetus to relativism in the first place. What matters in determining whether tolerance is forever called for is whether the relevant disagreement is irresolvable in this strong sense.

The possibility that a given disagreement is irresolvable in the strong sense is compatible with either realism or relativism, as is the possibility that the disagreement is resolvable. Recall that the sophisticated relativist will allow for the possibility of criticism of prevailing standards, discovery of error, etc. Thus ap-rel does not rule out the possibility that we and society C will ultimately turn out to share sufficient common ground to settle our disagreement about cannibalism, so that the same conclusion concerning the permissibility of cannibalism will be true for our moral system and theirs. What ap-rel holds is that where there is rationally irresolvable disagreement, there is no objective fact of the matter. Conversely, a moral realist metaphysics does not rule out the possibility that, even though there is an objective fact about whether cannibalism is wrong, no amount of evidence would ever suffice to resolve our disagreements about that question.
In Wong’s case for tolerance, in short, all the work is being done by the combination of the justification principle and the rational irresolvability of the disagreement in question. Further claims about the implications of irresolvable moral disagreement for metaphysics or moral semantics add nothing to the case for tolerance. In contrast, if my earlier arguments are right, the metaphysical claims of age-rel do contribute to the case for tolerance, by requiring us to reevaluate the wrongness of some actions.

At this point it may be objected that my comparison of the implications of the two relativist doctrines has been unfair, in that ap-rel has been measured against a fallibilist moral realism which holds that we do not know whether cannibalism is wrong, whereas age-rel has been measured against a dogmatic moral realism which assumes that we do know that cannibalism is wrong. Measured against such a dogmatic moral realism, the conjunction of ap-rel and the justification principle could likewise be said to provide grounds for greater tolerance.

A first response is that it seems appropriate to compare the implications of ap-rel with the implications of the last realist stop on the road to ap-rel. It is less clear what realist position is maximally similar to age-rel, and hence what would be the appropriate basis for comparison with age-rel.

More importantly, the cases for tolerance based on age-rel and ap-rel are unlike in that, in the case of age-rel, but not in the case of ap-rel, what is distinctive to the meta-ethical theory is doing the work. What is distinctive about age-rel is that it instructs us to judge some actions – those performed by members of other cultures – by standards other than our own. And it is precisely this defining feature of age-rel whose acceptance should change our mind as to whether we would be justified in interfering with the cannibalism of society C. In contrast, the feature of ap-rel which is relevant to our judgments about the justifiability of interference is one which is shared not only with any meta-ethical position which denies the existence of objective, culture-independent, moral facts, but also with realist positions which deny that the disagreement in question is rationally resolvable. The epistemic claim of rational irresolvability is doing all the work.
Moreover, age-rel seems to support a stronger case for tolerance than does fallibilist moral realism. The fallibilist moral realist can allow that cannibalism by members of C might not be wrong; at most, she might hold that if the disagreement about cannibalism is rationally irresolvable, then we lack justification for thinking it more likely than not that cannibalism is wrong.49 The age-relativist, in contrast, can say that cannibalism by members of C is not wrong.50 While either the claim that C’s cannibalism might not be wrong or the claim that it is not wrong can provide ground for tolerance – given plausible auxiliary principles, surely the latter provides stronger grounds.

Indeed, depending on the precise specification of the general principles enjoining tolerance, ap-rel may actually provide weaker support for tolerance than does a fallibilist moral realism. When the moral realist discovers communities practicing cannibalism, such that we cannot convince them of the superiority of our moral principles, that should raise the possibility that he might just be mistaken about the wrongness of cannibalism. What reason does he have for supposing that his society’s judgments about cannibalism are more reliable than those of society C? Such a worry will lack force for the ap-relativist who is not similarly given reason to question her belief that cannibalism is wrong – by her group’s standards,51 and so, depending on the relevant auxiliary moral principles she recognizes, may continue to deem interference permissible or even obligatory.

Still, even if the preceding contrasts between age-rel and ap-rel are convincing, it may appear that justice has not been done to the ap-relativist case for tolerance. Quite simply, if it turns out that rival moral systems are ultimately on a par, so that there is no neutral reason (or at least no neutral moral reason) for preferring one to another, then it seems that people, or groups, should be allowed to choose their own norms. But, while such a response is reasonable enough, it is not particularly a consequence of ap-rel. The value of individual or cultural autonomy is as much a principle internal to our moral system as is the wrongness of cannibalism. How to balance these values is a substantive moral question internal to our own moral system. While accepting ap-rel might tilt the balance toward respecting autonomy in some cases, it would – again – do so no more than any other position which holds that the disagreements
in question are rationally irresolvable. For prospective interferers concerned about the autonomy of the agent with whom they would interfere, the potentially relevant questions are these: is the agent’s action wrong? does the agent believe the action to be wrong? ought (epistemically) the agent to believe that the action is wrong? can it be rationally established that the agent’s action is wrong? To none of these questions will the ap-relativist give a different answer than will the realist who acknowledges the rational irresolvability of the disagreements at issue.

I have argued that ap-rel, unlike age-rel, does not increase the scope of our principles of tolerance. One may wonder – as with age-rel – whether ap-rel might not instead actually undermine those principles. The version of this worry according to which our allegiance to all moral principles might be undermined raises issues no different from those raised by the corresponding worry concerning age-rel. Is there reason to suppose that ap-rel should call into question in particular those principles required to make the case for tolerance?

Wong’s case for tolerance, recall, was based on the ‘justification principle,’ according to which interference is justifiable only if it would be acceptable to those interfered with if they were fully rational and informed. The justification principle is intended to capture a proper degree of respect for the autonomy of other agents. Given the importance of respect for autonomy, preventing an agent A from acting as she wishes requires some special justification. Interference may (perhaps) be justifiable on paternalistic grounds, e.g., that A would be acting against her own interests, or on the ground that the action to be prevented would be wrong for other reasons, e.g., because it would harm others. For a moral realist, the justification principle captures both kinds of considerations. As long as paternalistically motivated interference with A respects A’s interests and goals as she would herself understand them, it is arguable that A’s autonomy is honored; if paternalistic interference meets this condition, it should be justifiable to A, if she were fully rational and informed. If the interference is based on a true and justified belief that the action to be prevented would be wrong, then, on most moral realist views, it should likewise in principle be justifiable to a fully informed and rational A.
If respect for others’ autonomy counts as a significant moral consideration in our moral system, I see no reason why accepting ap-rel should diminish its significance (except insofar as it might be thought to diminish the significance for us of moral considerations in general). Nor do I see any reason why accepting ap-rel should make the justification principle any less plausible as a measure of when paternalistic interference would violate autonomy. Thus I see no reason why accepting ap-rel should undermine the justification principle for cases of paternalistic interference.

With respect to non-paternalistic interference intended to prevent wrongdoing, the issue is less clear. The plausibility of the justification principle in such cases might be thought to depend in large part on the assumption that right actions in general are those which could be justified to any rational and informed party. But that is just the connection which ap-rel challenges: actions which are right according to one moral system need not be justifiable to rational and informed parties subscribing to other systems. Thus whether an action or principle is generally acceptable to rational and informed parties might come in general to seem a less significant moral question for appraiser-relativists.

But it would also be reasonable for appraiser-relativists to continue to accept something like the justification principle for cases of this sort: if we accept that our reasons for holding A’s actions to be wrong are ultimately no better than A’s reasons for holding her actions not to be wrong, then respect for autonomy might speak against interference, though once again this consideration might have to be weighed against other considerations.

In short, accepting ap-rel should not undermine the justification principle with respect to paternalistic interference; for otherwise motivated interference, either retaining the principle or abandoning or weakening it might be a reasonable response to accepting ap-rel.

Returning now to the scenario of interfering with society C’s cannibalism, it is unclear whether interference in this case would fall under the paternalistic or non-paternalistic paradigm. The latter paradigm may seem applicable if we think of ourselves as restraining cannibals in order to protect their potential victims. But if the potential victims accept (or would at the limit of inquiry accept, or otherwise fall under the scope of) a moral system which
accepts (or even commends) cannibalism, then – even if they would prefer not to be eaten themselves – the case seems more aptly classified under the paternalistic paradigm. If so, ap-rel should not undermine the applicability of the justification principle, but should rather speak against interference. If, on the other hand, the potential victims fall under the scope of a moral system which does not permit cannibalism, then the interference would be non-paternalistic; the ap-relativist might or might not accept the applicability of the justification principle and of a consequent cancellation of the grounds for interference. The conclusion we reach resembles, albeit with qualifications, the point of view advanced by many undergraduates: that interfering with an agent is more readily justified when that agent is wrongdoing others who do not share his moral system.

I have argued that age-rel, but not ap-rel, can provide grounds for tolerance, given independently plausible auxiliary moral principles (with the qualification that whether age-rel supports tolerance will depend on just how the relevant auxiliary principles are to be characterized). To the extent that their pronouncements on the subject are committal, the positions defended by the classic defenders of relativism in anthropology seem to be versions of age-rel. So, it now looks as if what Williams calls the “anthropologist’s heresy” is not fallacious after all. However, the anthropologists’ position may still be problematic, if the anthropological case for relativism, arguing from empirical facts concerning diversity in moral standards, is better suited to support ap-rel than to support age-rel.

Nicholas Sturgeon suggests that “…it is appraiser relativism, not agent relativism, that is distinctively a response to the unsettleability of moral disagreements.” If Sturgeon is right, and if the best anthropological arguments for relativism are arguments based on the putative unsettleability of cross-cultural moral disagreements, then anthropologically inspired arguments indeed seem better equipped to support ap-rel.

Sturgeon’s remark seems accurate as an account of relativist philosophers’ actual argumentative strategies. Philosophers such as
Wong, who argue for relativism on the basis of putatively irresolvable cross-cultural disagreement, tend to endorse versions of ap-rel. Meanwhile, philosophical defenses of age-rel or related versions of relativism, such as those advanced by Gilbert Harman,\textsuperscript{57} tend to be motivated principally by considerations independent of any anthropological data.\textsuperscript{58} It makes sense that arguments which take conflicting moral appraisals as their starting point and impetus, should conclude that, if moral truth is relative to culture, it should be to the culture of the appraiser.\textsuperscript{59}

There is a possible way of arguing from irresolvable (apparent) moral disagreement between cultures to an agent-relativist thesis, but the resulting version of age-rel would be significantly different from those so far considered, and less likely to support a further inference to tolerance. This alternative route begins, like the argument for ap-rel, by taking the putative irresolvability of many cross-cultural moral disagreements to undermine the realist position that ethics concerns objective, culture-independent facts. The argument continues, again like the argument for ap-rel, by holding that ordinary moral talk is nevertheless useful and meaningful. But, where the ap-relativist holds that everyday statements about right and wrong are most naturally construed as claims about what is sanctioned by the moral system subscribed to by – or applying to – the speaker or her group, the age-relativist might hold that they make better sense if construed as claims concerning what is sanctioned by the agent’s moral system. The justification for preferring the agent-relative construal might be similar to the considerations advanced by Harman in favor of his version of age-rel: the basic thought is that it does not make sense to say of someone that her action was wrong (or that she ought not to have done it), if the grounds for saying so would not count for the agent as reasons not to perform the action in question.\textsuperscript{60}

But this argumentative route leads to a version of age-rel different from the one we have so far been considering. The earlier version was a metaphysical thesis about the nature of moral facts; the new version is a semantic thesis about how moral language is used. The earlier, metaphysical, version of age-rel held that there are objective moral facts concerning what it is right or wrong for a given agent to do under certain circumstances. The semantic version presupposes
that there are no objective moral facts. But while it is easier to see how the facts of moral diversity might be taken to support semantic age-rel, it is harder to see how semantic age-rel supports a conclusion of tolerance. More precisely, it supports tolerance to the same extent as does ap-rel, or any other theory which denies objective moral facts, or indeed any other account which denies that the moral disagreements in question are rationally resolvable. But the stronger implications of tolerance which follow from metaphysical age-rel (given the right interference principles) seem unlikely to carry over to semantic age-rel. Once we jettison the idea that there is some property of objective rightness which attaches to the cannibalism of society C, though not to cannibalism if practiced by us, then the claim that cannibalism by C is right will no longer have the same force as a reason not to interfere. On the current version of age-rel, saying that cannibalism is permissible for members of C is to say only that members of C are not motivated by the sorts of considerations we take to speak against cannibalism. As with ap-rel, putting a high value on autonomy might incline us to attach some weight to the fact that our anti-cannibal reasons would not count as reasons for them. But, as before, this consideration is independent of the truth of relativism or of the denial of objective facts — what matters is that disagreement about cannibalism is rationally irresolvable. Indeed, the fact that members of society C fail to be motivated by certain kinds of considerations may actually provide reason for us to be less hesitant about interfering, in that it may incline us to classify them as outside the sphere of moral agency, lacking the requisite moral standing to have a claim on us that we recognize their autonomy.

It seems reasonable to expect that if any relativist thesis can be successfully defended on the basis of cross-cultural differences, it is more likely to be a version of ap-rel (or, at most, a semantic version of age-rel), though establishing this would require substantially more investigation of possible argumentative strategies for relativism than is possible here. But if this is right, anthropologists like Herskovits who would make a case for tolerance on the basis of a relativism derived from the facts of moral diversity may after all be guilty of a fallacy of sorts, though the fallacy has not hitherto been correctly diagnosed. For the validity of the inference from
relativism to tolerance requires an agent-relativist thesis, construed metaphorically. Nevertheless, given that many with relativist inclinations, including the relativist anthropologists in question, are more sympathetic to age-rel, that philosophers are generally inclined to reject the popular inference from age-rel to tolerance, and that in both contexts the metaphysical construal of age-rel seems usually to be assumed, it is noteworthy that metaphysical age-rel can after all often provide reasons for tolerance toward the actions of members of other cultures.

My argument has focused on relativistic evaluations of the rightness of actions. If we think instead of judgments concerning the goodness of agents, then anthropological data of diversity may be more likely to support an agent-relative account. If we accept the inference that one set of moral standards has no objective claim to be preferred to another set, then in many contexts it will make better sense to judge the goodness of an agent by the agent’s own standards. In other words, although anthropologically motivated relativists should probably be appraiser-relativists when it comes to evaluating the rightness of actions, they should be agent-relativists when it comes to evaluating the goodness of agents. Thus, although the anthropologically motivated relativist will be as motivated as the realist to deplore, and perhaps try to prevent, such practices as cannibalism, the anthropologically motivated relativist should not be inclined to condemn a cannibal who is conforming to her society’s standards. Now, a realist might be equally disinclined to condemn in cases where he took the difference in standards to be rationally irresolvable, or even in cases where he took the difference to be resolvable, but thought that the agent acted sincerely on mistaken moral beliefs, and that the agent’s error was epistemically non-culpable. Nevertheless, the realist and anthropologically motivated relativist judgments of the agent will not be identical: there is a significant difference between judging someone to be in non-culpable moral error, and judging her not to be in moral error. Thus arguments for relativism based on anthropological data might be better suited for promoting tolerance in the sense of not looking down on the mores of other societies, than for promoting tolerance in the sense of non-interference.
In summary, I have argued that the relation between relativism and tolerance – understood as non-interference – is more complex than it is generally taken to be. The standard rejection, represented by Williams, of inferences from relativism to tolerance is too quick. Agent-relativist theories (of which the relativism discussed by Williams is one) can provide grounds for tolerance, though not necessarily overriding ones, given independently plausible auxiliary moral principles, though the success of such an inference will depend on just how the relevant auxiliary principles are to be characterized, which may depend in turn on how major questions in moral theory are to be resolved. This strategy for defending tolerance is similar to one proposed by Wong; it will not work, however, in the context in which Wong proposes it, in connection with Wong’s own appraiser-relativism. Ap-rel makes minimal difference with respect to tolerance when compared to a plausibly humble realism. However, there is reason to suspect that the strong (metaphysical) version of age-rel required to support inferences to tolerance is less likely to be supported by anthropologically based arguments than are relativist positions less favorable to the case for tolerance.

We should not forget, though, that non-interference with other cultures can equally well be defended on any number of grounds other than relativism. First, as noted earlier, if cross-cultural disagreements about such matters as whether cannibalism is wrong turn out to be irreolvable, that is reason for calling into question our certainty that our moral knowledge is superior to that of those we would reform. Second, even if we maintain that we are entitled to our confidence in the correctness of our moral beliefs about cannibalism, etc., we might fear that, due to our ignorance about other cultures, our meddling may have unforeseen destructive consequences. Third, even if we are confident in our ability to predict the consequences of interference, we might value cultural diversity and/or cultural autonomy sufficiently to think that the costs in these respects would outweigh the benefits to be gained by interfering. Finally, given the imbalance in power relations between ourselves and those societies which exhibit values most distinct from ours, and given historical tendencies toward co-optation of benign missionary impulses by destructive economic forces, we may fear that any interference with traditional societies by West-
erners, no matter how well-intentioned, will serve principally to reinforce the economic and political subjugation of non-Western societies.63

NOTES


2 Even one of the few authors who defends the inference from relativism to the thesis that one ought to be tolerant of actions of which one disapproves, concedes that the inference would involve pragmatic self-contradiction if the relevant ‘ought’ were understood as a moral injunction, proposing that it be understood instead as some sort of more general prescription of rationality (Craig Ihara, “Moral Skepticism and Tolerance,” *Teaching Philosophy* 7 (1984): 193–198).


4 For a particularly thoughtful criticism of the inference from relativism to tolerance, see Geoffrey Harrison, “Relativism and Tolerance,” *Ethics* 86 (1976): 122–135; reprinted in Meiland and Krausz, eds., pp. 229–243; all page references are to latter publication.


6 For purposes of this paper, tolerance will generally be understood as non-interference with behavior of which one disapproves on moral grounds. Near the end of the paper I say a few words about tolerance understood as non-condemnation. Of course, not all non-interference can be classified as tolerant: e.g., non-interference where one lacks inclination to interfere, or non-interference on the ground that the prospects for success seem too unlikely, are not instances of tolerance – see Harrison, pp. 234f.

7 I will generally speak interchangeably of the judgment that an action is right being made true by a set of norms, or of the action being made right by a set of norms, though different relativist positions seem more naturally captured by one or the other of these formulations.

8 On this characterization, positions which deny that moral claims have any truth-value do not count as relativist. I take this characterization to accord with the most common usage, though some philosophers have suggested characterizing relativism more broadly to include those non-cognitivist positions which countenance conflicting prescriptions or what have you (see T. M. Scanlon, “Fear of Relativism” in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence and Warren Quinn, eds. *Virtues and Reasons: Philippa Foot and Moral Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 219–245). What is sometimes called ‘descriptive relativism,’ the empirical claim that different groups adhere to different moral standards, does not by itself count as a relativist thesis on either my or Scanlon’s definition.
9 The term ‘cultural relativism’ has also sometimes been used for descriptive claims about diversity in moral beliefs among cultures. My usage is different.

10 That is, the account of moral truth will be something like the neo-pragmatist account once proposed for all truth by Putnam (notably, in Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge U., 1981), ch. 3), minus the expectation that different communities would converge in their judgments even under suitably idealized conditions.

11 Such a characterization would need considerable refinement in light of the facts that discrete cultures cannot be neatly individuated, and that membership in a culture is consequently not always clearly defined. Such refinements may push the relativist to a position according to which moral truth is relative to what an *individual* would accept at the limit of inquiry, with the addendum that individuals from similar cultural backgrounds will be likely to overlap considerably in the moral beliefs they would accept at the limit of inquiry (as well as in those they actually accept).

12 “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence,” *Ethics* 86 (1976): 107–121; reprinted in Meiland and Krausz, eds., 209–225. In Lyons’s original formulation the distinction is between ‘agent’s-group relativism’ and ‘appraiser’s-group relativism’ (my emphases), but the distinction is readily transferable to doctrines according to which moral truth is relative to individuals. Similar distinctions are drawn elsewhere in different terms, e.g., by Gilbert Harman (“What is Moral Relativism?” in Alvin Goldman and Jaegwon Kim, eds. *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978), pp. 143–161) between ‘normative moral relativism’ and ‘moral judgment relativism.’ (Harman also distinguishes a third thesis, ‘meta-ethical relativism, which I take to be subsumed under Lyons’ ‘appraiser-relativism’ as well.)

13 For simplicity I am ignoring the possibility of error about either or own moral standards or those of the Ilongots.

14 I will throughout speak of the ‘moral system’ of an individual or group to designate the ordered totality of standards for moral judgment which apply to her/it, whether because she/it would accept those standards at the limit of inquiry, or for whatever reasons are taken by the relativist thesis in question to determine which standards apply to whom.


16 Williams, p. 20. Williams’ presentation of the argument includes as a second premise that ‘right for a given society’ is to be understood as functionally valuable for that society. This (not entirely unfair) specification of the relativism advanced by many anthropologists does render Williams’ criticisms more on target, but this specification is not essential to the relativist position, and objections like Williams’ are widely held to be applicable quite generally to inferences from relativism to tolerance.

17 Ibid., p. 21, author’s emph.

18 In fairness to Williams, his criticism does, as already noted, have greater force against the functionalist version of cultural relativism he is targeting. On this
version, Williams is right to retort, “The most the theory can allow is the claim that it is right for (i.e., functionally valuable for) our society not to interfere with [for example] Ashanti society, and, first, this is certainly not all that was meant, and, second, is very dubiously true” (ibid., p. 21). But if we discard the gloss on “right” as “functionally valuable,” then it is clear neither that the relativist interpretation of the conclusion says less than the relativist intends, nor that it is false. My target here is not the particulars of Williams’ argument, but a general received wisdom in contemporary philosophy, of which Williams’ discussion may be taken as representative.


20 As noted earlier, a similar response is offered by Wong. However, I will argue later, Wong’s response does not work in the context in which he introduces it – in connection with his own brand of relativism, which is a version of ap-rel.

21 On the other hand, the principles relevant to determining when interference is permissible may also be reformulated in terms which do not speak of rightness or wrongness at all; given interference principles reformulated in such ways, age-rel may fail to provide reasons for increased tolerance. I return to this issue below.

22 This abbreviation stands for ‘Only with Wrong Actions’ Permissible Interference Principle.

23 To make sure that this judgment will seem uncontroversial, let us construe the practice of cannibalism to include the killing of a victim for that purpose. In any event, I suggest later that age-rel is likely to provide stronger support for non-interference than even strong degrees of fallibilism about whether cannibalism is really wrong.

24 I return later to the worry that accepting age-rel might actually undermine the relevant principles concerning permissible/obligatory interference.

25 This will not be so if we subscribe to OWA-PIP, which holds that it is necessary that an action be wrong, for interference with that action to be justified. But the interference principles we actually subscribe to are probably more complex ones which imply that the wrongness of an action is relevant, but neither necessary nor sufficient, for justifying interference.

26 This might seem problematic, given that most actions are likely to affect many people, with differing standards, requiring the agent considering an action to weigh the harms to one person as measured by one set of standards against the benefits to another measured by different standards. But it is not clear that the difficulties here are greater than, or even different in kind from, classic problems concerning inter-personal comparisons of utility.

27 It would not be identical to preference-utilitarianism at least in that an individual’s preferences need not accord with what she would recognize as benefits at the limit of inquiry, but this difference does not make the resulting theory any more relativist.

Would it matter, on such a theory; if the person to be affected rejects consequentialism? This underlying consequentialism could itself be held to be true absolutely, or just relative to a given agent or appraiser.

28 To the contrary, it is more likely that if we recognize a duty to prevent canni-
balism, then accepting a general deontological framework would make us likely to reinterpret this duty as derivative of something like a duty to prevent wrong actions.

29 Scanlon, p. 24.

30 Ibid.

31 “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of General Psychology* 10 (1934): 73. Despite this formulation, Benedict does not in fact intend her position to be debunking; her aim is clearly to increase our respect for other moral systems, not to diminish our respect for our own.


33 The analogy is borrowed from Phillips, op. cit.

34 Age-rel might, however, speak against OWA-PIP, which holds that whether an agent is acting wrongly is the only relevant consideration for whether interference is permissible.

35 As with other versions, this version of relativism will support tolerance, only given the right auxiliary moral principles. But, as before, it seems plausible that our moral system includes principles which will do the job, e.g., the principle that we should try to promote human flourishing in general.

36 From the standpoint of such a theory, it might even be charged that it is moral realists who take the claims of morality too lightly, in regarding them as revisable opinions about matters of fact.

37 Harrison, p. 236.

38 Even a duty to help others do right would speak as much in favor of resisting C’s efforts to impose cannibalism as it would speak against resisting C, since resisting C would protect the ability of other members of V besides oneself to do what is right for them.

39 This is not to deny that a moral system is conceivable according to which the duty to convert others to cannibalism is an irreducible primitive, taking precedence over all else, but only to point out how far-fetched such a possibility is. (A moral system according to which the duty to help others do right takes precedence over all else may not be stable enough even to be a possibility.)

40 This is apparent, e.g., in the following passage: “A moral principle . . . can apply to all moral agents in the sense of directing them to perform certain moral actions; and it may be true of all agents given a certain set of truth conditions that a group or society assigns to the principle; but . . . there may be more than one set of truth conditions for the principle . . .” (Wong, p. 189, author’s emphasis).

41 Ibid., p. 181. As with OWA-PIP, I would suggest that a weakened version of this principle is more plausible, e.g., one which holds that being able in principle to justify the interference to those interfered with is relevant, but not necessary, for the permissibility of interference.

42 Ibid.
Ibid., pp. 183–184.

The cannibalism example may be a poor one, from the standpoint of Wong’s theory, in that Wong, like many ap-relativists, is prepared to allow that not just any moral system is equally adequate; rather, he holds only that there can be more than one equally adequate moral system, such that the systems yield conflicting consequences. Wong himself may well hold that a system which endorses killing other people for the purpose of eating them is probably not adequate; if so, his relativism would not provide reason to tolerate such a practice. But the example could easily be changed to one which falls within the scope of Wong’s relativism, without affecting the argument.

But if we accept the (more plausible) weakened version of the justification principle, this reason need not always override all other considerations.

I defend an inference from rationally irresolvable disagreement about fundamental moral questions to a denial of objective moral facts in “Irresolvable Disagreement and the Case Against Moral Realism,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34 (1996). I defend the claim that many of our fundamental moral disagreements with other cultures probably are rationally irresolvable in “Can We Establish That It is Wrong for Men to Shoot Their Wives When Dinner is Late?” (presented at 1997 APA Pacific Div. meetings).

Of course, in order to maintain a distinctly relativist position, the ap-relativist must hold that rationally irresolvable (in the strong sense) disagreement is at least possible for many, if not for all, significant moral questions. But even holding that strongly irresolvable disagreement is possible for all moral questions is fully consistent with the possibility that any given disagreement between actual disputants is resolvable.

I myself have argued (“Irresolvable Disagreement”) that the latter possibility may not make sense after all, and that consequently, rational irresolvability concerning very basic moral questions provides reason to reject the view that there are objective facts concerning those questions. But that is a contested point—Susan Hurley (“Objectivity and Disagreement” in Ted Honderich, ed. *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 54–97) and Christopher Dustin (“The Untruth in Relativism.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 3 (1995): 17–53), among others, have argued that the objectivity of moral principles is compatible with allowing that the correct principles could never be made rationally compelling to members of cultures subscribing to rival principles.

I defend the latter inference in “Irresolvable Disagreement,” and, as a claim about rationally irresolvable cross-cultural disagreement about any question, not just moral questions, in “Scientists, Witch-Doctors, and the Epistemic Challenge of Cross-Cultural Disagreement.” Unpubl. MS.

Even here there is room for fallibilism, in that a sophisticated age-rel will allow that members of C generally may be mistaken in some of their beliefs; perhaps further reflection would lead them to accept that cannibalism really is wrong by their own standards. Still, it should be significantly easier to establish a strong presumption that cannibalism is not wrong according to the standards of C than to establish a similarly strong presumption that cannibalism is not wrong simpliciter.
This is not to say that the ap-relativist should consider herself infallible about what is true in her own moral system, nor that she should be immune to influence by the moral ideas of other societies. The point is that the accuracy of one’s perceptions of objective facts can be called into question by disagreement, whereas the accuracy of one’s beliefs about what is true relative to one’s own standards is not similarly called into question by the fact that others subscribe to different standards.

I take no sides on whether paternalistic considerations ever really justify interference, but I take them to represent an important class of considerations which might be taken to justify some degree of interference in some circumstances. Nor do I take sides on whether it is wrong for an agent to act against her own interests or goals. It will, regardless, be useful here to distinguish paternalistic grounds for interference from other grounds.

It might be worried that if reason and full information are as little able to settle questions of what ought to be done as ap-rel suggests, then perhaps there is not even a determinate fact as to whether A would accept the legitimacy of the interference if fully rational and informed, in which case the test proposed by the justification principle would be inapplicable. But ap-rel denies only that all rational, informed appraisers must reach the same conclusion, not that there is a fact as to what conclusion a given appraiser would reach if rational and informed. Indeed, we need to assume that there are determinate facts of the latter sort to make sense of typical arguments for ap-rel, which hold that different appraisers would reach different conclusions if fully rational and informed.

In cases in which A agrees that the prospective action would be wrong, but intends to do it anyway, accepting ap-rel would make no difference as to whether interference is justified.


Harman’s brand of moral relativism has been defended and elaborated in a series of papers. In his earliest presentation (“Moral Relativism Defended”), Harman defends a version of relativism something like age-rel, which applies only to what he calls ‘inner judgments’ (judgments concerning what a given agent ought to do, or what it would be right or wrong for her to do). This theory is different from the position I have characterized as age-rel in that, on Harman’s view, the judgments in question presuppose moral standards shared among agent, appraiser, and the appraiser’s audience. Where there is no such congruence, inner judgments will be out of place. Consequently, the question of deferring to the agent’s standards in cases of conflicting standards does not even arise. Some of Harman’s subsequent developments of his theory (in “What is Moral Relativism?” and “Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics”) are more straightforwardly agent-relativist, at least with respect to ‘inner judgments.’ More importantly, Harman’s relativism differs from the agent-relativism so far discussed also in that, in terms introduced later in the text, it is most plausibly construed as a semantic, rather than a metaphysical, agent-relativism.
One of the principal considerations advanced by Harman is that it makes sense to hold that a given moral principle applies to a given agent only if the agent recognizes (or under some appropriate circumstances would recognize?) that principle as motivating. Of course, this argument too depends on the assumption that there is actual moral diversity to the extent that different agents are motivated by different principles, an assumption Harman defends with anthropological evidence in “What is Moral Relativism?” 155. However, there and elsewhere Harman seems to take imagined examples of professional hitmen to be sufficient to defend this assumption. It is internalism, rather than anthropological diversity, which is at the crux of Harman’s argument.

One might argue that the best explanation of apparently intractable ethical disagreement between cultures is not that the disagreement is rationally irresolvable, but that members of each culture are so used to (correctly) applying their own standards that they fail to recognize that these standards are not legitimately exportable to other cultures. But for this to be a plausible, let alone the best, explanation, the thesis that different standards apply to different agents needs independent motivation. While it seems true that, because of our ignorance of relevant aspects of their cultural context, it will often be more difficult to judge what agents of other societies should do than to judge what our neighbors should do, such a caution will be readily acceptable to the moral realist as well; it does not support the thesis that different moral principles apply to different groups.

If one finds convincing this type of strategy for arguing from cultural diversity to a relativist semantics for ethics, then one might be led to a mixed version of relativism. In Harman’s more recent work (Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), pp. 62–63), he suggests that age-rel may be right for certain kinds of moral judgments and ap-rel for others. David Phillips (op. cit.) suggest that whether it makes better sense to understand a given moral judgment as relative to appraiser’s or agent’s standards may vary with context.

For example, perhaps the explanandum which motivates relativism is not so much conflicting appraisals as the fact that members of different societies obey different norms. This could be explained by the hypothesis that different norms apply to members of different societies; this fact could in turn perhaps be explained by a social contract account of moral obligation conjoined with the hypothesis that more than one kind of contract can allow for a sustainable society. (This is the first sort of ‘benign relativism’ discussed in §1. Such an account does not need to assume any actual historical decision on what norms to obey, but only socialization into rough congruence in intentions, where the content of these largely shared intentions may be thought to be established over time by implicit bargaining, as hypothesized by Harman in “Moral Relativism Defended” and “Relativistic Ethics: Morality as Politics.”)

I cannot establish here that such an argument is less tenable than anthropologically based arguments for ap-rel, but the foregoing account seems less less readily reconcilable with many of our actual normative judgments. Most of us will find implausible social contract theories which hold that any mistreatment of
outsiders is morally permissible, as long as our society agrees on it. It may well be thought to count against agent-relativist theories in general that they require us actually to revise our substantive moral beliefs. Whereas the ap-relativist holds that our judgment that it is wrong for members of C to eat each other is true, though our ordinary understanding of that judgment may be inflated, the age-relativist holds that our judgment is simply false. Age-rel also seems independently implausible in that the centrality of the idea of universalizability to moral thinking (at least, to our moral thinking) leads to a reasonable expectation that if there are objective moral facts, they are unlikely to sanction such wide differences in morally permissible behavior as those which are a consequence of age-rel.

62 That is, it will make better sense if the purpose of such judgments is to assign blame or commendation to a given agent. What looks like a judgment of an agent’s goodness may also be used to convey the appraiser’s evaluation of a certain character type, in which case the judgment would presumably be relative to the standards of the appraiser, not of the agent.

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