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Is Objective Moral Justification Possible on a Quasi-realist Foundation?

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This essay juxtaposes the position in metaethics defended, expressivism with quasi-realistic trappings, with the ancient problem of relativism. It argues that, perhaps surprisingly, there is less of a problem of normative truth on this approach than on others. Because ethics is not in the business of representing aspects of the world, there is no way to argue for a plurality of moral truths, simply from the existence of a plurality of moral opinions. The essay also argues that other approaches, which superficially seem better adapted to defending robust and substantive conceptions of moral truth, in fact face more danger from the threat of relativism. This is particularly so in the case of ‘secondary quality’ or ‘response-dependent’ approaches, but also in the case of certain kinds of constructivism.

It is often thought that the kind of position that I defend in ethics has to struggle to provide any understanding of ethical objectivity. In this essay I urge that this is not so. Indeed, I make the stronger claim, that it is other views that are beset by problems of objectivity. These include recent Kantian constructivist views, neo-Wittgensteinian views, and even Aristotle-inspired realisms. But even if this counterattack does not persuade everybody, the defence of my own position remains.

I hold that the key to ethics lies in the practical stances that we need to take up, to express to each other, and to discuss and negotiate. As the expressivist tradition has always emphasized, ethics is at bottom about practice. It is about choices and actions. Ethics concerns what to do and what not to do; who to admire and who to avoid; where to draw lines and where not to; what feelings to cultivate and which to repress. Our ethic is shown in our cluster of dispositions to encourage and to discourage various choices, characters, and feelings. A sincere moral opinion is the expression of one of these dispositions. For this reason ethics can, fundamentally, be expressed in terms of prescriptions, and in some systems, like that of the Old Testament, this is indeed how it is given: thou shalt do this and not do that. But prescriptions only get us part of the way. Attitudes need comparison and ranking as well as simple expression. ‘This is better than that’ can get expression as ‘admire this more than that’, but the replacement would be strained. And we have an ethical language that goes beyond simple imperatival forms for good and sufficient reason, namely to bring to the
business of systematizing and reasoning about attitude the elegant framework of propositional logic.

Because practice is so important, these dispositions need discussion. They need to be queried, and sometimes qualified and rejected and replaced. These queries can take the form of asking whether a particular opinion is true or right. But the appearance should not mislead us. As Wittgenstein, and the minimalist tradition in the theory of truth, remind us, $p$ is true means that $p$. Asking whether a moral judgment is true or right is no more than asking whether to accept it. And asking that is asking which attitude or policy or stance to endorse.

All this should be platitudinous. But in fact in many peoples’ minds it rings all kinds of alarm bells. It sounds to them to be an invitation to subjectivism or relativism or scepticism or even some kind of eliminativism, and these are all alarming words. Some people who share the basic orientation have unfortunately encouraged these anxieties. Bernard Williams wrote that ethics cannot be what it seems. And famously, John Mackie, in his ‘error theory’ supposes that there are elements in our ethical practice that could only be justified if something more were true: some kind of ‘objectivity’ or ‘authority’ or ‘to-be-done’-ness built into the frame of the world. But this something more is not true, so first-order ethical practice is founded on a mistake.

I reject these views. I don’t think first-order ethical practice embodies any mistake at all. One sign of this is that Mackie himself never showed what a practice of expressing and comparing and encouraging and discouraging practical stances would look like if it were free of the mistake. I would suppose that it would come to look exactly like ours (even if started somewhat differently, in some impoverished form). And this shows that there is no mistake embedded in the very structure of our reasonings.

So how do I avoid the anxieties?

I. Relativism

There is no problem of relativism.

Why not? There is no problem of relativism because there is no problem of moral truth. Since moral opinion is not in the business of representing the world, but of assessing choices and actions and attitudes in the world, to wonder which attitude is right is to wonder which attitude to adopt or endorse. Suppose, then, that I adopt and express an attitude: say, that women should be educated. Suppose I meet a member of the Afghan Taliban, who holds the reverse. This may certainly pose me a practical problem: in fact at least two practical problems. First, I would like to be able to change his attitude. And second, even if I can’t do that, I would like to be able to stop him from
implementing it. But I may not know how to go about either of these things, and there lie my practical difficulties.

A freshman relativist may get up at this point and say, ‘well, it is true for the Taliban that women should not be educated’. But that is just a bad way of saying that the Taliban hold that women should not be educated, which we already knew. It is not a way of putting that opinion in a favourable light. If anyone wants to put that opinion in a favourably light, he has some very hard work to do, and we can promise in advance that he will fail. Why? Because nothing worth respecting speaks in favour of the view. There is no favourable light in which it can be put. If you think otherwise, I am against you and I will express this by saying that you are wrong. I reject your opinions, and this I voice by word and deed.

The freshman relativist may try again. He will protest that in the last paragraph I cheated. True, the Taliban cannot put his opinion in what we regard as a favourable light. But it is in a favourable light already as far as he is concerned. And isn’t this the problem? The standard reply is that it shouldn’t matter if the opinion stands favourably with those who are in the wrong. But to this in turn the relativist will say: ‘well, it is merely your attitude against his’ And part of this is right: it is indeed my attitude against his. That is what ethical conflict is. The part that is wrong is the ‘merely’. What is ‘mere’ about a conflict of attitude? The world’s worst conflicts are those of policy, choice, and practice. They are the most important conflicts there are. By comparison, mere conflicts of opinion can fade into insignificance. It need not matter at all to me that you hold that the distance of the moon is half a million miles, although I hold that it is nearer a quarter of a million. The difference need not translate into actions that bother me. But if your attitude to me is contempt or disgust, that matters a great deal.

No doubt this mistakes the intended import of the word ‘mere’. It is not that conflict of attitude is unimportant. The relativist will say ‘it is your attitude against his and neither of you can show that the other is wrong’. The conflict is ‘merely’ a conflict of attitude in the sense that there is no proof procedure. This, I should say, also contains a grain of truth, although only a very small grain. For, after all, it is strictly false. I can show that the Taliban is wrong by the simplest means: any educated female is a perfectly good illustration of his error. My wife shows how wrong he is, and so do millions of other women. So perhaps the complaint is that I cannot show the Taliban himself that he is wrong for, after all, he is blind to the illustration or takes it the wrong way.

Now even this is not axiomatic. It may be possible to show the Taliban himself that he is wrong. We may be able to increase his experience of women, to undermine the delusive authorities on which he relies, to enlarge his sympathies and so on. It is unlikely to be a quick process, but whoever thought that it should be? It is also probably a process that is more likely to be
successful if attempted by someone nearer to the Taliban’s frame of mind: a more liberal Muslim, for example.

The only grain of truth in the remark is that there is no algorithm for success. There is no proof procedure or for that matter no empirical process of working on the Taliban that is guaranteed in advance to bring him to my opinion. But that’s just how it is. It is always contingent, and sometimes chancy, whether we can move a dissident towards concurrence with our own sympathies and attitudes. If that worries anyone, they would do well to reflect that the same is true in empirical and even mathematical or logical cases. The problem with the Taliban is that he is blind to what illustrates his error, and that may be true of people in these other cases. I can show that daffodils are yellow, but I cannot necessarily show to some particular dissident that they are yellow if he refuses to look, or looks but is blind to colours. I can show that contradictions are false, but I cannot necessarily show it to some enthusiast who holds in advance that all logic is a patriarchal plot of which I am a part.

One formula that has attracted some admiration in recent discussions of relativism, is that on such an issue we can simply say ‘there is nothing else to think’. This may just be a flowery way of nailing our colours to the mast, but otherwise it strikes me as overdoing it. I think it is unfair to the Taliban to deny that he thinks something else. It dehumanizes him, making him some kind of mad dog, not so much voicing an ethical opinion or recommending a way of life, as simply making noises. Whereas the truth is surely that he voices a genuine attitude, and a practical policy, for which he has his delusive reasons. That is why we are in conflict. Otherwise he would represent nothing but a kind of obstacle to our own policies, something, in Strawson’s words, to be ‘managed or handled or cured or trained’. I have no sympathy with the Taliban, but I would not myself care to encourage this response.

Well now, says the relativist as a last resort, but are you not an anti-realist? And doesn’t this mean that there are no facts of an ethical or normative kind? So aren’t all attitudes fundamentally on all fours? The answers are: yes, I am an anti-realist; no, this does not mean that there are no facts of an ethical or normative kind, and finally, even if it did, this would not mean that all attitudes are on all fours.

Anti-realism, or as I prefer to call it quasi-realism, refuses to give ethical facts a typical explanatory role. This is already heralded when we turn our backs on ethical representation. A representation of something as F is typically explained by the fact that it is F. A representation answers to what is represented. I hold that ethical facts do not play this explanatory role. We cannot, except by analogy, talk of ethical perception. If we want a slogan we can say that the way of the world, and that includes the mental world, is independent of the normative. Oughts do not explain is’s. Our moral understandings are not explained by independent moral structures, to which
we are lucky enough to be sensitive. The alternative view, in terms of attitude and practice, is far more economical.

Why does this not imply that there are no moral facts? Minimalism shows us why not. I have already given you a moral opinion of mine: women should be educated. Here is another way of putting it: it is true that women should be educated. Here is another: it is a fact that women should be educated. If we like we can go further up this progression, which I call Ramsey’s ladder: it is true that it is a fact . . . ; it is really true that it is a fact . . . ; and, soon but not quite yet, I shall suggest that we can add objectivity to the list.

And why does that not imply that divergent moral opinions are on all fours? Well, all I can hear that as meaning is that they are all equally good. And that is just not true. The Taliban’s opinion on the education of women is not as good as mine. In fact, it is diametrically wrong, wrong root and branch. And notice that this would be true even if we were less minimalist than I have been about facts. Suppose a substantive or robust theory of truth were developed, giving us some notion of correspondence. Suppose it proceeds by isolating some metaphysical category of Facts (note the upper-case). And suppose finally that for the kinds of reason I have outlined, there are no normative or ethical Facts (all these doctrines belong to the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus). This would be a metaphysical result. So it clearly could not imply that all moral opinions are on all fours. It could not imply, for instance, that it is permissible to hold that women should not be educated. It could at best imply that, in holding this, you do not trespass against the upper-case Facts. But that is all right. It was not that (or, not simply that) that is wrong with the Taliban view. The main thing that is wrong with the view is that it is inhumane, cruel, arbitrary, and so on. The metaphysics cannot imply that it is all right to be like that!

I have said that there is no problem of relativism, and tried a little to explain why this is so. I shall finish this part of the discussion by entering a very small concessive remark, something that can perhaps serve to salvage a little pride for the poor freshman relativist.

There are cases like that of the Taliban, but there are also cases where travel broadens the mind. We might start off by thinking that our attitude is the only permissible attitude, or our ways are the only permissible ways, and that all others are wrong. But exposure to other people, or other cultures or times can make us change our minds. They do it differently – yet we cannot condemn them, or find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways. So we become a degree more tolerant. And this is often exactly as it should be.

I suspect that the freshman relativist generalizes too rapidly from this kind of progression, assuming that because it is as it should be in some cases, it must be so in all cases. So that simple exposure to alternative opinion should be enough to dissolve any allegiance we hold to our own attitudes or principles. The error comes in forgetting the qualification that we cannot
condemn them, or find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways. When this is true, toleration is indeed the right upshot. But it is not always true.

Consider, for instance, the progress that happens when we learn that a faintly pejorative stereotype is just that. We realize that not all people with the $X$ way of life have the negative properties $N$ that popularly characterize that way of life. So indeed we cannot find it in our hearts to maintain the superiority of our ways: the $X$ way of life becomes permissible in our eyes, and this may be a thoroughly good thing. But if I go to Afghanistan, the situation is different. I can, and should, maintain exactly what I started with. If I became infected by the Taliban attitude to women, that would be unfortunate and would represent a deterioration in my own moral nature. If the Taliban are seductive enough in other ways, I may have to be on my guard against this.

Clearly, then, there remain particular moral problems connected with multiculturalism. There is no one moral or intellectual problem of relativism. But there are particular problems of when to tolerate and when to oppose, and the answers to these may not all be easy, or all given in advance. We have to ask whether we are faced just with an alternative, equally good solution to some problem of living, that can cheerfully be acknowledged in the spirit of an alternative convention, or whether, on the other hand, we are faced with something that must be opposed. Slavery, the oppressions of caste systems, the systematic degradation of women, child labour and many other facets of societies are not alternative equally good solutions to problems of living. They are things that must be opposed.

So the quasi-realist approach gives a complete defence against relativism, acknowledging only particular problems that have to be solved, when they come up, like all moral problems. We have to approach them deploying the beliefs and attitudes that we hold, and bringing them to bear as best we can. If I am worried about whether, say, to tolerate lesbian parenthood or the use of cannabis as alternative lifestyles, or whether to oppose them as impermissible aberrations, this is what I have to do. They may be cheerfully tolerated, like different conventions of dress or eating, or they may go into the same bracket as the Taliban. But each issue has to be fought on its merits. There is no problem of relativism, but only individual problems of living.

Why do I think it an advantage of quasi-realism that it solves this issue so easily? Cannot other approaches say the same things? The difficulty is this. Other approaches look for more ‘robust’ or ‘substantive’ conceptions of ethical truth. Or, they try to model ethical truth on other areas: science and a teleology for human beings in the case of some kinds of naturalism; mathematics, in the case of a priori and constructivist approaches; secondary qualities in the case of some contemporary ‘moral sense’ theories. Such theories typically arise in response to a felt need for some ‘substantive’
conception of moral truth. Now where there is a need, there is also a danger. The danger is that what you get actually fails to fill the need in the right way. Let me illustrate with three examples.

The first is the kind of theory associated with John McDowell, that uses the rule-following considerations to defend a close analogy between ethics and secondary-quality perception. Now I think this obviously gets into great difficulties over relativism, because both the rule-following considerations and the analogy with secondary quality perception do so. Roughly, in each case we can envisage a situation in which there are different ‘whirls of organism’. There are organisms that whirl the Taliban way, and see women as inferior beings whose highest purpose is passively to serve the pleasures of men, and organisms that whirl the Western or Enlightenment way. There are organisms that whirl the way dogs do when it comes to smells, and organisms that whirl our way. If truth was found in the ‘practice’ or the ‘shared consensus’ of organisms, then it is very hard to see why these individual communities of shared response are not generating their own truths. This is how we do think of it, I would claim, in the case of secondary qualities. The dog inhabits, literally, a different world of smells from the human being. And there is no saying that just one of us is ‘right’. So relativism becomes a real threat, because the theory looks as if it has to allow for a plurality of truths. There are defensive moves possible (one can always remark that one element of our whirl of organism is to set ourselves against those who whirl another way) but the danger is very real.

Again, consider the very different theory of Christine Korsgaard – a kind of constructivism. Korsgaard fears the contingent, changeable world of desire and attitude (‘mere’ attitude) enough to want an entirely different source of normativity, which she finds in such notions as self-legislation, and the nature of practical identity. Now although Korsgaard herself believes that there is a kind of Kantian straitjacket on the shape our self-legislations must take, the problem of relativism is more impressive than this solution to it. For on the face of it, you can have pluralities of self-legislatings persons whose identities are happily bound up in various constraints they set themselves under, but who unfortunately find these constraints in entirely different places. Some conceive it their duty to prefer insiders to outsiders, others do not. If the ‘construction’ or self-legislation generated moral truth, once more we have a plurality of truths, and relativism strikes. And I should say that the same result awaits the less rationalistic, more political, version of Rawlsian constructivism that seems visible in some of Rawls’s more recent work. That is, whereas earlier we might have thought that the framework of a decent society emerged as the necessary consequence of rational choice, in the later work we have a more relativized conception of the kinds of structure that we can justify to each other, given conditions of political dialogue that are themselves contingent and local. The shift in emphasis seems to me wholly admirable,
but it leaves the door open to pluralistic fears that the more ambitious Kantian colouring once closed. Finally, the same kind of result looks to threaten any neo-Aristotelian theory that seeks to tie moral choice to some conception of ‘flourishing’. The problem is again that there is a plurality of ways in which flourishing can be realized. Some flourish one way, some another. It is not just that there is, as Bernard Williams memorably put it, no particular tie between behaving admirably and flourishing ‘by the ecological standard of the bright eye and the glossy coat’. It also remains disappointingly true that in such a flexible animal as the human being, entirely different conceptions of flourishing will support entirely different conceptions of what to do and what to admire. We have only to think of the Taliban conception of what it is in a woman to flourish (a conception, incidentally, that we can easily envisage being shared by their women, at least after a generation or two). Once more if moral truth is found ‘in’ such ideas, then given the plurality of ideas, we have the relativistic plurality of truths.

It is, then, a distinct advantage of quasi-realism that it keeps free of all that. Of course, this is not to deny that conceptions of what counts as flourishing should inform our attitudes. But when the conceptions are contestable, we are under no pressure at all to think that they generate different and contesting systems of ethical truth. They only generate the need to choose, and to defend our choice with the best story we can find. Equally, I would say that an admirable ethic has much to learn (ethically) from the tradition that issues in contemporary constructivism. That is a tradition that emphasizes the desirability of accommodation with others. It emphasizes ‘the common point of view’, or the need to adopt an impartial language, the language of mankind, if we are seeking joint policies to which nobody has a reasonable veto. I hope we adopt this attitude of civility to each other, and think we go better when we do. I think we also ought to have a ‘man within the breast’ as a kind of trustee of the interests of those who are affected by our actions, even if, politically, we can get by without actual dialogue.

II. Objectivity

Can the view I have sketched defend a sufficiently robust concept of objectivity to satisfy us? Here too I shall urge that there is no problem. Objectivity, I say, is desirable. It is a virtue. But what does it mean? We can think of this by considering the flaws and failures that denote its absence. First, there are flaws of bias. Two considerations are equal, but the biased judge weighs one more heavily than the other. Two people have equal claims, but one is preferred to the other. The most obvious cases are ones in which only a certain range of considerations ought to affect an issue, but
others are surreptitiously introduced. Thus, I hold that some restricted range of considerations ought to influence a hiring decision. If my college introduces another – say, trying to reject a candidate because of age or gender – then he is not being objective. He is indulging his bias. Famously, we are not good at knowing when this is true of ourselves, and the mechanisms of self-deception are familiar enough. The colleague may not actually advance age or gender as a reason. But if, sufficiently often or sufficiently predictably, the reasons he does advance all turn out to discriminate against those of the wrong age or gender, we know what is going on. And we may know it before he does.

Worse, epistemologically at any rate, than bias is blindness. For as well as objective decisions, we talk of objective views of things. A person may fail to give an objective appreciation of the situation because he fails to see the situation at all. A person who does not appreciate what is going on cannot give an objective view of a situation. To be objective, our view has to have taken enough into consideration. It has to be sensitive to what matters.

In the case both of decisions and views this formula seems to work: to be objective is to be sensitive to the right aspects of the situation, and in the right way. Normativity is built into the concept at the centre.

Can the quasi-realist say such things? I have just said them. But can the quasi-realist select an appropriate range of considerations as the right range? Can he privilege the decision-making of the unbiased judge, or the point of view of the informed, large-minded spectator who sees the situation in its entirety? Of course. I am against my colleague who lets his hiring decision be influenced by the age, gender or whatever of the applicant, and I express this by saying that he is sensitive to the wrong considerations. He is biased, not objective. I am impatient with people who get their opinions from the gutter press, because that press does not give a full enough selection of facts to justify their attitudes. I privilege the better-informed.

Let us return to the Taliban. You have already heard me saying that the Taliban are wrong. But can the quasi-realist say that there is anything objectively wrong about their views? They are certainly sensitive to the wrong considerations – that is given by the fact that they let educational policies get decided by gender. I should also say that they are blind to the nature of women and the possibilities open to them. They are insensitive to most of the important aspects of women’s lives. So certainly, it is a plain fact that they show deficiencies of objectivity. They are objectively wrong.

What else might the worry about objectivity be? It might be a way of reintroducing the demand for proof, that we met in the last section. Someone might, I suppose, seek to use the notion so that someone is objectively wrong if and only if there is a guarantee in advance that there is a cognitive procedure for changing his opinion to coincide with ours. But this would be an unfortunate usage: witness my illustration that there is no such procedure.
even in the straightforward empirical cases where people are happiest talking of objective error.

One thought people may have in mind, when they hanker after objectivity, is this. If we are wrong about literal objects, such as what lies in our path, we expect to be tripped up. Objects make themselves felt. The Captain of the Titanic was wrong about an object, and as a result lost his ship. We might hope to show that if the Taliban are ‘objectively’ wrong, then there is disaster lying in wait for them: an equivalent to being tripped up. This, I take it, is the thought that issues in Aristotelianism. Their mistake will show in the relative impoverishment or loss of flourishing lives. Just as people think that the economic errors of communism were finally exhibited in the collapse of Eastern European communism, so they might hold that errors of morality will be illustrated in the collapse of lives built on those errors.

If that is the idea, the quasi-realist certainly does not have to oppose it, although I myself would not believe it for a moment. It may be true that there are such tight constraints on flourishing that any deviation from a good ethic destroys it. Or rather, I should say, it could have been true. For I am not sure it is a sensible thought to keep open, after all we know about human beings. It seems to me much better to think of the alignment between flourishing and behaving well as highly contingent, and not only contingent, but socially contingent. That is, it is up to a society to create an alignment between behaving well and flourishing. As Hume saw, commercial societies implement attitudes and procedures so that people who renege on their word get tripped up. If they do not, because, for instance, transactions are not repeated, then the alignment breaks down, and we get individual cases in which the cheat flourishes. It would be up to the world community to ensure that a society that refuses to educate its women is tripped up – that is, somehow penalized in ways that eventually result in reform. When it comes to things like caste systems or oppression of minorities, I see no reason at all for thinking that nature puts into place mechanisms for tripping up those who hold the wrong attitudes. It is ‘set us as a task’, in Kantian terms, to put into place the sticks and carrots that will hopefully introduce improvement.

Here, it seems to me, the modern options in moral philosophy are hopelessly impoverished by their Aristotelian and Kantian trappings. Those trappings enable one group to believe piously that the Taliban will not flourish, and that this is the bottom line: this is what is wrong with them. They enable the other group to think that they have transgressed against some rational constraint on practical reasoning, and that this is the bottom line: this is what is wrong with them. Whereas the real truth is that what is wrong with them is neither of these things. So far as I can predict, the Taliban (or at any rate, half of them) might well flourish, again by the ecological standard of the bright eye and the bushy coat, if the rest of the world does nothing about it. They may flourish by any standards they themselves would recognize (and as
already mentioned, that could include female members of the society). And it is pie-in-the-sky to believe that there is some theorem of practical reasoning against which they trespass, or that this is what is wrong with them. What is wrong with them is more straightforward than either of these things. What is wrong with them is that the men oppress the women, impoverish their lives, and keep them in a state of ignorance and inactivity. Why should we feel any urge to say more than that? Isn’t it bad enough?

The idea behind saying ‘they are objectively wrong’ on this suggestion was that they are wrong in the kind of way that those who are wrong about objects are: they get tripped up. The world itself contains the mechanisms for correcting their ways, and preferably in ways that they cannot ignore. I have suggested that this is too optimistic. And again, we might reflect that it is pretty optimistic even in many empirical cases. Certainly if I am wrong about whether there is a cliff or iceberg in front of me, the world will trip me up. But it I am wrong about less immediate matters, I can go happily with my errors to the grave. If you disagree with me about the O. J. Simpson verdict, one of us is objectively wrong, but neither of us is particularly likely to suffer because of it. The connection between objectivity and flourishing is not so very close in everyday empirical cases, so it is unwise to ask for it to be closer in the delicate cases of ethics.

So I cannot hear the word ‘objectivity’ as any kind of stick with which to beat the expressivist or quasi-realist. Looking at it the other way, if someone calls my opinion about an ethical issue ‘subjective’ I can hear the charge in a number of ways that matter. He may be imputing hidden bias. He may be imputing lack of knowledge, or lack of ability to deploy the right knowledge. He may think that the issue is genuinely one on which it is possible to be in two minds, and that my more definite attitude is only one option, or one unattractive option. All these are charges I may have to listen to, and on occasion they may be justified. But there is no single general charge, always waiting to be made. My judgment, like that of others, will doubtless show particular flaws of this kind in particular situations, and it is then up to the critic to press the particular charge he has in mind. And that too is just part of the human situation.

III. That is Just Us

In his recent book of that title, Thomas Nagel sets up a ‘relativist’ challenge to the authority of norms, not only in ethics but potentially in other areas too, such as logic, mathematics, or science. His hate-figure is the postmodernist or relativist who hears the right opinion, and even echoes it, but adds always the qualification or rider: that is just us. Nagel opposes to the bitter end this last word. He even invokes a kind of Platonic image of harmony between our
ways and the normative orders that govern the universe. If that is to be the alternative, it is preferable to the relativism, whatever metaphysical anxieties it provokes. Nagel’s anxiety, and the cost he is prepared to pay for a remedy for it, are undoubtedly widely shared. Yet I think the angst is unfounded, and the cost does not have to be paid (which is fortunate, for I believe it cannot be paid: there is no proof awaiting us that our normative attitudes harmonize with the normative order governing the universe, even if we could give any sense to there being such a thing, which I doubt).

I agree with Nagel that there is something flattening or dispiriting about the relativistic last word. And it is surely intended by many postmodernists as a debunking signal: a flag showing that they have seen through the authority of whatever norms are in question. They may go on to voice acceptance of the norms, but, to Nagel’s ear, the protestation will sound hollow. They can’t give the norms the authority they really deserve. And in Nagel’s view, only the Platonist can do that.

My comment on this dialogue once more is that the mistake is one of taking there to be One Big Question, when in fact there are only a lot of little questions. Nagel thinks the relativist challenge points us towards a large metaphysical hole: a gap in our ontology or view of the world that we must desperately try to overcome. I believe, instead, that it amounts at best to an attempt to undermine our first-order confidences, and that such attempts are to be met piecemeal, depending upon the case in hand.

Here is an illustration from recent work by the late Jean Hampton. Consider the scientific norm of insisting upon double blind tests for the efficacy of new drugs (so that nobody involved knows which is a real drug and which is a placebo). Suppose some half-hearted experimentalist, who says ‘we like to do double blind tests’, and then adds ‘but that is just us’. Surely the right response is to ask what the little word ‘just’ is doing. It insinuates the double blind methodology is optional, so that there would be nothing wrong about doing the tests without it. But that, we suppose, is a shocking mistake. Tests conducted without it have a high probability of saying that a drug is efficacious when it is not, or vice versa, and this is what we wanted to avoid. If our experimentalist denies this, he had better have a story, and most scientists would bet in advance that he will not have one.

Another good way of putting it is this. Let us give the dissident that it is just us. But let us add some words of self-awareness. It is just us, able as we are to conduct reliable tests. Or, it is just us, forearming ourselves against misleading results. There is nothing to be ashamed of in these words of self-description. On the contrary, there is something to be proud of, because learning to avoid the experimental pitfalls presumably took some doing. So we can agree with Nagel and Hampton that better last words than ‘that is just us’ should be found. But we stay within our first-order normative space as we find them. This makes it plain that the issue with the relativist is
fundamentally one of confidence. But if our last words are happy enough, our confidence is well founded, and no challenge to it exists.

My response is the same if an ethical attitude is challenged. I am in favour of education for women. Suppose now not a Taliban, but some weary postmodernist, saying ‘I am in favour of it too. But that is just us’. Again the ‘just’ insinuates that this is somehow an optional attitude, that there is nothing wrong with people such as the Taliban who happen to whirl the other way. But I am unsympathetic to this degree of toleration – the kind of open-mindedness that comes when all one’s brains have fallen out, as it is sometimes put. Putting it positively I can add words of self-description: it is just us, free from the politics of arbitrary discrimination, free from culturally embedded misogyny, maintaining ideals of equality and freedoms of self-development for all. These words ring well in my ear: it is just us, and we are doing well. Putting it negatively, I can expound as I have done on the way the Taliban attitude is not optional. There is indeed something wrong with it and them, and I can go on to detail some of what it is.

Of course in all this I am speaking in my own voice. That is inevitable. But so long as my own voice is not one to be embarrassed by, it is also of no interest.

Again, however, there is no open invitation to be smug. Suppose I announce my hostility to legalized cannabis. Someone comes along and, perhaps pointing to countries where cannabis is legal and things seem to go on fine, says ‘that is just us’. I try for words of self-description: just us, aware of the dangers; just us, able to discriminate harmless drugs from harmful ones. And here, suddenly, the words do not ring all that happily. Either the descriptions are unjustified or false, or they are not things to be proud of. They may even be things about which to be embarrassed ‘just us, ignorant of the real consequences, or just us, believing what we are told in the gutter press’. When this happens something has to give. We either have to find better words, or change our habit of being embarrassed by ignorance or gullibility, or come to soften our opposition to cannabis. Or, perhaps, ‘carelessness and inattention’ can provide a remedy, for one human response to finding that the last words of self-description are embarrassing is, unfortunately, just to kick over the table, refusing to listen. But that too is an embarrassing last description of our state.

I conclude by raising one final issue that perhaps troubles people who think about these things. I suspect it lies behind the kind of moral imperative people feel to transcend quasi-realism. It may partly explain why, as I put it in my Ruling Passions, they think quasi-realism smells of sulphur.

As we have seen, people hanker after algorithms, or procedures guaranteed in advance to prove that their opponents are wrong, or preferably to prove to them that they are wrong. They want this security. But suppose, as I am afraid is true, they cannot find such procedures. Well, in fact attitudes and politics
are going to continue. In practice, however much a Professor beats his breast about the need for an algorithm in the class room, out of the study he will discipline his children, sit as a magistrate, campaign for one party or another, tut-tut the Taliban, just as if he had one. But one strand from Kant will lead the Professor to be embarrassed about some of this. For the attitudes and the politics will eventually have a coercive edge. There will come a case in which someone is prevented from doing something although we cannot prove to him that he is wrong to do it. And people think that this trespasses against the \textit{respect} due to persons, or against the \textit{dignity} of persons – and this worries them. People thinking like this fear that they can only be justified in coercive measures if, at least in principle, the object of those measures ought to be assenting to them, and this in turn would only be so if somewhere there is the missing algorithm. It is as if, when I lock you up, if what I do is just, then you must be tacitly in possession of thoughts that would lead to you assenting to your fate. You could reason to my conclusion, even if in fact you choose not to. Otherwise, so the line goes, I fail to respect you as a person, or infringe your dignity and even your rights.

I do not have too much sympathy with this line of thought. It seems to me only in fairyland that everyone has at some deep level an appreciation of the right and the good. It is wishful thinking to suppose that at the end of every just piece of sentencing there is a prisoner who tacitly accepts the justice of the sentence.

Human beings do dirty things, and their cultures let them get away with them. If a Taliban living in a Western jurisdiction is indicted for the not-uncommon crime of burning his wife to death for some petty misdemeanour, he may feel unjustly treated. His whole culture may back him in this resentment. He may feel it atrocious that his crime attracts the same penalty as, say, if he had killed his boss. And he may have no principles within him that could even ideally be deployed to change his feelings. But that does not give me, the Westerner, the least reason either for changing the judgment, or for feeling guilty about enforcing the penalty. Nor do I trespass against dignity and due respect. The Taliban deserves no respect for his attitude to women or for his action. Nor does his self-justification express any kind of dignity. He brought it all upon himself, by himself refusing to treat half of humankind with due dignity and respect.

It would, of course, be nice if all criminals were penitents, and if the dignity of people and the respect due to them were always so great that there was no need for coercive measures in the first place. And no doubt these things are true in fairyland. In the real world, we have to do the best we can, and here, as elsewhere, the task of the philosopher is partly to enable us to do this without the confusions and guilt that so often bedevil practical reasonings. I hope I have shown why, in my opinion, quasi-realism is excellently, and uniquely, well-adapted for doing this.\footnote{Simon Blackburn}
NOTES

4 An earlier version of this paper was presented at a conference on multiculturalism and moral objectivity, sponsored by the Ethics Priority Area, University of Oslo.

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