MORAL RELATIVISM AND MORAL EXPRESSIVISM

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ABSTRACT: Though moral relativism has had its supporters over the years, it is not a dominant position in philosophy. I will argue here, though, that the view is an attractive position. It evades some hardcore challenges that face absolutism, and it is reconcilable with an appealing emotivist approach to moral attitudes. In previous work, I have offered considerations in favor of a version of moral relativism that I call “perspectivalism.” These considerations are primarily grounded in linguistic data. Here I offer a self-standing argument for perspectivalism. I begin with an argument against moral absolutism. I then argue that moral terms, such as ‘wrong’ and ‘right’, require for their application that the moral judge instantiate particular affective states, and I use this claim to provide further defense of moral relativism.

Let (metaethical) moral absolutism be the view that all moral statements have truth values simpliciter (or relative to a world), and let (metaethical) moral relativism (broadly construed) be the view that at least some moral statements have truth values that are relative to the standards of a speaker or assessor. Though moral relativism has had its supporters over the years, it is not a dominant position in philosophy. However, I will argue here that the view is an attractive position. It evades some hardcore challenges that face absolutism, and it is reconcilable with an appealing emotivist approach to moral

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1 Strictly speaking, we ought to call the views “metaethical moral absolutism” and “metaethical moral relativism.” But I will adopt the standard terminology here. Relativism is also sometimes referred to as “subjectivism.”

attitudes. In previous work, I have offered considerations in favor of a version of moral relativism that I call “perspectivalism.” These considerations are primarily grounded in linguistic data, such as disagreement and retraction data. For lack of space, I shall not repeat these arguments here; instead, I offer a self-standing argument for perspectivalism. I begin with an argument against moral absolutism. I then argue that moral terms, such as ‘wrong’ and ‘right’, require for their application that the moral judge instantiate particular affective states, and I use this claim to provide further defense of moral relativism.

1. AGAINST ABSOLUTISM

Following philosophical conventions, let us distinguish between two types of moral absolutism: singularism and pluralism. Let singularism be the view that there is one fundamental moral principle that determines what is right and wrong in all circumstances, and let pluralism be the view that there are a number of moral laws provided by a “lawgiver” that determine which types of actions are right and wrong. Utilitarianism is a good example of the first kind of moral theory. Its fundamental principle tells us to maximize pleasure and minimize pain. Another example is virtue ethics. Despite its founders’ objections to rule-based moral theories, virtue ethics does have a fundamental principle that guides action. Its fundamental principle encourages us to do what is virtuous and not do what is not (Anscombe 1958). Deontological theories, such as standard Christian morality, on the other hand, are good examples of the second kind of moral theory. For each type of action we can think of, a moral law determines whether it is right or wrong. Adultery and euthanasia, for example, are prohibited regardless of the circumstances.

There is a simple objection to pluralist absolutism. It appears to yield the wrong result in extreme cases. Joseph Fletcher, who proposed and defended what he called “situation ethics,” offered the following real-life examples of cases to which Christian moral principles do not obviously apply.

Case 1: I dropped in on a patient at the hospital who explained that he only had a set time to live. The doctors could give him some pills (that would cost $40 every three days) that would keep him alive for the next three years, but if he didn’t take the pills, he’d be dead within six months. Now he was insured for $100,000, double indemnity and that was all the insurance he had. But if he took the pills and lived past next October when the insurance was up for renewal, they were bound to refuse the renewal, and his insurance would be canceled. So he told me that he was thinking
that if he didn’t take the pills, then his family would get left with some security, and asked my advice on the situation. (1966, 163)

Case 2: As the Russian armies drove westward to meet the Americans and British at the Elbe, a Soviet patrol picked up a Mrs. Bergmeier foraging food for her three children. Unable even to get word to the children, she was taken off to a POW camp in Ukraine. Her husband had been captured in the Battle of the Bulge and taken to a POW camp in Wales. When he was returned to Berlin, he spent months rounding up his children, although they couldn’t find their mother. She more than anything else was needed to reconnect them as a family in that dire situation of hunger, chaos and fear. Meanwhile, in Ukraine, Mrs. Bergmeier learned through a sympathetic commandant that her husband and family were trying to keep together and find her. But the rules allowed them to release her to Germany only if she was pregnant, in which case she would be returned as a liability. She turned things over in her mind and finally asked a friendly Volga German camp guard to impregnate her, which he did. Her condition being medically verified, she was sent back to Berlin and to her family. They welcomed her with open arms, even when she told them how she had managed it. And when the child was born, they all loved him because of what they [sic] had done for them. After the christening, they met up with their local pastor and discussed the morality of the situation. (1966, 165)

Cases like these provide possible counterexamples to particular Christian moral principles. For example, Mrs. Bergmeier is guilty of adultery, even though her actions make it possible for her to reunite with her family. Though Fletcher never took a stance on whether the agents in his real-life examples acted rightly or wrongly, the examples were supposed to show that Christian morality might sometimes be wrong. Fletcher himself was an exponent of situation ethics, a version of consequentialism. Where traditional consequentialism commends actions that maximize pleasure and minimize pain, situation ethics commends actions that maximize (in a distributive and qualitative sense) agape, or love.

Consequentialism seems to make more sensible judgments than pluralist absolutism with respect to the above cases. Consequentialism of any stripe presumably would judge that Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing. However, extensive disagreement about many individual cases gives us reason to doubt that there could be objective facts about all cases. For example, if we follow Fletcher in taking agape to be central to morality, there are cases in which there is no way to determine which of two actions will lead to the greatest
dissemination of agape. Should you pull the chair from underneath your son who is about to be hung by a sadistic guard, because the guard threatens to kill both your son and another inmate if you do not? Should you attempt to save your wife who was in a car accident with a friend, despite her grim chances of surviving even given immediate attention, or should you attend to her friend who will survive if you help him immediately but who will die if you do not? In these kinds of extreme cases, moral truth appears to rely on subjective judgment.

It may be argued that the singularist absolutist could agree that there are cases in which what is the right thing to do (according to the unique fundamental moral principle upheld) is not clearly determined and yet deny that this should lead to a rejection of the fundamental moral principle. This, however, does not seem to me to be quite right. For the singularist absolutist, the fundamental principle is supposed to apply in all circumstances. Once it is admitted that there are cases in which no fundamental principle applies, it is at the same time granted that singularist absolutism is false.

Of course, even if the fundamental principle does not apply in extreme cases, this is still compatible with claiming that there is only one right thing to do. That is, some subjective judgments might be simply wrong—even if we are not in a position to know which ones. This position would be a version of particularism. I will argue below, however, that unknown truths have no motivational force and that this position, therefore, should be rejected.

2. CENTERED PROPERTIES

Consider the following response to the case of Mrs. Bergmeier who asked a German camp guard to impregnate her in order to escape from the camp.

(1) Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing.

Even if the principle of agape or some other basic principle has been applied, there may not be a unique answer to the question of whether (1) is true or false. I would judge it to be true, but others may judge it to be false. But if there is no objective way of settling the truth value of (1), and the statement has a truth value, then it must have this truth value relative to subjective standards.

Sentence (1), however, does not express the proposition that Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing, according to my moral attitudes. The latter is a descriptive claim, not a normative one. No one can rightly deny its truth. On the version of relativism I argue for in “Moral Contextualism and Moral Relativism” (2008), (1) expresses the minimal proposition that Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing. Speakers and assessors are not constituents of the proposition.
Let it be granted for argument’s sake that propositions are Russellian. The proposition expressed by (1) then contains Mrs. Bergmeier and the property of doing the right thing. This proposition, however, is not true or false relative to a circumstance of evaluation that contains only a world parameter. It has a truth value only relative to a moral judge.

Propositions, on this view, do not determine a function from a world to a truth value but a function from a world and a moral judge parameter (and perhaps other parameters) to a truth value. Likewise, the properties that constitute them do not determine functions from a world to a set of individuals who satisfy the predicate but a function from a world and a moral judge parameter to a set of individuals who satisfy the predicate. I call these properties “centered properties” (Brogaard 2008, forthcoming). The property of doing the right thing then is a centered property, which determines a function from a world and a moral judge to the set of individuals satisfying the predicate ‘did the right thing’.

3. THE PERCEIVED-RESPONSE THEORY

The question, of course, that arises is what are moral centered properties? I did not address this question previously (Brogaard 2008). Though I will not attempt to make a complete case for my view here, I believe that moral properties, such as the properties of being right and wrong, are abstract, universal entities that actions possess relative to a judge if and only if the actions give rise to particular affective states in the judge, were the judge to seriously consider the action. In what follows I will leave the clause ‘were the judge to seriously consider the action’ implicit.

Before looking at the details of this proposal, I will offer a quick account of what an affective state is. In previous work, I have argued that an emotional state is a perception of an object, action, or event causing certain physiological changes in the body state (Brogaard 2012a, 2012b). This is what I called the “perceived-response theory.” The following is a quick summary of my argument for this theory.

The now classical theory of emotions is the so-called James-Lange theory of emotions. On this theory, emotions occur as a result of bodily reactions to events. You perceive an external stimulus that leads to a bodily reaction, for example, a rise in heart rate, perspiration, and dryness of the mouth. Your emotional reaction is dependent upon how you perceive those physical reactions. For example, suppose you are walking home from the pub and see a threatening man with a knife just a few meters ahead of you. You tremble and your heart is racing. The James-Lange theory proposes that you normally will perceive your physical responses in a particular way, for example, as fear.
Emotions, then, are feelings that come about as a result of these bodily changes. The bodily changes do not come about as the result of our emotions. As William James puts it:

My theory, on the contrary, is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur is the emotion. Common-sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colorless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we should not actually feel afraid or angry. (1884, 450)

What is called the James-Lange theory of emotions is primarily due to James. Carl Lange (1885) held that vasomotor changes are the emotions. For him, emotional experiences are experiences of these vasomotor changes. Lange’s view, however, is highly unintuitive. Intuitively, actual vasomotor changes are not definitive indicators of emotional states. As Martha Nussbaum puts it, “if we discovered that my blood pressure was quite low during this whole [grieving] episode, or that my pulse rate never went above sixty, there would not, I think, be the slightest reason to conclude that I was not grieving. If my hands and feet were cold or warm, sweaty or dry, again this would be of no criteria value” (2004, 195). The James-Lange theory avoids this problem, as it merely requires that we experience these changes.

Though it seems that the James-Lange theory has taken a long step toward solving the problem of the nature of emotions, something fundamental is missing in this theory. Certainly our vernacular concept of emotion does not take emotions to be just perceptions of bodily changes. In ordinary language, we say things like: “John fears the dog,” “Mary is happy that Tom is back,” “Alice is angry at Peter.” It seems evident that our emotions are directed not just toward our bodies but also toward objects in the world. We represent the world and become angry or afraid or happy based on those representations. For example, my state of fear at least partially represents the dangerous snake and not just the state of my body.

Stanley Schachter (1964) defends a two-factor theory of emotions according to which human emotions contain two parts: physical arousal and a cognitive element. According to Schachter, both of these elements
must be present for one to experience an emotion. Some form of arousal occurs (e.g., an increased heart rate, perspiration, a faltering voice, and so on), one then interprets this arousal and, subsequently, experiences the emotion.

Most theories of emotions are versions of Schachter’s two-stage view. We might also call it the “conjunctive theory.” On this view, emotions are conjunctive states of perceptions of bodily changes and judgments or perceptions directed at the external world. Most researchers sympathetic to the James-Lange theory of emotions now admit that emotions involve a cognitive element. Jesse Prinz argues that emotions are perceptions of changes in the body state coupled with core relational themes that reliably cause those changes. Core relational themes include, for example, dangers, losses, threats, and achievements. According to Prinz, then, emotions are perceptions of changes in our somatic condition, but they are also appraisals, where an appraisal is “any representation of an organism-environment relation that bears on well-being” (2004, 57). In the case of fear, for example, the representations “that trigger bodily response will do so in virtue of being recognized as dangerous, either explicitly or implicitly by similarity to previously established elicitors” (55). So on Prinz’s view, it is central to fear that one is threatened or in danger from the object of the fear.

However, the conjunctive theory of emotions runs into trouble. Consider the following case: John is working for the police catching stray dogs. He is currently in front of a stray dog. The dog is extremely dangerous. It clearly presents a threat to John’s well-being. As John is used to being around dangerous stray dogs, he does not normally have any fear response to them. But today he is clearly displaying symptoms of fear. John perceives the fear response as being a response to a snake right behind the stray dog. In the envisaged scenario, John’s fear is fear of the snake, not fear of the dog. Yet the conjunctive theory predicts otherwise. On the conjunctive theory, John perceives fear-relevant physiological changes to his body state. And he judges that the dog and the snake are dangerous. Since the conjunctive theory holds that fear is a conjunction of a representation of an object or event as dangerous coupled with a representation of fear-relevant physiological changes in the body state, and both the dog and the snake are represented as dangerous, the conjunctive theory predicts that John’s fear is fear of the dog and fear of the snake. Let us call this problem “the connection problem.”

Elsewhere, I propose a view I call the “perceived-response theory” (Brogaard 2012a, 2012b). On this view, emotions are mixed modal perceptions of somatic or mental responses to sensorily presented external stimuli. Fear, for example, is a perception of somatic or mental responses of a particular kind
to an external object (e.g., an aggressive-looking person). Suppose I see an aggressive-looking person approaching. The visual image activates my sympathetic nervous system, which in turn gives rise to changes in my body state by acting on the muscles and hormonal levels. This change in body state then activates nerve cells in the brain. This causes a fear response.

On the perceived-response theory, fear is not a change in body state nor the cognitive representation of a change in body state but rather a perceptual state representing the angry-looking person causing my muscles to tense up, my heart to pound, and my breathing to shorten. Emotions are therefore perceptual representations of body changes that occur in response to external stimuli. These perceptual states can be veridical or nonveridical. They are veridical if their content is true; otherwise they are nonveridical. To say that fear is veridical only if I really undergo the changes, and nonveridical otherwise, is not to say anything about whether I am in a state of fear. I can be in a state of fear regardless of whether the object I fear and the vasomotor changes I experience actually exist.

The perceived-response theory avoids the connection problem as follows. John perceives both the snake and the dog as dangerous. But he does not perceive the dog as causing the fear-relevant physiological changes in his body state. So John’s fear is fear of the snake, not the dog.

4. MORAL STATES AND AFFECT

Let us return now to the claim that moral states are particular kinds of affective states. I propose that moral affective states are perceptual states that represent an action or action type causing the physiological changes typically associated with negative emotions (e.g., fear, anger, disgust, and sadness) or positive emotions (e.g., joy, awe, and admiration). In a famous scene in the 2001 movie Hannibal, Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) removes the top of the still-conscious-but-dazed Krendler’s skull, cuts out a piece of his brain, sautés it in a pan by the table, and feeds it to Krendler while he is fully conscious. Though the scene is completely fictive, it nonetheless is capable of inducing a strong feeling of revulsion in us. The perceptual state representing Lecter’s action as a cause of the physiological changes associated with revulsion is an example of a moral affective state.

My proposal now runs as follows: no fundamental moral principle always determines whether an action is right or wrong. In hard cases, a moral judge determines the rightness or wrongness of the action. We could now stipulate that an action that evades objective evaluation possesses the property of being wrong relative to a moral judge if and only if the action triggers a particular kind of negative moral state in the judge, and an action that evades objective
evaluation possesses the property of being right (permissible) if and only if it
does not trigger a particular kind of negative moral state in the judge.

This leaves us with the option of saying that while some actions can be
assessed only relative to a judge, some basic moral principle (e.g., the prin-
ciple of agape) suffices for assessing a range of cases that clearly obey the
principle. The subjective element enters the picture only in difficult cases.
Moral decision making, on this proposal, would proceed in accord with the
following algorithm:

A. Apply the principle of agape (or other fundamental moral principle) to
the relevant action.

B. If applying the principle of agape does not yield a definite moral
judgment, then the action is permissible just in case it does not trigger
a negative emotion of the right kind in the agent.

The problem with this mixed account is that it ultimately breaks down. The
mixed account immediately raises the question of how to resolve disagree-
ment about the basic moral principles themselves. Since basic moral prin-
ciples are basic, presumably no further appeal to more basic principles would
be possible to resolve the disagreement. So it would seem that we must appeal
to the emotions triggered in subjects by the basic principles. But this collapses
the mixed view into a purely relativistic account.³

The threat of ultimate collapse gives us a strong incentive to adopt a purely
relativistic framework. On the purely relativistic view, there are no funda-
mental principles. They are true only relative to certain judges. An action
possesses the property of being wrong relative to a moral judge if and only if
the action triggers a particular kind of negative moral state in the judge, and
an action possesses the property of being right (permissible) if and only if it
does not trigger a particular kind of negative moral state in the judge. We can
also stipulate that when we must choose one evil action over another, the
right one to choose is the one that triggers less severe negative emotions. I will
return to the issue of which negative emotions are “of the right kind” in
section 7.

I noted earlier that an action can be wrong relative to a judge even when
the action does not trigger any emotions in the judge. I required only that the
action would be a trigger, were the judge to seriously consider the action. The
counterfactual here is true just in case the judge has a disposition to have
the emotion. The judge has the relevant disposition if and only if information
about the action type is stored in the judge’s memory together with emotional
content, in much the same way that information about traumatic events can

³ Thanks to Dan Zeman here.
be stored together with emotional content. I imagine that the action categorization will be fairly coarse-grained. Presumably the brain does not ordinarily store information about very fine-grained action types, such as strangling someone slowly in Time Square with a telephone cord. This latter action type would most likely fall under the action types killing and torturing.

Truly alien action types could not be stored in memory in this way, so alien action types cannot be assessed relative to a judge. The judge must understand the relevant facts about the action to be morally assessable. For the sake of illustration, suppose you just landed on Mars. To your surprise a little green man appears. He sticks both of his fingers in his ears and closes his eyes. You take him to be shy. Unbeknownst to you, however, stuffing one’s fingers in one’s ears while having one’s eye shut causes all Martians within one yard’s radius to undergo a slow and painful death. The Martian believed his act would torturously destroy you. Assuming earthly principles of morality do not apply on Mars, it is correct to say in this case that the action in question was wrong relative to more ethically inclined Martians but was not right or wrong relative to you.

So far, so good. Purely relativistic theories, however, face some common complaints. One is that they yield funny truth values for counterfactual statements. Mark Schroeder (2010), for example, thinks that moral relativism entails that I can believe that abortion is okay yet truly utter the sentence, ‘If I had had a negative moral attitude toward abortion, abortion would have been okay’. Given a Lewis-style semantics and similarity metric, the world closest to the actual world in which the antecedent holds is one in which I have a negative moral attitude toward abortion but in which everything else is the way it otherwise is. In this world, it is true by my standards that abortion is okay. Or so the argument goes.

However, I think it is highly questionable that these counterfactuals could ever come out true. In the world closest to the actual world in which I have a negative moral attitude toward abortion, I do not also have a positive moral attitude toward abortion. So an utterance of the sentence, ‘If I had had a negative moral attitude toward abortion, abortion would have been wrong’ comes out true. This, of course, may not be a natural thing for people to say, but it is nonetheless false that we get funny truth values for these kinds of counterfactual statements.

Another complaint is that relativism yields unintuitive truth values for the utterances of disturbed evil people. Consider a serial killer who is not appalled by the gruesome murders that he commits. In a full-blown relativistic framework, the sentence ‘It is morally permissible to murder people’ comes out true when uttered by the serial killer. To many people, this is highly unintuitive. However, there are ways of making the consequence
seem less unintuitive. In a relativistic framework, the sentence is true relative to the moral standards of the serial killer but false relative to the moral standards of most of the other people who assess it. This does not seem that unintuitive. Furthermore, perhaps the relativist can explain the remaining unintuitive character by appealing to a difference between an engaged and an unengaged perspective.4

5. FURTHER MOTIVATIONS FOR MORAL RELATIVISM

The view that emerges may seem similar to traditional forms of noncognitivism. Noncognitivism holds that moral statements do not express beliefs or other truth-apt mental states. One form of noncognitivism going back to Carnap is prescriptivism, which holds that moral statements are commands. Another form is expressivism, or emotivism, which holds that moral statements express desires, emotions, or other affective states.

The latter view may seem similar to the form of moral relativism outlined above. However, while I agree that moral expressions partially serve to express emotions, the view defended here differs in important respects from expressivism. First, the version of moral relativism defended here is a theory about what constitutes moral judgments. It gives us a guide for determining the truth value of moral statements. Expressivism, on the other hand, is not a theory of the nature of wrongness: the view says nothing about what wrongness is; it just says something about what moral utterances express (Blackburn 1998, Dreier 2004, Horgan and Timmons 2006, Schroeder 2010). Or to put it differently: the view offers assertability conditions for moral utterances, not truth-conditions. According to expressivism, the statement ‘stealing is wrong’ can be correctly asserted only when the speaker has a negative attitude toward stealing.

Second, expressivism denies that moral utterances express mental states that are truth-apt. The view defended here holds that certain mental states that are apt for truth, or veridicality (viz., emotional states), are required for making a moral judgment.

Allowing that moral states can have veridicality conditions prevents a serious difficulty facing expressivism. As Michael Huemer (2008) points out, there appear to be ethical truths that do not have any associated emotional reactions, for example, “If x is better than y and y is better than z, then x is better than z,” “The ethical status of choosing (x and y) over (x and z) is the same as that of choosing y over z, given the knowledge that x exists/occurs,” and “If two states of affairs, x and y, are related such that y could be produced

4 Thanks to Dan Zeman for making this suggestion.
by adding something valuable to $x$, without creating anything bad, lowering
the value of anything in $x$, or removing anything of value from $x$, then $y$

is better than $x$.” These formal ethical claims do not by themselves tell you what
you should do or even whether a particular thing is good or bad. But they can
be used to reject otherwise tempting and interesting substantive ethical views.
Because these formal ethical claims do not trigger any emotional reactions, it
is difficult for expressivism to explain why they seem so obviously true.

In Schroeder’s (2008) version of expressivism, these kinds of judgments, as
any other judgments involving logical connectives, are represented as (bifur-
cated) attitudes of being for (as in “I am for the child campaign”) toward
complex contents. Although attitudes of being for might not trigger emotional
reactions, they are nevertheless motivational. Furthermore, Schroeder gives
an account of the meaning of ‘better than’: “We might say that ‘better than’

corresponds to being for preferring, so that ‘a is better than b’ expresses FOR

(preferring a to b)” (2008, 58). The clause for ‘better than’, coupled with
clauses for truth-conditional connectives, would yield the meaning of formal
ethical claims as attitudes of being for with motivational import.5

Perhaps that goes toward solving Huemer’s challenge. However, the
moves needed to account for formal ethical claims seem extremely compli-
cated. Moral relativism does not face a similar obstacle. This is because moral
relativism can agree with moral absolutism that, relative to some fixed param-
eters, the expressions ‘good’ and ‘bad’ have determinate extensions. Where
the moral absolutist holds that moral expressions have determinate extensions
relative to a world parameter, the moral relativist can hold that moral expres-
sions have determinate extensions relative to a world, a time, and a judge
parameter. For example, relative to a world, a time, and a moral judge,
‘morally bad’ denotes the set of all actions that either can be objectively
assessed or can trigger negative emotions of the right kind in the judge. For all
rational agents, the formal ethical claims come out as true, which explains
why rational agents consider these claims to be self-evidently true. The
claims, of course, will come out false relative to deeply irrational agents,
which is rather unsurprising.

Despite the differences between the proposed version of moral relativism
and expressivism, most of the considerations that are thought to support
expressivism also support moral relativism of the type defended here. One of
the strongest arguments for expressivism, sometimes attributed to David
Hume, rests on motivational internalism. According to motivational internal-
ism, there is a strong connection between accepting a moral claim and being
motivated to act in accordance with the claim. On a plausible form of

5 Thanks to Dan Zeman here for proposing this solution.
motivational internalism, accepting a moral claim will motivate a rational agent to do what the claim tells him to do (Korsgaard 1986, Smith 1994). Moral theories that take moral statements to express belief have difficulties explaining motivational internalism. As Hume argues, motivation requires belief and a corresponding desire or passion. Beliefs alone do not motivate, especially not beliefs about what is right and wrong. Here is the often-cited passage from Hume:

> Since morals, therefore, have an influence on the actions and affections, it follows, that they cannot be deriv’d from reason; and that because reason alone, as we have already prov’d, can never have any such influence. Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason. ([1740: 3.1.1.6] 1978, 457)

Moral relativism does better than many forms of moral cognitivism in terms of explaining motivation. The connection between accepting a moral judgment and acting on it can be explained as follows: making or accepting a moral judgment requires that the action the judgment condemns or commends triggers negative or positive emotions. Emotions, such as anger, sadness, disgust, and fear, are classic motivators of action. Anger provokes a fight response, fear provokes a fight-or-flight response, and sadness and disgust provoke avoidance. Of course, it is possible to be disgusted by, say, the action of eating meat and still freely eat meat, but arguably this is not a rational response to the emotion. Freely doing something that disgusts you is like kicking someone who makes you happy. Both responses stride against better judgment.

A second motivation for moral relativism turns on epistemic access to moral properties. Moral absolutism is bound to say that there are difficult ethical questions to which we cannot come to know the answer. So absolutism entails that there are unknowable moral facts. Unknowable moral facts have no motivational force, which strides against the nature of morality. Furthermore, it is difficult to see what could possibly be determining what these unknowable facts are. It is highly plausible that moral facts supervene on nonmoral facts (Hare 1952, 145). That is, there cannot be a difference in the moral facts without a difference in the nonmoral facts. But if the moral facts supervene on nonmoral facts and human attitudes do not settle any moral truths, then it becomes difficult to explain what determines what the unknowable moral facts are.

Moral relativism is not in a similarly bad position. Two actions can be judged differently by different moral judges. But the different judgments would involve different emotional states on the part of the judges. So moral
relativism does not have to posit unknowable moral facts and can agree to the supervenience principle.

6. MORAL PERSPECTIVALISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM

For all I have said above, the version of moral relativism proposed is consistent with two kinds of relativistic frameworks. The two forms of relativism come apart with respect to utterance truth. Consider again (1), repeated from above:

(1) Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing.

On the view I have called “perspectivalism,” the truth value of (1) is determined by the context of use. If I utter (1), then (1) is true, but if someone who adheres strictly to Christian morals utters (1), it is false (Brogaard 2008).

On alternative versions of relativistic semantics, defended by John MacFarlane (2005a, 2005b), Andy Egan, John Hawthorne, and Brian Weatherston (2004), and others, utterances do not have truth values relative to a context of use but only relative to a context of use and a context of assessment. For a speaker who utters a sentence, the context of use and the context of assessment are one and the same. But for people other than the speaker, they come apart. For example, if a principled Christian—call him Mr. C—utters (1), then (1) is false, but if I later assess the utterance made by Mr. C, then Mr. C’s utterance is true.

I agree with the sentiment underlying this version of relativistic semantics. It certainly seems correct that Mr. C’s utterance of (1) comes out true when I evaluate it, even if it is plainly false from his point of view. Or suppose I change my moral standards at some point in my life. Let us say I come to regard (1) as false. At that point, I would hesitate to say that my utterance made back in 2012 was true. I would be more inclined to say that I was wrong back then. But this suggests that an utterance can change its original truth value, thus vindicating the two-context version of relativism. This latter argument for introducing a context of assessment is also known as “the retraction argument.”

It is tempting to include Max Kölbel among the authors who defend this view. However, including Kölbel in this camp probably is not accurate. At most, as López de Sa (2007) has pointed out and as Kölbel (2007) himself has acknowledged, his view in his “Truth without Objectivity” (2002) and “Faultless Disagreement” (2004) is rather unspecific about which alternative of the two I mention here he prefers. However, in “How To Spell Out Genuine Relativism and How To Defend Indexical Relativism” (2007), Kölbel explicitly states his preference for a view that is closer to “perspectivalism” as I characterize it below than to views according to which moral terms are assessment-sensitive.
As I have argued earlier, however, we do not need to introduce the more complicated framework involving both a context of use and a context of assessment in order to accommodate the data (Brogaard 2008). When I evaluate Mr. C’s utterance of (1), I have a thought of the form:

(2) Mr. C’s utterance of ‘Mrs. Bergmeier did the right thing’ is true.

As I argue in “Moral Contextualism and Moral Relativism” (2008), there are several reasons to think that the directly quoted material here is used, not simply mentioned. One reason is that expressions in the matrix clause can depend anaphorically on expressions in the quoted sentence. Consider:

(3) ‘Give me your money, or I’ll shoot’, he said; but I didn’t give it to him.

The pronoun ‘it’ in the matrix clause is anaphoric on ‘your money’. But this requires ‘your money’ to pick out an individual to which ‘it’ refers. Quoted indexicals trigger a context shift. In (2) the quoted material creates a shift in context to one in which the thief, and not the actual speaker, is the speaker. So the semantic value of ‘I’ is the thief, not me. However, the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are not indexicals. They contribute the same centered property to all propositions. So the quoted material ‘did the right thing’ in (2) is assessed relative to me, not Mr. C, which means that relative to my moral standards, my thought expressed by (2) comes out as true.

To sum up, once we understand the linguistic properties of direct quotation, there is no need to introduce the more cumbersome semantic framework requiring both a context of use and a context of assessment.

7. HOW TO DISTINGUISH BEAUTY AND DECENCY

I turn now to one of the most recalcitrant arguments against expressivism. The argument turns on the assumption that expressivism entails that moral and aesthetic expressions at least sometimes express the same attitudes. The reason that this is thought to be problematic is that we might condemn something morally but praise it aesthetically (D’Arms and Jacobson 1994, Harold 2008). For example, a painter could be working on a beautiful painting but neglect his children during this process. Most people would find the painter’s actions aesthetically innocent, or even commendable, but morally debauched. So if moral and aesthetic utterances have analogous assertability conditions, then we both should and should not assert ‘The painter is doing something wrong’.

I do not think this is a recalcitrant problem for expressivism. The expressivist can simply say that ‘wrong’ is ambiguous and that we should assert the
sentence when ‘wrong’ means ‘morally wrong’ but not when it means ‘aesthetically wrong’. However, the problem arises anew when we take emotional attitudes to be constitutive of moral judgments. On the version of moral relativism defended here, it might seem that any negative emotional attitude toward an action (aesthetic, epistemic, moral, etc.) would be sufficient to render the action wrong.

There is a further problem lurking in the background. Bad art does not trigger the same emotions in me as morally reprehensible actions. Likewise, beautiful paintings do not trigger the same emotions in me as supererogatory actions. So how do we characterize the difference between aesthetic and moral attitudes?

There are several ways one can approach this problem. One could argue that moral states correspond to a particular set of emotional states (anger, guilt, revenge, etc.), whereas aesthetic states correspond to a different set of emotional states (awe, wonder, joy, etc.). Alternatively, one could argue that the distinction is grounded in the different normative roles the attitudes play in social encounters.

There are hurdles to overcome for both of these approaches. Allured by the first approach, one could argue that attitudes such as compassionate love, disregard for others, guilt, and anger are among the moral emotions (Velleman 1999), whereas awe and amazement are among the aesthetic emotions. There would no doubt be a significant overlap between the two lists but this would not pose a recalcitrant problem for this sort of approach. The approach would still allow for the possibility that one could have positive aesthetic emotions at the same time as one has negative moral emotions, or vice versa.

The problem with this latter suggestion is rather that moral and aesthetic emotions have a different phenomenology. The disgust Muslims felt in response to Maple’s painting of a Muslim woman holding a piglet is no doubt different from the disgust I feel in regard to British artist Tamany Baker’s constellations involving corpses of wild birds. Muslims are raised to believe that pigs are unclean and that one should keep one’s distance from pigs to be a good person. The disgust displayed by the Muslims in response to the painting was no doubt a moral emotion, whereas the disgust displayed by me in response to the constellations involving corpses of wild birds is aesthetic rather than moral. Even if we allow moral and aesthetic emotions to overlap, we are left without an explanation of what makes a moral emotion moral and what makes an aesthetic emotion aesthetic.

The second suggestion mentioned above was to distinguish between moral and aesthetic emotions on the basis of whether they play a normative role in social encounters. One could say that moral emotions are accompanied by normative attitudes, whereas aesthetic attitudes are not. On this view, a Muslim’s feeling of moral disgust toward a painting portraying a Muslim woman holding a piglet is accompanied by a belief that the painting should not have been created, whereas the feeling of aesthetic disgust toward a constellation of bird corpses is not accompanied by a belief of this sort.

Though this explanation of what a moral emotion is seems initially appealing, it ultimately fails, as it is viciously circular. Suppose Muslims believe that Maple’s painting should not have been created. This belief is equivalent to the belief that it was wrong for Maple to create the painting. For this belief to be true, the painting must trigger a moral emotion. But for an emotion to be moral, the Muslims must believe that it was wrong for Maple to create the painting. So we are moving around in a circle. We could plausibly explain the difference between moral and aesthetic discourse by referring to the function it serves, but we cannot explain the difference between moral and aesthetic emotions in this way.

A more plausible response to the problem focuses on what I noted earlier about the difference between moral and aesthetic emotions. Moral and aesthetic emotions have a different phenomenology. The reason for this is presumably that they represent different physiological changes to the body state. It is not surprising that each of our names of emotions covers a range of different but related emotions. ‘Disgust’, for example, does not refer to a single kind of perceptual state but to a whole range of different perceptual states that represent a variety of different physiological changes. Which physiological changes in the body state are associated with moral disgust versus aesthetic disgust is no doubt a question that would require empirical investigation. What matters here is that a moral state and an aesthetic state can be quite different despite being called by the same name in ordinary English.

Once we have a way of distinguishing moral and aesthetic emotions, we can make it a necessary condition on moral wrongness that it triggers a negative moral emotion. More precisely: it is morally wrong relative to a moral judge if and only if it triggers a negative moral emotion in the judge.8

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REFERENCES


