Moral Conflicts and Ethical Relativism*

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Our everyday and raw experience is of a conflict between moral requirements at every stage of almost anyone's life.

[STUART HAMPShIRE, Morality and Conflict]

It follows that the only rational way for the adherents of any tradition to approach intellectually, culturally, and linguistically alien rivals is one that allows for the possibility that in one or more areas the other may be rationally superior to it in respect precisely of that in the alien tradition which it cannot yet comprehend.

[ALASDAIR C. MACINTYRE, Whose Justice? Which Rationality?]

Many theories in the history of ethics have held that there cannot be genuinely irresolvable moral dilemmas, that is, an agent cannot be bound by two moral requirements, neither of which overrides the other in a morally relevant way. The major goal of a moral theory is to demonstrate how to resolve apparent conflicts.

Recently, a number of philosophers have challenged this standard view about moral conflicts and the role of ethical theory. Their claim is that the moral universe is more complicated than many theories acknowledge. The inevitability of conflicts is a moral datum that a theory must accommodate. "One of the gravest normative problems with which we must deal is the existence of deep and apparently irresolvable moral disagreements," says David Wong. "We must know how to act when no single side in a disagreement can show that it has the best arguments." 1

John Rawls says of his theory, "Justice as fairness tries to construct a conception of justice that takes deep and unresolvable differences on

* Though I cannot be sure I have satisfied all their queries, I am grateful for encouraging and thoughtful suggestions from Kenneth Winston, Ruth Barcan Marcus, two anonymous referees, and especially Terrance McConnell and David Wong, all of whom sent me detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper.


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matters of fundamental significance [religious, philosophical, moral notions, and doctrines] as a permanent condition of human life.” Irreconcilable yet reasonable disagreements on these significant doctrines are taken as a general fact which challenges attempts to reach political agreement. Some philosophers, including Bas van Fraassen, Ruth Marcus, and Bernard Williams, not only have endorsed some version of this alternative pluralist view that some conflicts are ineliminable but also have proposed arguments to rebut the traditional position that moral dilemmas are in principle morally resolvable. They recognize that we often do choose in cases of conflict but argue that given the moral symmetry the grounds of resolution cannot be moral.

In his book Morality and Conflict, Stuart Hampshire joins this group, claiming “there must always be moral conflicts which cannot, given the nature of morality, be resolved by any constant and generally acknowledged method of reasoning.” Apparently concerned to forestall a likely objection, he hastens to add that he is “not arguing for moral relativism” (p. 154). I wish to examine a question raised by Hampshire’s remarks that few have addressed: Must admitting the existence of genuinely irresolvable moral dilemmas commit one to an important or troublesome version of ethical relativism, or is the admission compatible with the denial of relativism, as Hampshire maintains?

My goal is to defend a reasonable pluralism that shows the compatibility of moral conflicts and objectivity in ethics. Although it may seem that admitting moral conflicts does lead to ethical relativism, I argue that Hampshire’s position is not logically precluded. I then examine Hampshire’s views on moral conflict, differentiate versions of relativism, and conclude that despite arguments to the contrary, there are interesting ways of defending Hampshire’s view that one can believe in the existence of irresolvable moral conflicts and not be an ethical relativist.

MORAL THEORY AND MORAL CONFLICTS

Most nonrelativistic theories in the history of ethics presuppose or imply that moral dilemmas are in principle resolvable. This might be taken as


Hampshire, p. 152; henceforth page references to Hampshire’s book will be given in parentheses in text.
supporting evidence for the contrapositive view that the existence of irresolvable moral conflicts leads to some form of relativism. Immanuel Kant said in *The Metaphysical Elements of Justice* that because “duty and obligation are in general concepts that express the objective practical necessity of certain actions... It follows, therefore, that a conflict of duties and obligations is inconceivable.” 5 More recently Kurt Baier endorsed a similar position, saying “when there are conflicts of interest, we always look for a ‘higher’ point of view, one from which such conflicts can be settled. ... By ‘the moral point of view’ we mean a point of view which furnishes a court of arbitration for conflicts of interest.” 6

Ethical egoism and classical act utilitarianism also provide paradigm illustrations of theories precluding irresolvable conflicts. The agent ought to do whatever uniquely maximizes self-interest or utility. 7 Mixed theories have even more potential for conflict, but it need not be irreducible. “Ethics always has to deal with the conflict between the personal standpoint of the individual and some requirement of impartiality,” says Thomas Nagel. “Since personal motives and impartiality can conflict, an ethical theory has to say something about how such conflicts are to be resolved.” 8 For philosophers on this side, the task of moral theory is to systematize moral thought and ultimately provide principles or rules for overcoming irreducible conflicts. Hence advocates of this position have been called reductionists or systematizers. 9

Hampshire believes the list of historical theories embracing the no-conflicts view is even more comprehensive. He cites Aristotle as a paradigm systematizer and adds Hume, Kant, Mill, Moore, Ross, Prichard, and Rawls as philosophers who agree with Aristotle that a morally competent and clear-headed person need not encounter irresoluble moral dilemmas. They believe such a person will have the means to resolve all moral problems, even if resolution by rational method is sometimes difficult. Hence, conflict is not unavoidable. While we may differ with Hampshire over names on his list, 10 he rightly emphasizes that many nonrelativist moral theories, both teleological and deontological, embrace the view that moral dilemmas are in principle morally resolvable.

7. This is a dominant interpretation I accept, though Marcus disagrees.
8. Thomas Nagel, “Moral Conflict and Political Legitimacy,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 16 (1987): 215–40, p. 215. Note that Nagel endorses pluralism in an earlier paper: “Conflicts between personal and impersonal claims are ubiquitous. They cannot, in my view, be resolved by subsuming either of the points of view under the other, or both under a third. ... There are true practical dilemmas that have no solution” (Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value,” in *Mortal Questions* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979]; reprinted in Gowans, ed.).
10. William Frankena argues, e.g., that Kant “is not free from the difficulties due to conflicts between duties; it seems possible, at any rate, that keeping a promise might on occasion prevent one from helping someone in trouble” (*Ethics* [Englewood Cliffs, N.J.]:

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It is worth noting further evidence for the contrapositive claim. Many of those who adopt the pluralist position on moral dilemmas show substantial sympathy for relativism. Bernard Williams, for example, believes there is truth in some versions of relativism.11 And Philippa Foot has replied to familiar objections to relativism, to establish it as a position to be taken seriously.12 Their sense is that absolutist theories according to which there is a single true moral principle or set of principles cannot account for deep irresolvable disagreements. Thus if there are such conflicts, absolutism is false and presumably some form of relativism is true.13

There are, moreover, two well-known logical arguments for the standard view that there can be no irresolvable moral conflicts.14 Defenders of such arguments might be inclined to conclude that there is some ultimate moral standard for resolving dilemmas and that, hence, relativism is false. We might wonder, then, whether rejection of those arguments requires adopting a relativist position. Replies that have been made to these arguments against irresolvable conflicts, however, do not presuppose or require relativism. One can, as Lemmon did, argue against the “ought” implies “can” principle, without being committed to the view that ought statements are relative to a culture or set of standards.15 Similarly, there can be relativized and nonrelativized versions of deontic axioms and principles; their denial need not imply any obvious sorts of relativism. Van Fraasen, for example, defends a version of command theory. And Ruth Marcus has made the point (which has nothing to do with deontic operators) that conflicts which arise due to contingent facts do not imply that ethical principles are inconsistent, given the most familiar definitions...
of consistency, even though she claims that conflicts will arise under one set of shared principles.\textsuperscript{16} It is thus logically possible for Hampshire and other pluralists to maintain that there are irresolvable moral dilemmas without defending relativism.

Most literature on moral conflicts has focused on single-agent dilemmas, where one person ought to do each of two acts but cannot do both. I believe this is the type of case discussed by Williams, van Fraassen, and Wong, and it is the sort of dilemma that egoism and act utilitarianism are praised for avoiding. By contrast, interpersonal moral conflicts, distinguished by Ruth Marcus, Terrance McConnell, and others, are those where each of two (or more) agents has a moral requirement the successful completion of which prevents the other agent from discharging his or her obligation. Interpersonal conflicts may take either of two forms: (a) those generated when each of the agents accepts the same theory and (b) those arising when the agents are operating from different moral perspectives or frameworks or incompatible theories. Rawls's pluralism appears to refer not only to single-agent dilemmas but to interpersonal conflicts as well. My focus is on single-agent dilemmas. They have been taken to cause more serious problems for moral theory than interpersonal conflicts, which must be pervasive given the multitude of moral agents and the frequency of their interaction.\textsuperscript{17} Nevertheless, I suggest in the conclusion how my arguments might be affected by considering interpersonal conflicts.

Hampshire on Conflicts

To defend his view on conflict and morality, Hampshire relies not on responses to logical arguments but rather on experience from history and anthropology. He describes rich variations in cultures and great diversity in family and kinship structures, in sexual customs, in admired virtues, in attitudes between youth and elders, and in the relations between the sexes. He believes this multiplicity of coherent ways of life is a species-wide feature of human nature. Hampshire does not link his emphasis on cultural diversity with relativism but claims that it forces us to take the existence of moral conflict seriously. Recognizing the wide diversity in these ideals, Hampshire believes, makes the traditional presupposition of harmony between moral requirements questionable. Indeed, he believes our capacity to conceive of diversity is the origin of both our capacity to envisage conflicts of norms and of those moral conflicts themselves.

It is not merely that there are as a matter of fact different ways of life, but also that "moral duties and obligations present themselves as conflicts" (p. 157). Morality has its sources in conflict; there is no rational

\textsuperscript{16} Marcus.

\textsuperscript{17} Terrance McConnell brought this distinction to my attention, and I owe the foregoing description to him. See \textit{Interpersonal Moral Conflicts}, \textit{American Philosophical Quarterly} 25 (1988): 25–35.
path or assured solution. Appeal to universal values or alleged constancies of human nature will not resolve the moral conflicts we experience.

Hampshire is unconvinced by claims that such conflicts are superficial or signs of muddled thinking. Nor is he satisfied with the Aristotelian view that when confronted with conflict “the morally instructed, or wise, person strikes the right balance between conflicting interests and moral requirements at the moment of decision. With good judgment, taste and discretion, the resolution of conflicts can be found by a right ordering of the contrary tendencies in human nature” (pp. 140–41). His claim is that any universals in human nature, if they exist, will always underdetermine priorities and will be overlaid by specific diverse moral requirements.

Hampshire appears to distinguish two sorts of moral conflict, both related to single-agent dilemmas. We recognize abstract and timeless ideals which are natural and universal and generate duties we think we cannot neglect as human beings. But we also hold more local ideals from tradition or convention, giving rise to moral requirements that vary, duties that are alterable and transient. Nature and convention, the two sources of these moral ideals, compete. Similarly, the moral standards or principles arising from them, and thus our moral duties, conflict.18

Second, there is the pervasive conflict created by moral choice. When a moral or political choice is made, there are always ethical costs. Utilizing alternative forms of justice, Hampshire illustrates the conflict one confronts in choosing between seemingly equivalent options, thereby losing meaningful alternatives. In more personal situations, the agent will normally “feel that the choice has killed, or repressed, some part of him” (p. 155).

In either case, teleological theory is impossible on Hampshire’s view. There can be no “best” way of life or “best” choice. Often there is no fully rational answer; hence those moral claims are not to be accepted as valid for all mankind. Hampshire believes the rival picture—that in cases of conflict one can finally be shown to be the correct conception and the other incorrect—is just plain false.

In his most stinging indictment, Hampshire charges: “Whether it is Aristotelian, Kantian, Humean, or utilitarian, moral philosophy can do harm when it implies that there ought to be, and that there can be,

18. Although Hampshire does not present this in argument form, Bernard Williams has given a positive argument in defense of irresolvable conflicts which reflects Hampshire’s comments. He claims, first, that when general values are incommensurable, then there will be cases of conflicting claims of these values which cannot be resolved by appeal to further values. Second, there are incommensurable values, such as liberty and equality; hence he concludes that there are cases of irresolvable moral conflicts. Williams accepts this basic argument that incommensurable values generate irresolvable conflicts of obligation. Williams, “Conflicts of Values,” pp. 77–80. Compare Nagel, “The Fragmentation of Value.” Systematizers, even if willing to accept the second premise, would deny the first. See Walter Sinott-Armstrong, “Moral Dilemmas and Incomparability,” American Philosophical Quarterly 22 (1985): 321–29, and his Moral Dilemmas (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988) for a comprehensive discussion of these and other arguments.
fundamental agreement on, or even convergence in, moral ideals—the harm is that the reality of conflict, both within individuals and within societies, is disguised by the myth of humanity as a consistent moral unit across time and space. There is a false blandness in the myth, an aversion from reality” (p. 155).

CONFLICTS AND RELATIVISM

Despite these harsh claims, Hampshire repeatedly states that he is not arguing for any type of ethical relativism. His vehemence suggests he shares the common fear that embracing relativism will lead to the worst form of moral weakness or to incoherence. Hampshire is clearly concerned in particular that endorsing the view that there are irresolvable moral conflicts will commit him to some sort of moral relativism. But just what sort? And how does he propose to avoid relativism as an implication of his views on diversity and moral conflicts?

In general terms, admitting moral dilemmas undermines belief in convergence on important ethical principles, so that a variety of relativist doctrines always seem to be genuine possibilities. More specifically, Hampshire might have in mind the following argument which concludes that he is blatantly wrong and cannot avoid relativism as he had hoped. Many have agreed with Fred Feldman that “absolutism is the view that there is one criterion of morality valid for all people at all times, . . . it is the view that there is a single ultimate moral standard.”19 This is a strong statement, yet it captures the sort of absolutism associated with Kant and the utilitarians which Hampshire rejects. Consequently, if this is what is meant by ethical absolutism, and if by denying absolutism one is defending ethical relativism, then it seems clear that Hampshire is defending relativism of some sort, despite his claims to the contrary. I believe moral philosophers have often found this sort of argument compelling, that irresolvable moral dilemmas show there cannot be a single true morality and hence relativism must be true. The issue is not that clear cut, however. There are many versions of ethical relativism and absolutism, and other ambiguities to be sorted out before we can determine the relationship between relativism and moral conflicts.

Consider first Hampshire’s comments on cultural diversity. They do give evidence for what Richard Brandt and others have called “descriptive relativism,” the view that there is, as a matter of fact, a diversity of conflicting values or ethical principles, and that ethical disagreements usually follow cultural lines (cultural relativism). Hampshire’s statements on the depth and pervasiveness of conflict may even support Paul Taylor’s stronger version of descriptive relativism, that “as a matter of historical or sociological fact, no moral standard or rule of conduct has been universally recognized to be the basis of moral obligation,” although it is

unclear that Hampshire must concur with Taylor that "according to the descriptive relativist there are no moral norms common to all cultures."  

Writers on relativism agree that, without this thesis, other versions of relativism would be of little interest. Nevertheless, cultural relativism is merely a statement about how the world is and, as a descriptive thesis, is not properly a version of ethical relativism. Thus to whatever extent Hampshire's remarks support descriptive relativism, they do not provide a complete or automatic defense of ethical relativism.

Moreover, it does not seem to me that Hampshire is either endorsing or rejecting what has been referred to as "normative relativism," the view that "a person ought to act in conformity with the moral standards of his group." 21 that what is right for one individual or society may not be right for another, and thus norms are to be considered valid only within the group or society adopting them. Except to note that moral principles can be binding even if they are not universally valid, Hampshire does not appear to address the scope of the validity of norms. Neither does he make any claims about how one should act, nor does he answer the question about how a stranger ought to act in a strange society. He remarks that a stranger in a new place can either hold old ways or adopt new ones but cannot satisfy both (p. 147), yet there is nothing particularly remarkable in that claim. Moreover, a cultural relativist is not logically committed to any form of normative relativism. 22

Hampshire's worry that he will be accused of defending relativism may then focus on what is probably the most interesting relativist view, "metaethical relativism." According to Brandt, this thesis denies that there is always one correct moral evaluation and in that sense denies ethical truth, but metaethical relativists may differ on the reason why. They might deny that there is any method of ethical reasoning that can be justified, or they might agree that there is or could be such a method yet deny that in cases of conflict it could always show one position to be correct. Kenneth Winston has pointed out to me how striking it is that lack of method is taken to entail relativism. That follows, he suggests, only if one makes certain "positivist" assumptions. It is at least theoretically possible, as Ronald Dworkin has emphasized, that even if there is no method, one is still right or wrong.

William Frankena and Taylor describe metaethical relativism as the former of the above views, saying, respectively, that there is no objectively valid, rational way of justifying ethical judgments against one another, and that there is no method or set of rules of reasoning for gaining moral knowledge or for establishing the universal validity of norms.


22. Brandt, p. 77.
Now there is a straightforward way in which the view that there can be irresolvable moral conflicts appears to lead to metaethical relativism, posing a serious challenge to Hampshire. Suppose two incompatible actions are both obligatory, then one explanation is that there must be equally persuasive and decisive moral reasoning supporting both actions. Hampshire does not always see obligations as outcomes of moral reasoning alone, but would agree that what generates the conflict is that neither moral requirement outweighs the other. There is, apparently, no single “right answer” to the dilemma about what the agent ought morally to do. This view need not be denying ethical truth; the assertion may be that both moral requirements are true, but not jointly satisfiable. But there is no moral solution to the question of how the agent should choose, where it is open whether the reason for no solution is a lack of method or merely a very limited one. This helps explain why metaethical relativism is sometimes characterized by Brandt and Frankena as the view that two conflicting ethical judgments are equally valid, indicating that given irresolvable moral conflicts, metaethical relativism is inescapable.

There is a great deal of textual evidence that this is an accurate and clear interpretation of Hampshire’s views, hence that he is mistaken in his attempt to deny relativism. He says, “my claim [is] that there must always be moral conflicts which cannot, given the nature of morality, be resolved by any constant and generally acknowledged method of reasoning” (p. 152). He reiterates that there is “no rational path that leads from these conflicts to harmony and to an assured solution” (p. 152). And he concludes that his moral theory “asserts that moral conflicts are of their nature ineliminable and that there is no morally acceptable and overriding criterion, simple or double, to be appealed to, and no constant method of resolving conflicts” (p. 165).

Hampshire’s repeated claim that Aristotle was wrong to believe that in cases of conflict there was always a correct conception and his repeated denial of reasoning or method for resolving conflicts certainly sounds like a ringing endorsement of metaethical relativism. Setting up his theory in opposition to nonrelativists such as Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, and others only reinforces the interpretation that Hampshire has erred.

Although this is a strong argument, we would do well to attend to the ambiguity mentioned by Brandt yet often neglected in formulations of metaethical relativism. In Ethical Theory Brandt distinguishes the two versions of metaethical relativism more starkly. First, he describes a weaker thesis. “The ethical relativist asserts there are at least some instances of conflicting ethical opinions that are equally valid” in the sense that “application of a ‘rational’ method in ethics would support, equally, two conflicting ethical statements.”23 On this weaker view there is a unique rational method in ethics, but sometimes, even with ideally complete

data, it may leave us unable to decide between conflicting judgments. The second version of metaethical relativism, according to Brandt, is the view that “there is no unique rational method in ethics.” On his view, the former version, which he calls “relativism proper,” is less radical, more likely true, but it does not have “pervasive scope.” It is also more reasonable, he believes, and he cautiously accepts it.

Notice, however, that even the staunchest pluralists, such as Williams, need not believe that every conflict is without resolution. It is far more plausible to take the view that there are some such cases. Clearly the pluralist must then accept Brandt’s first version of metaethical relativism, since it is formulated so that it follows trivially from the view that there are irresolvable moral conflicts. Brandt hardly disputes this result: “Either there are conflicts of justified ethical judgment in certain conditions or there are not. If there are, then relativism is correct; if there are not, then relativism is mistaken.” Hampshire cannot avoid defending this weaker version of metaethical relativism, and his descriptions of cultural diversity work into an argument for it. It is not at all clear, however, that a pluralist must accept the more “radical” version. The stronger view might be true, but belief in the existence of some irresolvable moral dilemmas does not insure that it is.

It certainly makes a difference, then, what form of metaethical relativism we focus on and what form it is reasonable to attribute to Hampshire. It is worth comparing, then, how various commentators characterize it, whether or not they are relativists. Brandt believes the weaker version is more plausible and the “proper” version of relativism. Others disagree, however. Taylor is one of the few other writers to differentiate the versions of metaethical relativism, but he focuses on the stronger thesis. Frankena presents only one version, apparently a form of “radical” metaethical relativism, saying “there is no objectively valid, rational way of justifying one [ethical judgment] against another.” Philippa Foot is even more clear. She characterizes relativism as the view that no one set of opinions appears to have any more claim to truth than any other. All moral judgments are relative to some society or set of standards. “There is no absolutely true set of moral standards against which the standards of a group can be measured and judged correct or incorrect.” Similarly, Gilbert Harman argues that there are no objective moral truths that apply to all agents independently of the social conventions they have chosen to accept. Finally, John Ladd makes a spirited defense of the stronger form of metaethical relativism by criticizing weaker accounts

24. Ibid., p. 275.
25. Ibid., p. 284.
27. Philippa Foot, “Moral Relativism,” and the introduction to her essay in Kraus and Meiland, p. 149.
and characterizing relativism as the view that "there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times."

I have shown that many contemporary philosophers take the most interesting and meaningful version of metaethical relativism (whether they accept it or not) to be the strong form denying universal standards in ethics, which we might call "pure" relativism, rather than Brandt's preferred weaker version. This may be in part because some philosophers are inclined to define the most vulnerable version of the thesis they oppose. Because some of these writers have substantial sympathy for relativism, however, there may be a better reason. As noted, a defender of irresolvable moral dilemmas most plausibly believes there are some irresolvable dilemmas where conflicting moral requirements are genuinely binding but not morally satisfiable. It is compatible with this that in a range of other cases conflict is eliminable, and one can reason to the truth about how to act. Thus an advocate of moral conflicts need not deny there can sometimes or often be single solutions or moral right answers in ethics. Strong metaethical relativism says there is no nonrelative truth; moral judgments are always relative and can never be independent. But, I have argued, a defender of moral conflicts need not go so far and may only be committed to the metaethical thesis that sometimes a rational method cannot resolve a moral dilemma, where this does not preclude claims about moral truth. Brandt joins the friends of conflicts when he calls his weaker version of relativism a plausible and probably true view. It is certainly no embarrassment for pluralists to endorse the position; it is not only meaningful, but an interesting thesis as well. But given the more common use of the term, a defender of moral conflicts need not be labeled a relativist in the pure sense. Indeed the pluralist might even be an absolutist in Taylor's sense that "at least some moral norms are justifiable on grounds that can be established by a cross-cultural method of reasoning."

I suggest we might vindicate Hampshire along these lines, utilizing an argument he does not give. Despite his strong statements, he may only intend that whenever there is conflict there are no assured solutions, or that in some cases of conflict there is no method of reasoning which resolves those questions. It is unclear which is his view, but either one leaves it open to him to agree that there may sometimes be solutions and moral reasoning to generate them. His views on moral conflicts need not require that he endorse the "radical" relativism often thought to be objectionable, although they clearly require him to accept the weak form of metaethical relativism. Furthermore, it is then reasonable for him to deny that he is defending relativism, for he is defending a thesis that follows trivially from his views on moral conflicts, a position many commentators do not describe as "relativism."

It is extremely unclear whether either of the interpretations I have discussed is an accurate reading of Hampshire. Certainly there is a good deal of textual evidence for the straightforward argument showing he is mistaken to deny he is a relativist. The alternative I have worked out is more charitable, for I have shown how he can maintain his view that there are irresolvable moral conflicts and also be correct that he is not defending ethical relativism. I shall now offer further considerations that make it plausible to defend Hampshire’s view.

EVALUATING CONFLICTING CLAIMS

One reason it is difficult to interpret Hampshire is that his characterization of relativism is somewhat different from the other more standard versions we have discussed. In denying that he is defending relativism, Hampshire describes it variously as the view “that moralities cannot be compared and criticized” (p. 147) and “the thesis that ways of life, with their priorities among virtues and their dependent moral rules, are not subjects for moral judgment, because there is no independent ground from which they can be evaluated” (p. 154).

In contrast, Hampshire believes different ways of life ought to be evaluated and judged both (i) internally, to see whether or not they are incoherent in that they fail to satisfy and permit the purposes and virtues they purport to support and (ii) externally, because they “may lead to the destruction of life and to greater misery and degradation and to gross injustice, as Nazism did. These are always and everywhere considerations that count for evil” (pp. 154–55).

Hampshire is never clear how this external evaluation is to be made. He believes it is not irrational to use feeling to make such judgments because he believes one can perceive an act is wrong without being able to give a precise account why. But he is clear that “there are obvious limits set by common human needs” (p. 155) and that there are ethical universals such as human misery and gross injustice, which apparently ground these judgments.

Hampshire treads a narrow line here. He repeats that neither the requirements of justice and utility nor the requirements of reflective moral sentiment can be known a priori to be always and in all circumstances overriding, and he denies that there is a single criterion of human welfare or justice which can be used to judge moral claims as valid. Nevertheless, he “has admitted that we must always evaluate moral claims, and even a whole way of life, by reference to human welfare and justice as fairness” (p. 165). We can criticize moral claims and life-styles as cruel, oppressive, and grossly unjust, for example. In sum, he says his moral philosophy is one that “prescribes rational evaluation of moral claims and institutions and that in normal circumstances prescribes the rejection of moral claims and institutions which damage human welfare or which are unjust in their operation” (p. 165).
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It is difficult to sort all this out. My reading is that although Hampshire asserts that “there always will be, and ought to be, conflicts between moral requirements arising from universal requirements of utility and justice, and moral requirements that are based on specific loyalties and on conventions and customs” (p. 165), we are still required to evaluate competing customs and moral claims. Although utility and justice are universal moral requirements and standards, there is no single constant standard of morality based on these notions that will decide all cases. There will always be cases where they conflict, irresolvably, and sometimes local values can override injustice and human suffering which is not too great.

We have evidence, then, that Hampshire claims that there are moral universals and that we must use them to make cross-cultural evaluations, but there is no single ultimate moral standard that will always “win.” Nevertheless, even this much is compatible with at least two alternative views. Hampshire might believe (1) we must always judge and evaluate moral claims and ways of life, but due to inevitable conflicts we would err to expect answers. We should appeal to utility, justice, and our own feelings but should not think any judgment can ultimately be shown to be right or is in principle correct. Alternatively, Hampshire might believe (2) we must always undertake such evaluations, and there will be some cases of irreducible conflict, but there will also be cases where there can be right answers, as in a judgment that the Nazis were wrong. There are some cases beyond acceptable (though perhaps undefinable) limits, and so objectivity in ethics is not impossible.

It is hardly obvious what Hampshire intends. He often appears to endorse 1. My sense, however, is that he really believes 2. What the limits are, how bad injustice or misery need be to justify rejection of a moral claim or way of life is never clear. Nevertheless, it is clear, from the Nazi example and talk of limits, that on Hampshire’s view some such judgments can be made.31 If I am correct, then we have a second interesting way of seeing how Hampshire can believe in the irresolvability of moral conflicts and not be forced to pure relativism in the sense that there are no right answers, no cross-cultural moral standards or moral truths. It is also true, of course, that to the extent his view is that conflict is inevitable and

31. Ronald Dworkin argues that Hampshire has not refuted the stronger view “that genuine moral questions have, at least in principle, right answers; that in each situation of moral conflict one act or decision will be, all things considered, the right one.” Note first, I endorse a weaker interpretation of Hampshire, hence my 2 does not require resolution in principle of all conflicts. Second, Dworkin’s only defense of his explication is inadequate: “We would not sense the moral conflicts as conflicts unless we assumed that one decision is better than another even when we are uncertain which decision is better and know that either will have grave moral costs.” Nevertheless, Dworkin and I share the assessment that Hampshire does not completely reject an objective point of view in ethics; Ronald Dworkin, “The High Cost of Virtue,” New York Review of Books (October 24, 1985), pp. 37, 38.
pervasive, there is less room for him to be an antirelativist than he suggests in his discussion of cross-cultural evaluations.

CONCLUSIONS

Whatever account is most accurate as an interpretation of Hampshire, I have shown that he need not be seen as having made a gross faux pas but can be read as presenting a genuinely insightful view. More generally, I have described two interesting ways of defending the view that a pluralist need not be a relativist, that one who believes in irreducible moral conflicts need not reject the possibility of some moral right answers and objectivity in ethics. Straightforward arguments to the contrary and a common presumption that belief in moral conflicts leads to relativism can be rebutted.

When we admit that moral conflicts need not rule out objective values, our discussion becomes entwined with issues about realism in ethics. If moral realism is taken as the view that there are moral propositions whose nature is independent of our beliefs about right and wrong, then my arguments support Philippa Foot’s claim against Williams that the existence of irresolvable moral conflicts does not show that moral realism is false. Williams and others seem to believe in addition that conflict is evidence of inconsistency, and hence if conflicts are real then moral realism is vitiated. If Marcus is correct that conflicts are not evidence of inconsistency, then this is further evidence that they do not undermine realism.32

David Wong has described the main difficulty in explaining moral experience as “reconciling the features of experience suggesting that morality is objective with other features suggesting that it is subjective.”33 Given deep and irresolvable moral conflicts that are subjective data we must accommodate, then this discussion has suggested two fruitful ways of tackling that reconciliation of subjectivity and objectivity in ethics.

If I have been successful in showing that admitting the existence of single-agent moral conflicts need not commit one to relativism as the denial of nonrelative moral truths or cross-cultural evaluations, then it seems to me the argument is equally compelling for interpersonal conflicts generated by the same theory. Interpersonal conflicts generated by different

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33. Wong, Moral Relativity, p. 3. This book argued largely for the negative thesis that denies there is a set of valid criteria for determining a single true morality. More recently, he has developed the positive thesis that his version of a limited relativism is compatible with there being a set of criteria for the truth of moralities that apply universally; this thesis lends support to the view I defend here (David Wong, review of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, by Bernard Williams, Philosophy and Phenomenological Research [forthcoming], and “On Relativism, Flourishing, and Finding One’s Identity in Community” [manuscript, 1989]).
theories may be more complicated, however. Whether or not they commit one to ethical relativism depends, it seems, on the status that one assigns to the theories and the pervasiveness of such conflicts. If the theories are conflicting but both taken to be true, justified, and warranted, and conflicts abound, then it may be difficult to identify ethical universals. Nevertheless, there is nothing that theoretically precludes the existence of a perhaps limited core of moral principles common to the conflicting theories, allowing for fully justified moral right answers and universally valid norms.  

I have persisted in using the term “ethical relativism” as many commentators do, to describe the strong thesis that there are no universal principles for establishing moral truth. Past discussions of relativism have been hindered by the variety of meanings placed on the term, often with the implication that the meaning currently under discussion is the only serious candidate. But disputes about what deserves the name “relativism” seem fruitless. Hampshire, Williams, and others try to avoid the label, whereas Brandt and Wong do not; the labels tell us little about the extent to which they disagree. I have shown how Hampshire can legitimately deny that his view amounts to one important version of relativism. Given other uses of the term, however, it is not the only interesting version. My central goal has been to demonstrate interesting ways of defending a reasonable pluralism embracing both the reality of moral conflicts and the existence of moral truth, without sliding into the “pure” sort of strong relativism.

I have in the past endorsed the traditional view that moral conflicts are in principle resolvable. But I have come to believe that view is inadequate for explaining many personal, deeply moving, and tragic cases, including equivalent options such as those in William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*. I feel uncomfortable saying it is “morally permissible” for her to choose to sacrifice either child to the Nazis. And I am unwilling to say it is obligatory that she choose to hand over one or the other so that at least one child can be saved, as most reductionist theories imply. Following that conjunctive moral requirement, she cooperates in the murder of one of her children. Thus I find it a most welcome conclusion that admitting the irresolvability of such moral dilemmas need not force me to the sort of pure relativism I eschew.

34. McConnell has suggested in correspondence that if one takes the conflicting theories to be true and valid, then one may be committed to both dilemmas and relativism. But then, he points out, it is the endorsement of relativism that commits one to interpersonal dilemmas, not the other way around.

35. I have been influenced → Patricia Greenspan’s discussion of *Sophie’s Choice* in “Moral Dilemmas and Guilt,” *Philosophical Studies* 43 (1983): 117–25. One referee for *Ethics* disagreed that her tragic situation is a moral conflict, claiming that her moral duty is to refuse to collaborate with tyranny by making any choice at all. The moralist’s duty is to refuse to give potential tyrants the illusion that by making the threats to Sophie they in any way implicate her in what they do. I am not yet convinced Sophie’s sole moral duty is to refuse to choose.