MORAL AND METAETHICAL PLURALISM: 
UNITY IN VARIATION

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ABSTRACT: The most basic argument for moral relativism is that different people are (fundamentally) disposed to apply moral terms, such as ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’, and the corresponding concepts, to different (types of) acts. In this paper, I argue that the standard forms of moral relativism fail to account for certain instances of fundamental variation, namely, variation in metaethical intuitions, and I develop a form of relativism—pluralism—that does account for them. I identify two challenges that pluralism faces. To answer the challenges, I first argue that, due to fundamental conceptual variations in ordinary descriptive (nonmoral) discourse, a form of pluralism holds there as well and that this pluralism can answer the corresponding challenges. I then argue that the answers transfer to moral discourse, since the phenomenon of moral variation is structurally identical to that of descriptive variation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Different people are disposed to apply moral terms, such as ‘morally right’ and ‘morally wrong’, and the corresponding concepts, to different (types of) acts. This is the starting point of the perhaps most basic argument for moral relativism. According to moral relativism, a moral sentence—such as ‘lying is morally wrong’—can have different truth values when asserted by, or assessed by, different people. Likewise, the truth value of a moral belief—for example, the belief that lying is wrong—can vary depending on who believes it or assesses it.
Of course, it is not sufficient for this argument that people are disposed to apply moral terms and concepts differently. The difference in dispositions must be fundamental in the sense that people would not apply the relevant terms and concepts to the same acts, even if they believed the acts to have the same nonmoral characteristics, and even if their application were unaffected by distorting factors such as wishful thinking. Let us call this “fundamental variation.” If fundamental variation holds (which is controversial), one straightforward explanation of this is that moral relativism is correct: moral terms (and the corresponding concepts) have different extensions when different people use them.

In this paper I will present a form of moral relativism—pluralism—that differs from the standard forms (described further in section 2). In section 3, I outline pluralism and the way in which I take it to be preferable to the standard forms—that it accounts for more instances of fundamental variation. The view faces two related challenges, however. To answer the challenges, I first argue that a form of pluralism holds in ordinary descriptive (nonmoral) discourse as well, and that this pluralism can answer corresponding challenges (section 4). Then I argue that the answers transfer to moral discourse, since the phenomenon of moral variation is structurally identical to that of descriptive variation (section 5).

2. STANDARD FORMS OF MORAL RELATIVISM

Let me start by noting that I use ‘moral relativism’ to refer to any view according to which the truth values of moral sentences and beliefs vary depending either on the speaker/believer or the assessor. It thus covers both variants of “contextualism” (called “speaker relativism” below) and the more recent forms of relativism that I will call “assessor relativism” (for which the term ‘relativism’ is sometimes reserved).

As we have noted, the most basic motivation for standard forms of moral relativism is the fact that “fundamental variation” holds for moral discourse: people are, at a fundamental level, disposed to apply moral terms and concepts to different acts. More specifically, standard forms of moral relativism aim to capture the (putative) fact that each person tends to apply moral terms and concepts in accordance with her own moral standard, understood to consist of what we might call her moral likings, that is, a subset of her pro- and con-attitudes (goals, desires, motivations, etc.).

One very clear example is James Dreier’s (1990) speaker relativist view that moral terms function like indexicals, having as their standing meaning a character (in Kaplan’s sense) that is a function from the context of use to content. In the case of ‘morally wrong’, for example, the function picks out as
the referent the property disapproved of by the speaker’s moral standard.¹ What different people’s assertions and beliefs that, say, lying is wrong, have in common is not a specific content but that character.² If someone has a utilitarian standard, the content of her utterance of ‘lying is wrong’ and her corresponding belief is the proposition that lying does not maximize utility. People with different standards refer to different properties.

It seems that moral speaker relativism neatly accounts for “fundamental variation”: people apply moral terms and concepts differently, and would continue to do that even under more ideal circumstances, because moral terms and concepts have different extensions when used by different people. But it has been argued that it conflicts with another phenomenon. We typically respond to other people’s moral utterances and beliefs as if they are not context-dependent. Our responses are insensitive to the context of use. Compare the following two pairs of utterances. In the first, A, located in Australia, and S, in Sweden, say respectively (in January):

(1.1) It is summer here.
(1.2) It is not summer here.

In the second, K, the Kantian, and U, the utilitarian, say respectively:

(2.1) Lying is always morally wrong.
(2.2) Lying is not always morally wrong.

There are a number of related differences. First, if S wishes to report what A says (or the belief she expresses) she has to be sensitive to the context of use. Since she and A are in different places, she cannot report it as

(1.3) A says (believes) that it is summer here.

In contrast, U, who wishes to report what K said, need not worry about differences in contexts of use. Irrespective of K’s (and her own) moral standard, she can felicitously report it as

(2.3) K says (believes) that lying is always morally wrong.

Second, we intuitively apprehend (2.1) and (2.2) as being in conflict, as an expression of a disagreement between K and U (even if we know that they

¹ On Dreier’s view, the function is more complex, but this simplification suffices for the present purposes.
² It is controversial whether beliefs (and not only terms/sentences) have characters. On Kaplan’s (1989) view, a content can be believed under different characters, and different contents can be believed under the same character (see also Perry 1977). This is also how Dreier (1990) describes his speaker relativism, and I follow this line.
have different moral standards). Accordingly, U could felicitously respond to (2.1) as follows, making the disagreement explicit.

(2.4) No, that is not correct, lying is not always wrong.

In contrast, we do not perceive (1.1) and (1.2) as being in conflict and expressing a disagreement, since we know that they are uttered in different places; again, we are sensitive to contexts of use. Thus it would be misplaced for S to respond to A with

(1.4) No, that is not correct, it is not summer here.

Instead, one of the following would seem to be an appropriate response.

(1.5) Oh, is it? Here it is not summer.
(1.6) I know, but here it is not summer.

But the corresponding responses to (2.1) are just puzzling.

(2.5) Oh, is it? Lying is not always morally wrong.
(2.6) I know, but lying is not always morally wrong.

But they should not be puzzling if ‘morally wrong’ refers to different properties in the mouths of K and U respectively.

The differences between which responses seem appropriate in the case of sentences containing indexicals like ‘here’ and those containing moral expressions like ‘morally wrong’ can be summed up in terms of sensitivity to contexts of use. The proper responses to sentences containing indexicals are sensitive to the fact that the context of use (such as the location of the speaker in the case of ‘here’) helps determine the content. The proper responses to moral sentences are not sensitive to context of use (e.g., not sensitive to the moral standard of the speaker); when we report other people’s utterances of moral sentences, and when we experience and express disagreement with them, we respond as if what they refer to by, for example, ‘morally wrong’ is the same as that which we refer to by that expression, even if we know that the other has a different moral standard than we do. Call this phenomenon “insensitivity.”

On this ground, it has been argued that the context sensitivity of moral terms and concepts is different from that of ordinary indexicals (Brogaard 2008; Kölbel 2002, 2005). According to this suggestion, moral assertions and beliefs have the same content, irrespective of the asserter/believer, but the truth value

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3 Similar considerations about other types of expressions (e.g., epistemic modals and taste predicates) have motivated similar views about these expressions (Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson 2005; MacFarlane 2005, 2007; Lasersohn 2005).
of that content is relative to moral standards. Here, moral standards have the role of Kaplanian circumstances of evaluation (traditionally thought to consist of possible worlds) relative to which contents have truth values. When you say and believe that lying is morally wrong, what you say and believe is true relative to my standard if my standard disapproves of lying, and then it is correct for me to assess your belief as true. We can call this view assessor relativism.

This view is designed to account both for “fundamental variation” and “insensitivity.” The fact that people have different moral standards, and that each person asserts moral propositions that are true relative to her own standard, accounts for fundamental variation. The fact that it is correct to assess other people’s beliefs and assertions as correct if, and only if, their contents are true relative to one’s own moral standard accounts for insensitivity.

3. PRESENTING PLURALISM

Pluralism, the form of moral relativism that I will suggest in this paper, differs in two respects from the standard forms presented in the previous section. The first difference is motivated by the fact that there seem to be instances of fundamental variation that the standard forms do not explain. The fundamental variation used in arguments for standard forms of moral relativism concerns fundamentally different views regarding normative moral issues. Or put differently, that people have, or intuitively accept, different normative criteria for when actions are morally right and wrong, etc. But it also seems that people have fundamentally different metaethical views: they intuitively accept different metaethical criteria for when an action can count as being morally right or morally wrong, or as having any moral property at all.

One difference of this sort is of special interest in the present context. It is the difference between those who think that actions could be morally right or wrong in the absence of absolute moral properties or facts and those who do not. According to the standard forms of moral relativism presented above, moral properties and facts are relative, or nonabsolute, in the following sense: the truth and falsity of moral assertions and beliefs depend on relations between people’s moral likings (constituting their moral standards) and the acts in question. According to speaker relativism, whether my assertion of ‘lying is wrong’ is true depends on whether I morally dislike lying. According to assessor relativism, the truth of that assertion as assessed by you depends on whether you morally dislike lying.

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4 For purposes of simplicity, I bypass some differences between different forms of assessor relativism; see, e.g., MacFarlane 2009.
But some people intuitively think that if such relations between moral likings and acts are all there is, then there are no moral facts: no actions are morally right or wrong. According to such die-hard absolutists, if, for example, the claim that ‘torture is morally wrong’ is not true independently of their own (or anyone else’s) desires or goals, then it cannot be true at all. These people include error theorists, like Mackie (1977), Joyce (2001), and Olson (2011), but also some realist absolutists, such as Smith (1994), who are inclined to think that if it turns out that there are no absolute facts of the relevant kind, then there are no moral facts at all. But relativists like Dreier (1990, 2006), Finlay (2008), Harman (1996), Wong (1984), Kölbel (2002, 2005), and Brogaard (2008) are disposed to think that actions can be morally right and wrong even in the absence of absolute moral facts. This holds also for some realist absolutists, such as Jackson (1998), who are inclined to think that if it would turn out that absolute moral properties do not exist, then relative moral facts are the moral facts.

Both normative and metaethical variation are instances of different people being disposed to intuitively classify different types of actions as morally right (and wrong, etc). And, as far as I can see, there is no reason to think that while some intuitive differences in normative views are fundamental (and would thus survive full appreciation of nonmoral facts and rationality), intuitive differences in metaethical views (such as the difference above) are not. Indeed, the intuitions of absolutist and relativist metaethicists seem to converge in light of rational discussion just as little as the intuitions of normative ethicists. This gives us a prima facie reason to treat both types of variations alike; that is, if we take fundamental differences in normative views as evidence of relativity, we should also take this fundamental difference in metaethical views as evidence of relativity.

If we do, the result is this: the moral beliefs of those who are disposed to think of actions as morally right and wrong only if they have absolute moral properties are true only if the actions in question have absolute moral properties (and if there are no such properties, they are false, as error theorists have it). The moral beliefs of those who are inclined to classify actions as morally right and wrong even in the absence of absolute moral properties are made true by relative moral facts (facts about relations between moral likings and acts). In opposition to both standard forms of moral relativism and absolutism, this metaethical pluralist proposal challenges the assumption that a moral assertion or belief can be given the same metaethical analysis independently of who the asserter or believer is. This is as it should be, I believe, if we take arguments from fundamental variation seriously.

This takes us to the second difference from standard forms of moral relativism. On the view I propose, people’s metaethical commitments (and
moral standards) are not parameters of Kaplanian contexts of use or circumstances of evaluation. In my view, the most straightforward reason for taking fundamental variation as evidence of some kind of relativity goes back to the idea that, in general, people’s dispositions to classify (to apply terms and concepts) are evidence about (or even determine) the contents of the concepts and terms they use (at least if we abstract away from false background beliefs and distorting factors that might affect the application). Thus, if different people are fundamentally disposed to classify different acts as morally right and wrong, due to different (normative) moral standards and different metaethical intuitions, this is evidence that the contents of their moral assertions and beliefs are different. The root of relativity, on this view, is not some hidden indexical context-dependence or contents with standard relative truth values. Instead, it is that the contents (and characters) of concepts in general depend on how they are applied by competent users and that people go by fundamentally different (moral and metaethical) criteria when they classify actions as being morally wrong (or right, etc.).

On the resulting view, then, if two persons are fundamentally disposed to apply moral concepts and terms to different acts, due to having different moral standards or intuitively accepting different metaethical criteria, then their moral assertions and beliefs (e.g., ‘lying is wrong’) have different content. Admittedly, here I have merely outlined a defense of this view which has been developed elsewhere (Francén 2007, chs. 5–8). More must be said to establish that some metaethical disagreements are fundamental in the relevant sense and that, generally, the application of a concept, by competent possessors of the concept, is evidence about its content and extension. The latter idea is open to objections especially from externalism about content. Hopefully, however, the reasoning above suffices to give the view some initial plausibility and to present the ability to account for fundamental metaethical disagreements as a prima facie advantage. I will now turn to the task of elaborating the view in light of two related challenges.

Like speaker relativism, pluralism implies that different people’s moral judgments have different content, thus facing the challenge of explaining “insensitivity.” Moreover, it faces the more fundamental challenge from “unity.” Both assessor relativists and speaker relativists have answers to the

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5 Contents as I think of them are intensions: functions from possible worlds to extensions (for concepts and terms) or to truth-values (for beliefs and sentences). A difference in extension entails a difference in content, but the reverse does not hold.

6 Here I can only note that I take the cases that I discuss not to be of the kind where externalism most plausibly applies, since they are not cases where the people involved are disposed to defer to the use of experts, linguistic communities, or the nature of the natural kind that governs their use of the concept.
question of what makes a belief, say, the belief that lying is wrong: a specific content or character. Pluralism rejects both answers—two beliefs that lying is wrong may share neither content nor character. As it stands, then, it might seem that pluralism explains metaethical variation only at the cost of not accounting for the intuitive unity of moral beliefs.

In what follows, I develop the pluralist view so that it accounts for unity and argue that this also helps explain insensitivity. I proceed by first presenting a pluralist theory about a phenomenon of conceptual variation in ordinary descriptive (nonnormative) discourse, which I argue has the resources to answer the corresponding challenges. I then argue that the conceptual variation of moral discourse is structurally identical to, though in substantial respects different from, this phenomenon.

4. DESCRIPTIVE PLURALISM

4.1 Descriptive Fundamental Variation

Consider an ordinary descriptive concept, such as the concept of an apple. Most objects either uncontroversially are apples (e.g., ordinary exemplars of Cox Orange) or uncontroversially are not apples (e.g., ordinary horses). But unlike these central cases of apples (and non-apples) there are also peripheral cases. Imagine an object exactly like an ordinary apple except that it did not come from an apple tree but was created in a laboratory. Is this man-made, apple-like object (or ‘mapple’ for short) an apple? For such peripheral cases (or atypical exemplars), we can expect two things. First, that (at least some) people are less certain how to classify them. Second, that there is more divergence in how people classify them.

The general point is that for many concepts there are more or less central and peripheral cases. Here are a few other examples. Recently, I came across a picture of a prototype for a vehicle based on the same technology as Segways, with two wheels next to each other, but with a seat, a steering wheel, a roof, windows, and doors. When showing the picture to people, asking whether it is a car, I get different answers. But there are less extravagant examples. A chair-like object with a back that is only ten centimeters high—is that a chair or a stool? There are probably examples of buildings that are in between an ordinary house and an ordinary hut that people are differently disposed to classify as houses. The examples could be multiplied.

We should expect different people to apply terms and concepts differently in peripheral cases, because, regarding these cases, there has been little or no pressure from communicative interests to converge at a common classification.
Conceptual peripherality, as I understand it, can be characterized in relation to the communicative interests that generally make us converge at common classifications. First, some ways of categorizing are salient to us given our interests: for example, we have an interest in sorting out and communicating about edible things, so we have the concept of food. Second, there is a general pressure on each of us, stemming from communicational interests, to acquire dispositions to classify objects in the same ways as other people in one’s own community and to attach the same terms to the same classifications as others. This helps secure the function of descriptive communication, that is, to transfer information between people.

But in relation to many descriptive concepts, there will be cases such that (i) whether they are included or not in the extension of the concept has been of little or no significance to people (e.g., because they have not been sufficiently prevalent or interesting to sort out or communicate about) and (ii) their inclusion or exclusion cannot be automatically extrapolated from the cases for which inclusion/exclusion has been significant (often because they share many, but not all, of the relevant characteristics of the latter cases). For such cases there has been no pressure to converge in either counting them as falling under the concept or as not falling under it. This leaves room for different people to be disposed to classify these cases differently (and for people to lack determinate dispositions to classify them) without substantial loss in relation to the communicative purposes. For instance, it has not mattered to us whether mapples count as apples since we have had no need to communicate about them. Furthermore, they share many relevant characteristics with typical apples, but lack some.

Thus, we can expect different people to be fundamentally differently disposed to classify mapples and other peripheral cases. This, then, is evidence that different people have, and apply to these cases, concepts with different extensions and contents. That is, what governs their use of, for example, the term ‘apple’ are concepts with different extensions in peripheral cases. We can call this phenomenon “peripheral concept variation.”

Two qualifications: First, to the extent that we are inclined to think that deviant uses by individual speakers do not matter to conceptual content, the suggestion made here can be restricted to cases where there are two substantial groups of people, both with people intuitively being conceptually competent with the concept in question, with different uses. Second, since ‘apple’ is a candidate for a natural kind term, some philosophers might think that even

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7 I have previously argued that some intuitive philosophical disagreements can be explained as effects of peripheral concept variation. Specifically, I argued that this holds for the issue of whether “amoralists” have genuine moral opinions (2010a).
if some people are disposed to include things not belonging to that natural kind, this provides no evidence about the content of the concept. If so, we can focus on other examples mentioned above instead. To me, however, it seems perfectly intelligible that a group of people could use ‘apple’, not as a simple natural kind term, but to refer to objects of a natural kind and objects sufficiently similar to these.

4.2 Descriptive Unity and Insensitivity

It might be objected that the idea of peripheral concept variation is inconsistent with how we attribute beliefs and concepts. Imagine two people fundamentally differently disposed to classify mapples: P classifies them as apples, Q as non-apples. Discussing the possibility of such an object, M, they say, respectively:

(3.1) M would be an apple.

(3.2) M would not be an apple.

Intuitively, it seems appropriate to describe P as believing, and Q as disbelieving, that M is an apple. But if it is true that fundamental classificatory variation is evidence of conceptual variation, then the concepts that govern P’s and Q’s uses of ‘apple’—call them concept-P and concept-Q—have different contents. Consequently, the content of the belief that P expresses with (3.1)—call it belief-P—is not the same as the content of the disbelief that Q expresses with (3.2)—disbelief-Q. In other words, P and Q believe/disbelieve different propositions. If this is correct, it would seem that at most one of concept-P and concept-Q can be the concept of apples, and at most one of belief-P and disbelief-Q can be a belief/disbelief that M is an apple.

We have here a tension between two sorts of evidence. On the one hand, fundamental variation in classification is evidence of conceptual variation. On the other hand, our belief attributions (and the intuitions supporting these) suggest conceptual uniformity: for example, our intuitions that P and Q believe/disbelieve the same proposition—that M is an apple—indicate that P and Q have the same concept, namely, the concept of apples.

The tension is merely apparent, however. The intuition that P and Q believe/disbelieve that M is an apple is not necessarily an intuition that they believe/disbelieve the same proposition. The idea is that two beliefs in two different propositions can both intuitively count as beliefs that M is an apple, as long as the propositions are sufficiently similar. This also makes it misleading (in relation to our actual attributions of beliefs) to talk of the concept of apples—concept-P and concept-Q are concepts of apples, as long as their different contents are sufficiently similar.
More specifically, the idea is that when we attribute, for example, concepts of apples to people (and think of them as competent “apple-thinkers”), we require a specific extension in central cases of apples and non-apples (as indicated by their dispositions to classify these cases), but we tolerate differences in extension regarding peripheral cases. If someone is (fundamentally) disposed to include some clear cases of non-apples (she uses ‘apple’, say, about all kinds of fruit) or exclude some central cases of apples (e.g., using ‘apple’ only about green apples), we would not think of her as a (competent) possessor of a concept of apples (she is not a competent apple-thinker). Thus, when she (sincerely) says “there are long yellow apples that grow in bunches” we would not attribute to her the belief that there are such apples, but that there are such fruits. But classificatory deviances that concern only peripheral cases are different. I am, like P, disposed to classify mapples as apples. Yet, if someone else is disposed not to classify mapples as apples, I would not say that this disqualifies her from being a competent apple-thinker and possessing a concept of apples. When it comes to peripheral cases, it seems that we allow that people can classify differently without this being a reason to think of them as either being conceptually incompetent or as talking/thinking about something else.

To put the point more generally, for many concepts, and beliefs involving them, our dispositions to attribute them are not constrained by:

*Unique Content*: There is a content, C, such that S has the concept of F only if S has a concept with content C.

*Unique Proposition*: There is a proposition, p, such that S believes that x is F only if S believes p.

Rather, the relevant constraints are of the following kind.

*Set of Contents*: There is a set of contents, (C₁, . . ., Cₙ), such that S has a concept of F only if S has a concept with a content that is a member of (C₁, . . ., Cₙ).

*Set of Propositions*: There is a set of propositions, (p₁, . . ., pₙ), such that S believes that x is F only if S believes some member of (p₁, . . ., pₙ).

More specifically, concepts with different extensions in peripheral cases of Fs count as concepts of F as long as they have the right extension in the central cases of Fs (and non-Fs).

The resulting pluralist view has two parts. First, different people tend to classify peripheral cases differently and, therefore, have concepts with somewhat different contents. Second, concepts with contents such that their extensions differ only in peripheral cases count as concepts of the same things (since
this is how we are disposed to attribute concepts). For example, people who classify maples differently still count as speaking and having beliefs about apples and, thus, as having concepts of apples. Consequently, according to pluralism about apples, there is not one uniquely true answer as to whether maples are apples. Relative to some concepts of apples, they are; relative to other concepts of apples, they are not. (And none of the concepts is the uniquely correct concept of apples.)

The idea that concepts with peripherally different contents count as concepts of the same thing also helps explain insensitive responses to assertions (and beliefs) regarding peripheral cases. First, it intuitively seems appropriate for Q to report (3.1) with

\[(3.3) \ \text{P says (believes) that M is an apple.}\]

That (3.3) is an appropriate report, even if the proposition that P asserts with (3.1) is not the proposition that Q describes P as believing and asserting with (3.3), is directly explained by the idea that our attributions of apple-beliefs (and apple-assertions) ignore differences regarding peripheral cases.

Second, intuitively it also makes sense to apprehend (3.1) and (3.2) as being in conflict (as expressing a disagreement between P and Q) and thus for Q to respond to (3.1) with

\[(3.4) \ \text{No, that is not correct, M is not an apple.}\]

But if the proposition that P expresses acceptance of with (3.1) is distinct from the proposition that Q rejects with (3.2), it seems that it is not correct to think of them as disagreeing and that (3.4) is misplaced.

A first reply is that both P and Q count as having beliefs regarding whether M is an apple—one believing, and the other disbelieving, that it is. Thus construed, the two beliefs are correctly apprehended as conflicting regarding whether M is an apple. Furthermore, under one (correct) description of what P believes, which is indeed the intuitive description, Q will apprehend it as false. Intuitively, we represent P as believing that M is an apple. Relative to Q’s concept of apples, M is not an apple. Thus, using his own concept of apples to evaluate what P believes (under the intuitive representation)—that is, when evaluating it from an autocentric perspective—Q sees it as false. Consequently, when we apply our own concepts to the issues at stake in such conflicts, it can be expected that we will see the other party as believing or saying something false. (This also explains verbal expressions of disagreement such as ‘no’ or ‘that is not correct’.)

This explanation is not sufficient, however. Pluralism implies that different people’s concepts of, for example, apples can have different content. Thus,
when other people’s beliefs (as intuitively represented) are evaluated from an *exocentric perspective*, the following holds: that $M$ is an apple is true relative to some people’s concepts of apples, but false relative to others. When different people believe (or disbelieve) that $M$ is an apple, they may believe (or disbelieve) different propositions such that, when one person believes and another disbelieves that $M$ is an apple, both might be true. If pluralism is true, this should affect our intuitions about the relevant disagreements.

Here, however, we must be clear about what there is to explain, that is, the evidence at hand. There is not a universally shared and stable experience that disputes about peripheral cases are disagreements in the sense that one of the parties must be wrong. Sometimes, though not always, we intuitively experience them as mere terminological disputes. When involved in a discussion about, say, whether mapples are apples, or whether the Segway-vehicle is a car, we will sometimes, at least on reflection, be inclined to see these as just different ways of classifying (or of using the term or concept), where the other person’s classification does not signal incompetence with the concept in question. We might conclude that we simply mean somewhat different things or count somewhat different things as apples or cars. Pluralism can explain this pattern of intuitions about disagreement regarding peripheral cases, since it implies that we can perceive moral conflicts both from either an autocentric or an exocentric perspective.

Furthermore, to the extent that we sometimes intuitively perceive peripheral conflicts only as genuine conflicts where at least one of the participants must believe something false, there is a plausible explanation. For most cases (the central cases) in relation to each descriptive concept, it holds that if something is a disagreement from an autocentric perspective, it is also a disagreement from an exocentric perspective (where at least one proposition believed must be false). Since our concept attributions require sameness of extension in central cases, it holds for these cases that, if I believe that $x$ is $F$, and $P$ believes that $x$ is not $F$, then either the proposition believed by me or the proposition believed by $P$ is false. Since this is so in central cases, we can expect this to be our default assumption: when one believes that $x$ is $F$ and ascribes to $P$ the belief that $x$ is not $F$—thus seeing $P$ as believing something false from the autocentric perspective—it takes some effort to recognize that, as seen from the exocentric perspective, both beliefs can be true.

To sum up, pluralism seems to have the ability to explain both why we think of people who have descriptive concepts with peripherally different
contents as having concepts of the same things (unity), and why we respond to people’s assertions and beliefs in ways that are insensitive to differences in contents (insensitivity).

5. MORAL AND METAETHICAL PLURALISM

The suggestion, now, is that we understand moral relativity—both normative and metaethical—as being structurally identical to the phenomenon of peripheral concept variation for descriptive concepts, though they are different in substantial details. The basic idea, then, is this: First, the fact that there are fundamental differences regarding which acts different people are disposed to classify as morally wrong (and morally right, etc.) indicates that they have moral concepts (and beliefs) with different content. Second, since we are disposed to attribute moral wrongness-beliefs to people whose concepts have different contents, the concepts with different contents still count as concepts of moral wrongness, and the beliefs count as beliefs about moral wrongness. Let us now describe this view in more detail. I will start by focusing on fundamental variation in normative views, then return to metaethical variation.

One difference from the descriptive domains is that, regarding moral (and other normative) issues, interpersonal fundamental classificatory differences are not restricted to peripheral cases. Perhaps most people share some fundamental moral values. But for many acts that are in the focus of moral communication and debate and that are widely perceived as clear cases of morally wrong acts, there are some people (often substantial minorities) who deny this. But in the present context, another, though related, difference is more important than that regarding the actual extent of disagreement. It is that we tend to attribute moral beliefs to people with radically different ideas about which actions are morally right and wrong. In contrast to conceptual variation regarding descriptive concepts, it seems that we do not even require sameness in extension in central cases of, say, moral wrongness in order to attribute concepts of moral wrongness (and competence as moral wrongness-thinkers) to two different persons—their dispositions to classify in terms of wrongness can fundamentally differ even in central cases.

What, then, if not a specific extension in central cases, makes people count as having wrongness-beliefs and concepts of wrongness? The answer starts with the idea that the function of moral discourse is practical rather than descriptive and a view about attributions of moral judgments that some philosophers have based on this (versions of the idea are found in, e.g., Tersman 2006, Tresan 2009, Blackburn 1998, Gibbard 1990). Roughly, the
idea is that we are interested in ascribing moral judgments to keep track of people as potential cooperators. Consequently, we are interested in which (types of) acts we can suppose that they are ready to perform and which (types of) acts that they are ready to encourage or punish if others (including ourselves) perform or show signs of wanting to perform. Consequently, we will attribute (identify and individuate) moral beliefs roughly based on the moral pro- and con-attitudes of people. This does not mean that we always check for signs of people having pro- and con-attitudes (other than their utterances of moral sentences); we normally expect someone who in a sincere manner asserts moral sentences to have such attitudes. But it does mean that we are not interested in the exact descriptive content of the belief; that is, we do not attribute moral wrongness-beliefs or the concept of moral wrongness to someone (primarily) based on which acts she is disposed to classify as morally wrong. Even if two persons are fundamentally disposed to classify acts very differently in terms of moral wrongness, we can still think of them as competent possessors of the concept of wrongness.

It is often noticed, however, that there are some limits concerning how far someone can (be disposed to) deviate when applying a term such as ‘morally wrong’ without being disqualified from using it to talk about, and express beliefs about, moral wrongness. We would, for example, hardly say that someone who never uses ‘morally wrong’ about actions but only about, say, stones uses the term to talk about, and express beliefs about, moral wrongness. According to another, perhaps more controversial, kind of constraint, moral concepts, such as concepts of moral wrongness and moral rightness, must divide actions based on whether they somehow contribute to social goals such as the well-being of other people (Dreier 1990, Foot 1958, Smith 1994, Tersman 2006).

What is clear, however, is that these constraints regarding the content of beliefs about moral wrongness leave open for large (fundamental) differences regarding which actions different competent wrongness-thinkers classify as morally wrong. And given that such differences affect the extensions and contents of the concepts, this means that different people’s concepts of moral wrongness can and will have different contents.

I will not here attempt to state exact conditions for our attributions of moral beliefs or concepts. The matter is complicated by the fact that the concept of moral belief—or more specifically, the concept of a belief that an act is morally wrong—is a descriptive concept of which there are more or less peripheral instances (in line with the idea in the previous section). Central cases of moral beliefs are beliefs where the believer is motivated to act in accordance; experiences typical moral emotions such as guilt and indignation; is ready to argue and provide grounds for the belief; bases the judgment
on whether the act in question somehow contributes to social goals; and is ready to generalize the judgment to acts with relevantly similar characteristics. (There are probably more typical features.) Beliefs that accord with all such typical features are uncontroversial cases of moral beliefs. In peripheral cases, that is, cases of beliefs that display many but not all features, we can expect that some people, but not all, will be prepared to attribute moral beliefs (that is, to classify the beliefs in questions as, for example, beliefs that an act is morally wrong). I have previously argued that this is so for amoralist cases—where most features typical to moral beliefs are displayed, but the believer is not motivated to act accordingly. That these are peripheral cases of moral beliefs might explain why some people are ready to classify them as moral beliefs while other are not, and the conclusion to draw might be that amoralists have moral beliefs according to some concepts of moral beliefs but not according to others (Francén 2010a). Similar considerations might hold for some of the other features.

What matters here, however, is that even if we stick to beliefs that display all of the typical features of, for example, beliefs that lying is wrong, this class of beliefs will include beliefs with different contents, since there is a fundamental difference between which acts different people classify as morally wrong. Thus, concepts with different contents can count as concepts of moral wrongness, and beliefs in different propositions can count as beliefs that lying is morally wrong. This accounts for unity.

Now, how does this view explain insensitive responses to moral assertions and beliefs? Return to the assertions of K (the Kantian) and U (the Utilitarian).

(2.1) Lying is always morally wrong.

(2.2) Lying is not always morally wrong.

As we observed in section 2, it intuitively makes sense for U to describe K as saying and believing that lying is always morally wrong. On the view I am suggesting now, this makes sense even if their concepts of moral wrongness have different contents, since our attributions of moral beliefs about moral wrongness (and rightness, etc.) are based on practical role rather than belief-content. This explains the appropriateness of attributing moral beliefs in a context-insensitive manner.

It also explains why we experience (2.1) and (2.2) as expressing a disagreement between K and U, even though there need not be any propositions the truth of which they disagree about. They both count as talking and having beliefs about whether lying is always wrong—one accepting and the other rejecting that it is. In this sense, they have different views about whether lying
is always wrong. Also, when U evaluates what K says—that lying is always wrong—using his own concept of moral wrongness (i.e., when he evaluates it from an autocentric perspective), he accurately deems it false.

However, as with peripheral descriptive disagreement, this does not yet establish that the pluralist theory itself accounts for our disagreement intuitions. If pluralism is true, there is also, contrary to prevalent intuitive perceptions of moral disagreements, an exocentric perspective from which one can see that different people’s concepts of moral wrongness have different contents and, thus, that both parties of apparent moral disagreements can be right.9 This can be explained, however. As we have noticed, an important part of the function of moral discourse is practical: moral thought and language allows us to approach interpersonal conflicts in a way that makes it easier to cooperate and coordinate our behavior. They offer a way in which we can lift our perspective above simple clashes of individual interests. For moral judgments to have this role, it is important that we do not think of the truth of our own and other people’s moral judgments as depending on the judge’s own subjective desires, values, or classifications. If we did, we would be back in the simple clashes. The experience that there are, in some sense, ends that are independent of our individual interests and that we could come to agree about, thus helps moral judgments play the practical role. This means that we typically will tend not to experience K as saying and believing something that is true relative to her way of classifying, and U as saying and believing something that is true relative to her way of classifying.

In other words, we will tend to assume that moral conflicts are like conflicts over central cases of ordinary descriptive (objective) matters. As noted earlier, for these cases it holds that if something is a conflict from an autocentric perspective, it is also a conflict (where at least one must be wrong) from an exocentric perspective. There has been a general pressure to experience moral conflicts as if this assumption holds here as well, even if it does not; that is, there is a pressure to conclude from the fact that it is correct to attribute to my opponent the belief that x is wrong, while I myself believe that x is not wrong, that one of our beliefs must be false.

However, we should also keep in mind that just as with conflicts over peripheral descriptive matters, the intuition that the disagreements in question are genuine is hardly universal. It is not an uncommon response to moral

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9 I have previously argued on similar grounds that assessor relativism does not by itself explain disagreement intuitions: If assessor relativism is correct, the parties involved in the conflict might agree about the truth-value of the disputed proposition relative to every context of evaluation (Francén 2010b). Thus, assessor relativists also need an explanation, like that given below, of why this is not how we experience moral disagreements. If this is correct, assessor relativism is not preferable to pluralism on grounds of disagreement intuitions.
disputes that both parties can be right in relation to their own values. (For empirical evidence of both kinds of responses, see Goodwin and Darley 2008; Wright, Grandjean, and McWhite, forthcoming.) This is what to expect if pluralism is correct, since it implies that from an exocentric perspective fundamental moral disputes are not genuine disagreements.

With the idea that moral beliefs and concepts are attributed (roughly) based on their practical role rather than on their content or character, pluralism thus offers an explanation of unity (what it is that unites different people’s beliefs that, say, lying is morally wrong) and insensitivity (that our responses to other people’s moral beliefs are insensitive to their moral standards—to the extent that this is so). And this explanation works just as well for conceptual relativity that results from fundamental metaethical variation as it does for that which results from fundamental normative variation. That is, it works even if different metaethical analyses are correct for different people’s moral beliefs and assertions. Two beliefs that are to be analyzed differently—for example, one as being about absolute moral facts and the other not—can still in one sense be beliefs about the same thing, for example, beliefs that lying is morally wrong. They can because we identify two beliefs as moral beliefs (or more specifically, moral wrongness-beliefs) as long as they display typical features of the sort discussed above, and it is not part of those features that a specific content or character is required.

If this is correct, the view I have sketched—moral and metaethical pluralism—combines the ability to explain a wider range of fundamental variation than standard forms of moral relativism—metaethical as well as normative moral variation—with the ability to account for unity and insensitivity.

REFERENCES


