EARNING THE RIGHT TO REALISM
OR RELATIVISM IN ETHICS

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For some twenty hundred years, the disjunction between realism and relativism has had Philosophy in its grip. It may be that we simply can't prove either realism or relativism, at least not if that means keeping to the high standard of providing a proof that could not possibly be regarded as question-begging by the other side.

Consider, for example, the following argument against relativism, which is likely to get raised early on in any discussion of the issue. The argument points out that we cannot state that all truths are relative without making the statement itself an exception, thereby repudiating relativism and supporting realism after all. The thought behind this argument seems to be the following one: unless we intend our statement of relativism to be true in the realist sense, we will have failed to express the fact that relativism stands opposed to realism. Prima facie, the thought seems a good one. But before we draw a realist conclusion, we need to view the thought from the relativist's perspective. The relativist will insist that the statement of her thesis should not be interpreted along realist lines, on the ground that doing so would beg the question against her. Apparently, the only way not to beg the question here is to allow that the statement of relativism itself is only relatively true. The realist may try to turn this allowance against relativism, by pointing out that it leaves us free, even by the relativist's lights, to re-assert realism. But a determined relativist can grant this point without regarding herself as refuted. By her lights, the realist's assertion of realism is only relatively true and, so, can hardly serve to rule out relativism. In response, the realist may echo the response that the relativist had earlier made to her, and insist that her statement of realism should not be interpreted along relativist lines—on the ground that doing so would just as clearly beg the question against her as she had earlier done against the relativist. And so on and on.

If these are the only terms in which we can argue about realism vs. relativism, the issue begins to look like a stand-off in which everyone must ultimately beg the question. Realists may want to point out that their position
accords better with a classically conceived logic and with ordinary discourse. But it doesn’t follow that they have more right to beg the question on their side. For, insofar as relativists can successfully beg the question on the other side, it is fair to ask that realists do more in order to earn the right to realism than just claim default status.

My aim in this paper is to explore the prospects of earning the right to realism or relativism in the ethical domain, insofar as reasons can be offered on either side that, though they do beg the question, don’t merely beg the question. In section 1 I’ll develop a positive conception of realism that I think is especially well suited to the ethical domain. The heart of this conception is a certain realist ideal, according to which there is a single and complete body of truths. I’ll be arguing that this ideal constitutes the single most basic dividing point between realists and relativists. Regardless of how else they might want to characterize their respective positions and differences, realists are bound to embrace, while relativists are bound to reject, this realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths. If nothing else, identifying this basic dividing issue should help to clarify the terms of debate. But I will show that the realist ideal also points the way to a pragmatic conception of realism. So conceived, realism is a practical stance that we can bring to bear in inquiry. What makes this an essentially realist stance within an essentially realist project of inquiry is precisely that it is guided by the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths. What I’m proposing, then, is this: that we frame the issue of realism vs. relativism in ethics in terms of the feasibility and point of this realist ideal, which would motivate a form of ethical inquiry that ethical relativists are fundamentally committed to rejecting. I’ll elaborate and defend this proposal in section 1.

My proposal has the effect of transposing the metaphysical issue about realism into one that is also practical, more an issue about how inquirers should proceed, and less about the nature of reality and whether it is or is not epistemically constrained. As I see it, this transposition represents the best hope for realism in ethics. But I’m sure that many philosophers will disagree because, in their view, no position deserves to be called “realist” unless it provides for a conception of the world as it is in itself, independently of how we might take it to be. Bernard Williams calls this the “absolute conception of reality,” Thomas Nagel calls it “the view from nowhere,” and it is often called “metaphysical realism.” On the metaphysical realist view, beliefs and judgments are true just in case they capture the ways things really are—that is, just in case they ‘correspond’ to the mind-independent facts. From this metaphysical realist perspective, no view deserves to be counted as a realist view unless it provides a positive account of these “truth-makers.”

Let me briefly indicate at the start some of the reasons why I’m going to set aside the doctrine of metaphysical realism.

It is well known that the doctrine invites skepticism. Frankly, I don’t see any point in going to the trouble of earning the right to realism in ethics if skepticism is the destination.
Not all metaphysical realists are skeptics. The best example we have of an attempt to earn the right to metaphysical realism without skepticism is scientific realism. And some ethical theorists propose to model ethical realism on scientific realism. This approach deserves a full discussion that I hope to provide elsewhere. For the purposes of this paper, I'm going to set it aside on the basis of a difficulty that Mackie has raised. He points out that ethical realists would first have to posit mind-independent evaluative facts—which he calls "funny" facts. And, then, they would have to face the problem of explaining how we could possibly be in epistemic touch with them. We are able to do this in the case of science because the sort of mind-independent facts that science deals with are not "funny." They are physical facts that were initially introduced in the context of the theory of perception, in order to explain various aspects of perceptual appearances. All we have to do in order to explain how we are in epistemic touch with these physical facts is run the same explanation backwards: it is first via perception and, ultimately, via scientific theorizing, that we are in epistemic touch with them. But there is nothing comparable in the domain of ethics. Even if there are things that we might be inclined to call ethical appearances, there is no perceptual apparatus like vision or hearing or touch by which we are put into causal and epistemic touch with them. Because this is so, we have no explanatory framework that would allow us to see ethical appearances as systematic reflections of how things are in themselves, ethically speaking—at least, not if we have in mind something analogous to what we have in the case of sense perception. This is one of the main grounds on which Mackie rejects ethical realism altogether. But we needn't go so far as that. We can conclude more cautiously that scientific realism is a poor model for ethical realism.

It stands to reason that scientific realism is a poor model for ethical realism. After all, the aims of ethics are very different from the aims of science. While the aims of science are explanatory, the aims of ethics are evaluative. What one wants from an ethical theory is some sort of guidance concerning how one ought to conduct oneself, especially in relation to other people and, more broadly, in relation to anything that has a point of view from which it could be said to matter how we treat it. These different aims bring in train different approaches to the task of theoretical justification. In accordance with the explanatory aims of science, the task of justification there is primarily one of establishing the explanatory adequacy of a given theory with respect to various empirical data that stand in need of such explanation, where this task is closely associated with correct prediction. In contrast, ethical theories tend to look for "foundations" of certain ethical values. Although it could be said that these foundations "explain" why certain ethical values ought to be given priority in our lives, it is a quite different sense of explanation than we find in science. The task is not to predict or otherwise account for empirical data but, rather, to justify certain reasons for action, often in the form of a normative ideal of which our actions fall short.
The favorite candidates for such a foundation in ethics are reason and human nature. The former has been claimed to ground Kantian ethics and some versions of utilitarianism, while the latter has been claimed to ground virtue ethics. Anyone who is convinced of any of these foundationalist ethical theories is thereby bound to regard ethical relativism as untenable. This is especially clear in the case of the rationalist theories proposed by Kantians and utilitarians. Each of these theories provides a single ethical principle that is supposed to determine the truth-value of all of our more specific judgments about what is ethically right or wrong, good or bad. That leaves no room for relativism. I want to urge, therefore, that the proponents of these theories be counted as ethical realists even if they can’t satisfy the demands of metaphysical realists to provide a positive account of what the mind-independent ethical “truth-makers” are. However, I’m not going to assume that either Kantian ethics or utilitarianism—or, indeed, anything like these ethical theories—is true. This is partly because they are controversial. But it’s also because I’m inclined to take value pluralism seriously. And ethical theories of the sort that would automatically vindicate ethical realism don’t typically recognize a significant plurality of ethical values. Obviously, virtue ethics recognizes a greater plurality of ethical values than the Kantian and utilitarian theories do. But virtue ethics will not automatically rule out relativism unless it seeks a foundation for the virtues in human nature. And such a foundation would have a constricting effect on the number and range of virtues that it recognizes. The sort of value pluralism that I’m inclined to take seriously would be more broad-ranging than that. It would countenance virtues and other values that cannot be said to have a foundation in either reason or human nature. So I would not propose to earn the right to realism in ethics by defending any of the major ethical theories. It may seem that my determination to leave room for a broad-ranging value pluralism stacks the deck against ethical realism. But I don’t see why this should be so. I don’t see why there couldn’t be just as much objectivity in connection with a plurality as there can be in connection with a unity. The evident plurality of natural facts all around us does nothing to undermine the idea that they are objective.

So far, I’ve explained that I’ll be setting aside two strategies for earning the right to realism in ethics: the strategy of modeling ethical realism on scientific realism, and the strategy of establishing the truth of any foundationalist ethical theory. There is one last strategy that I’ll be setting aside that also deserves mention, namely, the strategy of carrying Davidson’s argument against conceptual relativism over to the case of ethics. I myself have tried this strategy and failed. As it turns out, there is much to be learned even from the failed attempt. But I haven’t the space to elaborate here. For the purposes of this paper, I’ll just declare that we can’t rule out ethical relativism by ruling out the intelligibility of alternative ethical schemes. There is too much intelligible ethical disagreement and too much actual diversity of ethical opinion.

By setting aside these three strategies, I’m left with the following point of departure. On the one hand, I’ve improved the prospects for earning the right
to realism in ethics by relinquishing the metaphysical ambitions of scientific realism in the ethical domain. But, on the other hand, that gain has been offset by my decision to recognize both a significant plurality of ethical values and a significant diversity of ethical opinion. For that precludes our earning the right to realism in ethics by establishing one of the major ethical theories or by arguing in Davidsonian fashion that we all by and large agree in ethical matters. It may seem that there is no route from this point of departure to a realist conclusion. But this isn’t so. The realist stance that I described above—that is, the commitment to a realist project of ethical inquiry in the light of the realist ideal of a single and complete body of ethical truths—is compatible with both a significant plurality of ethical values and a significant diversity of ethical opinion. And we shall see that it is highly resilient in the face of various arguments for ethical relativism.

In particular, the realist stance is not undermined by Gilbert Harman’s argument for moral relativism. His argument rests on a particular account of the foundations of morality, in terms of what self-interested individuals have reason to agree to on the basis of moral bargaining. Harman is certainly right that this account provides for a certain kind of relativity in the ethical domain: some moral judgments have force only relative to specific moral agreements. But, at the same time, the account also provides scope for the sort of ethical inquiry that goes together with the realist stance. In fact, we can get a very clear picture of what a realist project of ethical inquiry might consist in by seeing how it could and should be conducted within Harman’s framework. So, not only is it the case that Harman’s argument does not undermine the realist stance; it positively invites it. This will emerge in section 2.

In section 3 I’ll explore the extent to which Bernard Williams provides us with reasons to abandon the realist stance in favor of the relativist stance. Unfortunately, the reasons he officially gives presuppose that scientific realism is the only viable model for ethical realism. This leads him to overlook how the realist stance might yield a distinctive form of ethical inquiry. Yet, although he never discusses this realist project, there are aspects of his overall ethical vision that might be taken to pose difficulties for it—in fact, I think it is very likely that he himself would raise these difficulties if the matter were put to him. For he clearly holds that many attempts to make comparative evaluations of values drawn from different ethical systems will prove to be pointless. And the whole point of ethical inquiry as I’m envisaging it depends upon the meaningfulness and informativeness of such comparisons. I think Williams underestimates the extent to which such comparisons would be meaningful and informative. However, I’ll also identify a specific condition in which no genuine ethical illumination could be gained in this way. In this condition, the realist stance in ethics would be pointless, just as Williams has claimed. So, one way to earn the right to relativism in ethics is to show that this condition is the one we’re actually in. I’ll close with some remarks about how to settle the hard question whether it is our condition.
1. Realism as a Practical Stance

Let me restate my point of departure. I’m going to take it for granted that we shouldn’t try to earn the right to realism in ethics by any of the following strategies: modeling ethical realism on scientific realism; defending one of the major ethical theories; arguing against the very idea of an ethical scheme. The reasons why are, respectively: the aims of ethics are different from the aims of science; the major ethical theories are controversial and, also, they fail to recognize a significant plurality of values; there is too much diversity of ethical opinion to afford the Davidsonian conclusion that we all by and large agree in ethical matters.

It might seem that this point of departure is bound to preclude our earning the right to realism in ethics. For, once we’ve rejected all of these strategies it is not clear what other strategy might still be left to try. Yet there is one. It is striking that the three strategies I’m rejecting lay down very different sorts of requirements for realism. A metaphysical realist would not regard either the establishment of a particular ethical theory, or a Davidsonian argument against relativism, as a way of earning the right to realism in ethics. Similarly, a Davidsonian would reject the further requirements that metaphysical realists want to lay down as unintelligible. Given these divergences, it seems to me that we ought to step back and ask: What is the most basic and minimal commitment that is held in common by different sorts of realists, and that all relativists are committed to denying? If we could identify this basic and minimal realist commitment, then we could formulate a new strategy for settling the issue of realism vs. relativism. We could consider what reasons there are to embrace or reject this basic and minimal realist commitment.

I’ve already stated what I take this commitment to be, which most fundamentally distinguishes realists from relativists. It is their commitment to the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths.

Let me now clarify what I take this ideal to consist in. When I say that a body of truths is complete I mean: for every well-formed proposition, either it or its negation figures in that body. This may remind readers of Dummett’s formal characterization of realism in terms of the principle of bi-valence. But I have something different in mind. I do not intend to characterize realism in such a way that realists cannot countenance truth-value gaps. Such gaps might well arise due to reference failure, vagueness, threatened paradox, etc., without prompting us to embrace any form of relativism. That is why I incorporate the idea of a well-formed proposition in my characterization of completeness. I mean well-formed in a very broad sense, according to which a proposition is well formed just in case it is capable of having a truth value. Thus, a body of truths is complete just in case, for every proposition that is capable of having a truth value, either it or its negation figures in it. This idea of completeness can be further qualified by restricting it to specific domains. For example, we can think of a complete body of truths within the domain of facts or within the domain of
values, or within the more restricted domains of physical facts, psychological facts, mathematical facts, ethical values, aesthetic values, and so on. If we are prepared to distinguish domains, then we can raise the issue of realism vs. relativism separately in each domain. To embrace realism with respect to a given domain is to hold that there is a single and complete body of truths in that domain. And, if we embrace realism in more than one domain, then the various bodies of truths associated, respectively, with each domain, would together constitute a single and complete body of truths. In other words, they would not be many bodies of truths in the sense that interests the relativist. The whole point of relativism is to allow that there can be many bodies of truths that cannot be conjoined in accord with the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths.

I’ve introduced the idea of a realist stance, because I want to draw attention to the fact that the realist ideal is something we can actively embrace and that, when we do so, we must act in accord with it. There are two fronts on which its practical implications need to be recognized, namely, inquiry and interpersonal relations.

Inquiring realists hold that there is a single and complete body of truths in the domain (or domains) into which they are inquiring. It follows that there is no well-formed proposition in that domain (or domains) concerning which the question of its truth value does not arise. Any such proposition is, therefore, an appropriate target of investigation. However, it would be wrong to infer that the realist ideal constitutes the proper goal of inquiry. For one thing, it is probably an incoherent goal, since it is probably impossible for finite beings like us to know all of the truths. But even if it were not an incoherent goal, there are many reasons why we might not embrace it. Take the domain of facts. There are certainly truths about the facts that it would be quite useless to know (how many grains of sand are there); indeed, many of these truths are too boring even to think about (this is what goes wrong with the game of counting road-signs and out-of-state license plates when the journey gets too long); other such truths might be useful or interesting, but too costly to discover (this, I take it, is a poignant fact that most working scientists face whenever they apply for funding); still other truths might be downright dangerous to know (some take this view of genetics). For all these reasons, a commitment to the ideal of a single and complete body of truths need not bring in train a commitment to knowing all of them. Later, we’ll consider whether the case might be different in the ethical domain. Perhaps ethical truths are the sorts of things we should want to know. But my point here is an in principle one. All that the realist stance per se commits us to is the idea that there is a single and complete body of truths. And, in most domains, we can retain this commitment even if we happen not to be interested in knowing all of the truths in those domains. Yet even when this is our attitude, the commitment still has practical import. If we do embrace the realist ideal, we shall have to conceive inquiry—the business of acquiring knowledge of the truths in which we are interested—in relation to it. It will remain true that there is no well-formed proposition (in the domain of our inquiry)
concerning which the question of its truth does not arise. And, insofar as we think our beliefs are true, we must think of them in accord with the realist ideal. That is, we must think of them as figuring in the single and complete body of truths. Likewise whenever we change our minds. Whenever we acquire new beliefs or correct mistaken beliefs, we must think of these epistemic activities as bringing us closer to that ideal.

The practical implications of the realist stance for interpersonal relations are as follows. Once we adopt the stance, we cannot ever be wholly indifferent to the views of others. We must always take a stand. If we find that others' views are not conjoinable with ours, then we must either reject theirs as false or change our own minds. (When we change our minds we have two options. Either we can reject our own view as false, or we can suspend belief on the matter. The point is that we are constrained by the realist ideal to do one of these things whenever we are unwilling to reject a conflicting view as false.) And if we find that others' views are different from ours but conjoinable, then we must allow that we may have something to learn from them. Of course, there is no presumption that others are right when they believe a proposition we haven't yet considered. There isn't, any more than there is a presumption that others are right when we disagree. Nor is there any general presumption that we should always be interested in the propositions that others believe but we don't (though, as I've already indicated, there may be reason to presume this in the specific case of ethics). What is presumed—actually that's too weak: what is built into the realist stance—is that there is a single ideal in the light of which all of the differences among believers could in principle be sorted out, namely, the one complete body of truths. The realist stance does not exhort us to actually resolve our differences with others (any more than it ex- horts us to learn all of the truths). It only requires that we view our differences with others in the light of the realist ideal. As realists, we must hold that whenever disagreements do arise, at most one party can be right. And this, of course, is precisely what the relativist wants to deny.

It should already be clear that relativism can also be characterized as a stance that has significant practical implications. When I adopt the relativist stance, I am free to disregard epistemic differences between me and others in the deepest possible way: I can regard others as neither right nor wrong by my lights. And this is not because I regard myself as ignorant about whether they are right or wrong. It is rather because the sense in which they might be right or wrong has absolutely nothing to do with my own inquiry into what's true. I can view others as seeking something else, namely, their truths. Their truths are not conjoinable with mine at all. But I need not, for that reason, reject them as false. They are altogether out of the loop of consideration.

I want to emphasize that it is important not to exaggerate the practical implications of these stances. One very common mistake is to think that relativism instructs us to be tolerant of the views of others, while realism instructs us to be intolerant. But this is not so. Realism does provide the resources for one
very common argument in favor of intolerance, which I’ll call the argument from righteousness. This argument says that there is one truth and, if I take myself to know that truth, then I have a duty to spread it to everyone else whether they want it or not. But the realist stance doesn’t require such an intolerant attitude toward the views of others. It is coherent to embrace the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths and yet, also, embrace the sorts of moral values that would entail an obligation to be tolerant—values like self-determination and freedom from oppression. Similarly, it is coherent to adopt the relativist stance according to which different people may have different truths and yet, also, embrace the project of trying to stamp out alternative viewpoints. What is clear is that relativism lacks the resources to mount the righteous argument for intolerance that is available to realists. But, nevertheless, relativists have available less righteous grounds for intolerance, such as zeal to get everyone to be just like me.

I hope it is clear, then, that the practical differences between the realist and relativist stances cannot be cashed out in terms of the issue of tolerance. The difference turns on a less morally loaded and more purely epistemic issue. When I adopt the relativist stance, I am free to disregard the views of others as lying completely outside my pursuit of truth. They are utterly irrelevant—so irrelevant that even if they conflict with mine I needn’t, for that reason, regard them as false. As I put it earlier, the views of others are simply out of the loop of consideration. But this is not so when I adopt the realist stance. If I’m pursuing truth in the sense that goes together with the realist ideal, then no one’s views are ever wholly irrelevant. And this is so even if I am not particularly interested in them. Even so, my critical perspective on my own views must somehow comprehend theirs as well. If their views conflict with mine, I can’t hold mine without deeming theirs false. Or, to put the point in its full generality, I must view myself and others as subject to a single standard in the light of which all of our epistemic differences could in principle be sorted out—the single and complete body of truths.

So, my proposal is that we address the issue of realism vs. relativism in the ethical domain by considering the respective merits of these two practical stances in that domain. This is why I call it a pragmatic approach to the issue.

Unsurprisingly, this pragmatic approach to the issue of realism vs. relativism allows for the possibility that card-carrying pragmatists might qualify as realists. Despite Rorty’s insistence that pragmatism goes together with relativism, there are other brands of pragmatism besides his that are consistent with embracing the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths—Peirce’s, for example. This is not because the realist ideal can be equated with his ideal limit of inquiry. It is rather because the realist ideal satisfies his requirement of having practical meaning. I’ve already noted that finite beings like us probably can’t coherently aim to know the whole truth that is articulated in that ideal. But we have seen that the ideal still has practical meaning, because we can always conceive inquiry in relation to it. Whenever we acquire new beliefs,
and whenever we give up mistaken beliefs, we can conceive ourselves as doing so in order to get closer to the ideal. This does not mean that we should view our epistemic history over the millennia as a history of progress toward that ideal—toward knowing the single and complete body of truths. Whether such progress has actually occurred is an empirical question to which I do not know the answer. And, in any case, it will not compromise my point here if our epistemic history turns out to have been full of many false starts and even regress. My point is not about the overall progress of inquiry over time. My point is about how realists must view each moment of their inquiries from the inside, as they engage in them. Every time they change their minds, they must think of themselves as making some kind of epistemic improvement then. And, insofar as they are committed to the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths, they will conceive each such attempt at improvement in relation to that ideal.

These last remarks may seem to be in some tension with my earlier claim that we needn’t conceive the realist ideal as setting the goal for inquiry—that we needn’t be committed to discovering the single and complete body of truths. But I don’t see any real tension here. I can see myself as making progress toward an ideal while at the same time viewing the ideal itself as beyond my reach. I’m aware that many pragmatists would prefer to avoid any reference to such ideals. They would prefer to characterize our efforts at epistemic improvement in more myopic terms. Why, they might ask, can’t I acquire a new belief, or revise a prior belief, without thinking of myself as getting closer to the ideal of the single and complete body of truths? In answer, I must confess that I myself can’t make very much of the alleged distinction between “more” and “closer to an ideal limit or totality.” But for the benefit of those who attach great importance to the distinction, perhaps I should say a bit more about why I include the idea of completeness in my characterization of the realist ideal. I want to bring out something that the realist is committed to and the relativist rejects. Here is one familiar way of bringing it out: for any disagreement (over well-formed propositions) that could arise (within a given domain) at most one party is right. It seems to me that anyone who rejects relativism—even a pragmatist—needs to frame such a universally quantified thought. Now, think of the sum of all of the possible disagreements and, then, think of the sum of the “right sides” of those disagreements. As far as I can see, that would be a single and complete body of truths. And also, as far as I can see, any pragmatist or, indeed, anyone, who rejects relativism is implicitly committed to there being such a thing.

There is another important respect in which my conception of realism as a practical stance is consistent with a more generally pragmatist outlook. It is consistent with the pragmatist eschewal of skepticism. I can consistently embrace the realist ideal and also regard my current beliefs as immune from skeptical doubt. In fact, to hold my beliefs is, precisely, to regard them as beliefs in truths that figure in the single, complete body of truths. If I didn’t think they so
figured, I would give them up. Given my larger aim in this paper, it is not a disadvantage that my proposal affords a conception of realism that is compatible with pragmatism. Of all the “isms” pragmatism is the least hospitable to drawing distinctions between belief and value. This is not because pragmatists are not interested in the sort of objectivity that science delivers; it is rather because they insist that there can be just as much objectivity in the domain of values as there is in the domain of facts into which scientists inquire.

On the other hand, the realist stance does not require us to embrace pragmatism. It is possible to embrace the realist ideal and also impose further conditions on realism. We might think that, in addition to embracing the ideal of a single and complete body of truths, we must conceive the ideal along metaphysical realist lines as a realm of mind-independent facts. Or we might think that the ideal should be construed along Davidsonian lines, as what we already by and large agree about. But the important point is this: no such additional conditions could ever undermine the connection between realism and the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths. It would be incoherent to say that one is a realist because one believes that there are mind-independent “truth-makers” and, then, go on to reject the idea that there is a single and complete set of them. For, in rejecting that idea one would have lost the absolutist conception of truth that distinguishes realism from relativism. The same goes for the Davidsonian position. When he argued that we all by and large agree, his aim was to establish a condition in which we are justified in viewing all of our remaining differences as disagreements in which only one party can be right, rather than as conflicts in which each party is right relative to their conceptual scheme. And, to view them in this way is, precisely, to view them in the light of the realist ideal of a single and complete body of truths.

It seems to me that the real merit of conceiving realism in terms of a commitment to this ideal is that it allows us to pose the issue of realism vs. relativism in ethics without imposing any additional conditions on realism. For it probably doesn’t make sense to impose them in the ethical domain. Doing so would require us to assimilate ethics to science in inappropriate ways, or overlook the existence of actual diversity of ethical opinion. I will be arguing in the next two sections that the realist stance allows us to frame a realist project of ethical inquiry in the face of all this—in the face of the fact that the enterprise of ethics is different from science and in the face of manifest ethical diversity.

Despite all I have said in this section, I expect I may still evoke the following complaint from many: to embrace the realist ideal in ethics without providing a positive account of the ethical “truth-makers” is not to embrace anything that deserves the label “realism.” My concern isn’t so much to keep the label. My concern is to see whether we can earn the right to a position in ethics that stands opposed to ethical relativism because it insists that, in all cases of ethical conflict, at most one party is right. It would be very reassuring to get that much objectivity in the ethical domain, even if we couldn’t satisfy the metaphysical ambitions that enter into some philosophers’ conception of realism.
And, in any case, there is at least one good reason to call this sort of objectivist position in ethics a kind of realism. It incorporates the idea that there is something to inquire *about* in the ethical domain—something to get right or wrong, something to know.

2. Harman’s Defense of Moral Relativism

I want next to consider whether Gilbert Harman’s defense of moral relativism gives us reason to abandon the realist stance in ethics in favor of the relativist stance. We shall see that the reverse is true. Harman’s conception of the foundations of morality positively invites the realist stance, along with all of its practical implications for ethical inquiry and interpersonal relations.

On Harman’s account, moral rules are the result of moral bargaining. Such rules arise when individuals find self-interested reasons to enter into agreements with others to abide by certain common moral rules. It is undeniable that there are moral agreements in Harman’s sense. And he is absolutely right that they provide an occasion for adopting the relativist stance. When we observe that other people subscribe to a different agreement, as outsiders to that agreement we are free to regard what’s right or wrong within it as irrelevant to the question what would it be right or wrong for us to do. We can say to ourselves, that’s just what they agreed to do and their agreement doesn’t bind us in any way. Harman captures this relativist attitude with his notion of an “inner moral judgment,” which he defines as a judgment about what it is right or wrong to do in the light of a specific moral agreement. Once we’ve mastered this notion, we’re supposed to recognize that our inner moral judgments can’t properly be extended to those who stand outside of the moral agreement(s) to which we are party. And, of course, we know that the same goes for parties to other agreements; they too must recognize that their inner moral judgments do not extend beyond their agreements. Harman illustrates this relativity of inner moral judgments with a rather unwinning example, in which he points out that it sounds odd to say that Hitler was “wrong” to do the various things he did. It doesn’t sound nearly so odd to me as it apparently sounds to him. But I think I see what he means. Hitler does seem to be beyond the reach of a certain sort of moral judgment, namely, the sort of inner moral judgment that presupposes that he and we subscribe to the same moral agreement. It is not Harman’s aim, however, to show that Hitler is immune from all ethical evaluation on our part. He allows that we can say of him that he was evil.

This allowance should give us pause. If we are capable of ethical responses that are *not* confined to our moral agreements, that should make us wonder whether Harman is right to locate the foundations of morality in such agreements, rather than in our capacity for such wider ethical responses. But, for the sake of argument, I’ll assume that he is right to do so. For it will prove instructive to see what does and doesn’t follow. It follows that every ethical concept that is now available to us began its life as a by-product of moral bar-
gaining. (Self-interest is the one exception, for obvious reasons.) It also fol-
lows that the initial meaning of any given ethical concept incorporates a kind
of implicit relativization to the specific moral agreement in which it was first
introduced. However, no interesting form of relativism follows unless it can be
shown that our ethical concepts are forever confined to their original contexts.
And I don’t see how this can be shown. More specifically, I don’t see how we
can rule out the possibility of extending the application of ethical concepts be-
yond the confines of the moral agreements that originally gave rise to them. It
seems obvious to me that this has actually happened. It happened, for example,
when we took notions of rights that were originally introduced in the context
of the specific moral agreement that is articulated in the U.S. Constitution and,
then, used those same notions as a standard for criticizing agreements arrived
at in quite different political contexts. A defender of Harman-style relativism
might point out that it is always within the rights of those who stand outside
our moral agreements to protest that they should not be subjected to the stan-
dards of our agreements. This is certainly true; the relativist stance is always
available. But that doesn’t end the matter. For, as I shall now argue, Harman’s
highly rationalistic account of the foundations of morality invites us to frame
and pursue a project of ethical inquiry that is essentially realist in spirit.

Agents who have the requisite rational capacities to devise and implement
moral agreements in Harman’s sense must surely also have general capacities
for critical reflection. And, so, even if they begin by uncritically accepting the
ethical concepts that figure in their own moral agreements, there is no reason
why they couldn’t or shouldn’t subject them to critical scrutiny. Of course, within
Harman’s framework the only possible source of such critical insight is other
moral agreements to which one is not a party. But this is a perfectly good source.
There is nothing to stop us from learning about other moral agreements to which
we are not a party, and thereby acquiring conceptual resources for adopting a
critical perspective on our own moral agreements. And it is important to see
that such a critical perspective would not coincide with the moral perspective
that is supplied by the particular moral agreement to which one is a party. It is
a more comprehensive critical perspective from which one can make compar-
ative judgements about whether one’s own moral agreement is better or worse
than some others. It is also important to see that this more comprehensive crit-
ical perspective need not coincide with the perspective of self-interest that one
occupies while contemplating whether to enter into a given moral agreement. I
can certainly ask whether someone else’s agreement would be better for me
than the one to which I am a party. But there are other critical issues I can raise
as well. To take a realistic example, consider a woman who is party to a moral
agreement that systematically oppresses women. It is in her self-interest to abide
by this agreement not because it serves her interests so very well, but be-
cause she has no better option. After having made the agreement and lived by
it, she comes to learn about a different moral agreement in which women are
given the same rights to education, property and self-determination as men.
And she thinks to herself, that’s a better agreement. Perhaps this thought begins as a self-interested wish that her agreement were more like that one, or that she were a party to that one rather than her own. But she also has the conceptual resources to think that that agreement is simply fairer. I’ve assumed for the sake of argument that the notion of fairness is itself a by-product of moral bargaining and, so, must have begun its life relativized to a particular moral agreement. But the point remains that it can also provide a perfectly reasonable standard by which we can make comparative judgments about moral agreements. When we make these comparative judgments, we are taking conceptual resources that, by assumption, have been supplied by different agreements and we are incorporating them into a single critical perspective. This constitutes a move away from the relativist stance, toward the sort of ethical inquiry that would go together with the realist stance.

It might be objected that this sort of ethical inquiry needn’t be fully committed to the realist ideal according to which all ethical differences could in principle be sorted out. Perhaps it needn’t be. But, once we’ve begun the task of critical reflection, it is unclear why we should ever bring it to a halt. That is, it is unclear why, once we’ve begun the process of comparative evaluation of different moral agreements and their different terms, we should regard any of the ethical differences we find as falling outside the constraints that are imposed by the realist ideal. Either they are the sorts of differences that are conjoinable, or they are conflicts that need to be resolved. We needn’t be committed to the idea that we will always know how to resolve such conflicts in order to cleave to the realist stance. We need only be committed to the idea that there is something to resolve. And, it should be born in mind that there are more ways to resolve conflicts among evaluative attitudes than among beliefs. Instead of giving up one or other of the conflicting values, we can resolve the conflict by ranking them in relative importance. It should also be born in mind that some ethical conflicts aren’t really significant from the point of view of the realist ideal. I’m thinking of the sort of conflict that arises when we rank several ethical values as equally important and yet, due to contingent practical limitations, we find that we can’t pursue them all together. The fact that we must choose among them for this reason does not signify that they wouldn’t all figure in the single and complete body of ethical truths. And, more generally, the fact that there are all of these ways to interpret and cope with ethical conflict should help to strengthen our confidence in the feasibility of the realist project of ethical inquiry.

The specific approach to this project that I’ve proposed as a response to Harman is not the only possible approach. I think that anyone working in the contractarian tradition of moral and political philosophy who doesn’t share Harman’s relativism is carrying out what is, essentially, a realist project of ethical inquiry. These contractarians seek an answer to the very same question that would guide the inquiry I just described, namely, what is the best moral agreement? The main difference is that they tend to give a narrow interpretation to
the term "best" as meaning something like "serves everyone's interests in the most optimal way," and they tend to take a highly rationalistic approach to establishing what is best in this narrow sense. It is important to see that this familiar contractarian endeavor qualifies as ethical inquiry in the realist mode. But it is also important to see that the alternative approach that I've described here is also available. On this approach, ethical inquiry can be far more empirical, insofar as it undertakes to make many specific and substantive comparisons between actual moral agreements using their own terms.

3. Williams's "Truth" in Relativism

I turn now to Bernard Williams’s defense of ethical relativism. He holds that we can’t model ethical realism on scientific realism; he rejects the major ethical theories, thereby losing another possible ground for ethical realism; and he recognizes a diversity of ethical opinion sufficient to rule out the Davidsonian strategy against ethical relativism. There is one crucial difference, however. He takes for granted—wrongly in my view—that scientific realism is the only viable model for ethical realism. And, so, he never considers the possibility of a realist project of ethical inquiry along the lines I’m envisaging. But the question still arises, is it the case that his overall ethical vision should give us pause about that project? My aim in this section is to determine the extent to which this is so.

In order to accomplish this aim I’ll need to spell out some of the details of Williams’s defense of ethical relativism—what he calls "the conditions of the problem." First, there must be two or more systems of belief (Ss) that are to some extent self-contained. The issue of relativism concerns whether and how issues of preference can arise in connection with such Ss. Of course, issues of preference among different Ss cannot arise unless the Ss can be understood by the same parties—so that is another condition of the problem. Yet, although it must be the case that different Ss can be understood by a single party they must, nevertheless, be exclusive of one another—for, otherwise, they could be conjoined in accordance with the realist ideal of a single and complete body of ethical truths. One way of being exclusive is to have conflicting consequences. In the case of scientific theories, this usually means conflicting predictions. But this kind of conflict is symptomatic of realism rather than relativism, because it provides a basis for saying that one of the conflicting Ss is true while the other is false—and again we would have conformity with the realist ideal. There is a temptation to say that the relativist is looking for a kind of exclusivity that leaves both of the conflicting Ss standing as true. But Williams takes care not to characterize relativism in terms of truth, presumably in order to avoid some of the obvious formal difficulties that would otherwise ensue. In the ethical domain, these formal difficulties can be avoided by characterizing conflict in practical terms rather than logical terms. Thus, in ethics, two Ss have conflict-
ing consequences insofar as they give conflicting answers to the question whether a given action should be performed. But in the interest of generality, Williams settles on a somewhat vaguer characterization of exclusivity that can apply to both science and ethics. He says that two Ss are mutually exclusive if it is impossible to live within both of them at the same time.

Having specified the conditions of the problem, Williams goes on to define two sorts of confrontation that can occur between two Ss, real confrontations and merely notional confrontations. Holders of S1 stand in real confrontation with S2 if it is a real option for them to abandon S1 in favor of S2. If S2 is to be a real option for holders of S1, then the two Ss must be comparable; that is, it must be possible for holders of S1 to view the transition to S2 as making sense in the light of a comparison between them. Furthermore, they must be able to go over to S2 without losing their grip on reality. Notional confrontations do not display these features. When holders of S1 are in merely notional confrontation with S2, S2 is not a real option for them. They do not find S1 and S2 comparable, and they could not go over to S2 while retaining their grip on reality.

With this distinction in hand, between real and notional confrontations, Williams is able to characterize relativism in the following terms: When we stand in a real confrontation with a real option, then we face the task of appraising it with the vocabulary of true/false, right/wrong, etc. When we don't face a real option—in other words, when we stand in merely notional confrontation with some alien system—then, although we can apply our vocabulary of appraisal, it may be pointless to do so. The system may be too alien to be relevant to our judgements. When this happens, it makes sense to take up what I've been calling the relativist stance.

Williams holds that the relativist stance is appropriate in ethics but not in science. But this is not because notional confrontations arise only in ethics and not in science. As he himself observes, phlogiston theory is not, at present, a real option for us. Yet we don't take a relativist stance toward that theory. That is, we don't find it pointless to bring our vocabulary of appraisal to bear on it. On the contrary. Precisely because the theory cannot be conjoined with theories we now hold true, we find it important to appraise it as false—a clear reflection of the fact that we embrace the realist stance in science. But Williams contends that the situation is different when we stand in notional confrontations with alternative ethical outlooks. He maintains that there is no particular point in appraising them. If he were right about this, then it would be pointless to take up the realist stance toward them. One might as well abandon it in favor of the relativist stance.

However, we need to consider very carefully whether it really is pointless to take up the realist stance in ethics, and why. Clearly, it won't suffice merely to point out the existence of notional confrontations in ethics. We've just seen that the existence of such confrontations in science is perfectly compatible with the realist stance there. Williams is moved by the fact that science provides a
particular way of earning the right to realism that doesn’t carry over to the case of ethics. But we shouldn’t conclude to ethical relativism unless we are convinced that there is no other model for realism in ethics. And this means, in particular, that we need to uncover reasons for thinking that a realist project of ethical inquiry that is not modeled on science is either unfeasible, or unwarranted, or inappropriate.

The best way to uncover these reasons is by seeing what a realist project of ethical inquiry might amount to given the constraints that would be imposed by Williams’s ethical vision and, then, assessing the merits of that project.

There are two main components of Williams’s vision, both of which I find overwhelmingly plausible. First, he rejects the major ethical theories and, second, he conceives values as the products of social and historical and cultural forces. It follows that values are not typically chosen, either individually or collectively, in the way that the contractarian tradition portrays them but, rather, they evolve within particular forms of life that give them their point and meaning. Consequently, it also follows that, for Williams, the goal of ethical inquiry could not be the one that I considered in the last section in response to Harman. The goal cannot be to discover what the best moral agreement is, because most of the ethical issues we face have nothing to do with any such agreements. Yet there is one very basic ethical question that Williams thinks we all face, no matter what our social circumstances might be. This is the Socratic question, how shall I live? The question immediately suggests a very broad goal for ethical inquiry, which is simply to discover the best way of living. A realist project of ethical inquiry organized along these lines would be something like the project of an Ultra liberal arts education. The aim would be to discover what the best way of living is. And the method by which this aim would be achieved would be a comparative study of different forms of life.

So, here is my thought. If we assume the basic components of Williams’s ethical vision, then we can assess the merits of the realist stance in ethics by assessing the merits of this form of ethical inquiry, construed as something like the project of an Ultra liberal arts education. I hope it is clear that my thought is very much in harmony with Williams’s way of setting up the problem of relativism in ethics. For this form of ethical inquiry has a point only insofar as there is a point in appraising alternative ethical systems. To the extent that we find such appraisal pointless, so too is ethical inquiry. And, in that case, we may as well forsake the realist stance in ethics in favor of the relativist stance, which is exactly Williams’s suggestion.

However, we need to consider very carefully whether this form of ethical inquiry, which consists in the appraisal of alternative ethical outlooks, really is pointless and why.

It may be tempting—and I think Williams himself may be tempted—to think that the mere fact that values are the products of culture and history already suffices to make such appraisal pointless. But I don’t see why this should be so. Compare the case of science, where we clearly do see a point in making
cross-cultural evaluations of theories that belong to different social and historical traditions. Such evaluations can serve our current scientific inquiries in various ways. At the very least, such comparisons can help to clarify our theoretical commitments, by showing us what they rule out, such as phlogiston theory. But the comparisons needn't always work in favor of currently prevailing theories. If it should turn out that phlogiston theory would help to solve certain unsolved problems, then the scientific attitude requires that we should resurrect it in something like the spirit in which Chomsky has resurrected certain themes from Cartesian philosophy in order to solve problems in contemporary linguistics. The ethical inquirer can do something similar, by embracing values that originated in other forms of life. Obviously, there are limits on the extent to which ethical values are transportable from one context to another. Sometimes, one context can be quite accommodating of values drawn from another—for example, the American context can fairly easily accommodate conversion to Buddhism. But, presumably, there are other values that the American context can't so easily accommodate. Williams's example of medieval samurai warrior ethics might be a good example, but I don't know enough about gangland life in the urban U.S. to be sure. In any event, even when we can't just start living by the values we learn about from other contexts, there are other avenues of action that may be open to us. We might immigrate to a place where it is possible to live by those values, or we might stay where we are and fight for social change.

I take it to be Williams's view that, very often, all three of these avenues are closed: our own context won't accommodate living by the values we learn about from other contexts; but we also can't move to those other contexts in order to live by them; nor can we realistically expect to change our own context so as to accommodate them. This is another way of seeing the difference between ethics and science. In general, scientific theories are exportable from one context to another. But not so with ethical values. Being the sorts of social and historical products they are, they are not, according to Williams, easily transportable. And very often, we can't make up for this fact by doing the travelling ourselves. We too are the products of social and historical forces that, like our values, are pretty much bound to our particular contexts.

I happen to take a more optimistic view than Williams, of the possibility that one or another of these three avenues will be open to us in a given case. But I want to grant for the sake of argument that he might be right. If he is right, then there is a danger that ethical inquiry in the realist mode might reduce us to nostalgia and wistfulness. Even so, I'm not at all sure that it follows that the inquiry would have been pointless. I do see that it may seem pointless. For, it is a fair constraint on ethical inquiry that it should yield some form of ethical illumination. And there is much to recommend the idea that such illumination should make a practical difference in our lives. The clearest case in which there would be such a practical difference is this: that the fruits of ethical inquiry consisted in implementable instructions about how to live. But, of
course, the case we're now considering is precisely the case in which this isn't so. What other form might ethical illumination take in this case, where implementable instructions about how to live are not forthcoming from ethical inquiry? Well, suppose that when I study other forms of life, I discover values that I come to estimate very highly, even though it is not open to me to implement them. At the very least, this discovery would give me a kind of counterfactual knowledge about what I should do if I had the opportunity. And, with the acquisition of this counterfactual knowledge, I would learn something important about the values I currently live by. I would learn how conditional they are on my contingent circumstances. The opposite may happen as well. I may discover ethical attitudes and practices that I could never bring myself to share, no matter what my circumstances might be. And this discovery would show me certain respects in which my values are not conditional on my contingent circumstances. In both cases, I would learn something about the very contents of my standing evaluative commitments—something worth having, and something that I think qualifies as ethical illumination. So, I see a point in a realist project of ethical inquiry, even given the bleakest assumptions about how rare the opportunities are for implementing what we thereby learn.

These points that ethical inquiry might have, beyond delivering implementable knowledge, depend upon something that might be called into question. They depend on significant normative interaction between values drawn from different contexts. So, for example, I couldn't learn how conditional my values are on my actual context, unless I could see how those values would be outweighed in contexts where other values can be implemented. Similarly, I couldn't learn how unconditional my values are unless I could see how they outweigh values that might be acted upon in other contexts. So, one way to establish Williams's claim that it is often pointless to appraise values drawn from other contexts is by calling this normative interaction into question. Perhaps values drawn from different contexts don't speak to one another at all. Then it might, indeed, be pointless to engage in the form of ethical inquiry I've been discussing.

Notice that this sort of evaluative insularity will arise only if the following is true: When I pursue my Ultra liberal arts education I find that I am virtually indifferent to the values that others live by in their contexts. I don't mind that others act on those values, which shows that they're not entirely ruled out by my values. Yet they're not exactly ruled in either, except in the minimal sense that they're not ruled out. They simply go in at the very bottom of my preference ordering, as values I can't imagine ever pursuing so long as there is an alternative. This would engender a fairly deep experience of otherness. If ethical inquiry couldn't deliver anything else, besides such an experience of otherness, then it would make sense to abandon the realist stance in favor of the relativist stance. For, to repeat, the realist stance has a point in ethics only if it generates a project of ethical inquiry that can yield ethical illumination. And this outcome wouldn't be ethically illuminating. It wouldn't help me to settle any practical questions about how to live. Nor would it help me to clarify the
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So, I’ve finally identified a condition in which the relativist stance would make more sense than the realist stance in ethics. Yet I’m not saying that the realist stance would be untenable in this condition. The realist stance is tenable come what may. I’m only saying that it would be pointless. By pursuing ethical inquiry in the light of the realist ideal of a single and complete body of ethical truths, all we would arrive at is a very long list of conditional claims about what is valuable in different contexts. I’ve already explained that knowledge of this list would not qualify as ethical illumination. It would never bear on the ethical questions we face as agents whose lives and values are, by hypothesis, context-bound. Indeed, it seems to me that the knowledge would be better characterized as sociological than as ethical. And again, the reason why is the insularity of the values that evolve in different contexts, their failure to speak to one another. If that really is the nature of ethical value, then we might as well abandon the realist project of ethical inquiry in favor of the relativist stance.

However, we would be warranted in this relativist conclusion only if we knew that we were in the condition I’ve identified. Think how many things we would have to know. We would have to know a) that we typically can’t implement in our actual circumstances any values we learn about from other forms of life; b) we also can’t implement those values through cultural emigration; c) we can’t strive to get into a position to implement them by trying to foster social change; d) learning about such values could never give us reason to rethink our priorities; e) learning about such values could never serve to clarify the contents of our evaluative commitments, by revealing ways in which they are or are not conditional on our actual circumstances. I don’t find a single one of these propositions plausible. I certainly don’t think we know they obtain. But, on the other hand, I can imagine someone protesting that we don’t know that they don’t obtain either. For the sake of argument, then, and judiciousness, I propose that we suspend belief on this matter. That is, I recommend that we suspend belief about whether the condition in which ethical relativism would be warranted is our actual condition.

It may appear that, in saying this, I’m recommending that we shelve the whole issue about realism vs. relativism in ethics. But that isn’t quite so. We’re bound to come across ethical difference. And I don’t see how we could possibly respond without adopting one stance or the other, the realist or the relativist. We will have to choose. Furthermore, when we choose, we should want to do more than merely beg the question on the side we prefer. We should want to earn the right to our chosen stance. Obviously, we can’t do this without addressing the question on which I’ve recommended that we suspend belief: is our actual condition the condition in which the relativist stance would be warranted? This is an empirical question. And the only way to answer it is by pursuing the realist project of ethical inquiry. We need to learn about values that figure in other forms of life and try to make comparative evaluations. Of course,
what the ethical realist hopes to gain from these comparisons is ethical illumination, perhaps in the form of learning about new practical possibilities that we might pursue, or in the form of a deeper understanding of (or even correction of) our evaluative commitments. But it may be that ethical inquiry will fail to deliver such illumination. If a sustained attempt at such inquiry failed to deliver anything of ethical interest, then we could in retrospect say that the realist stance had, after all, been pointless. This is important. It shows that the realist stance does not prejudge the central issue on which its warrant would ultimately depend. In contrast, the relativist stance does prejudge the issue—at least in fact, if not in intention. It would foreclose the realist project of ethical inquiry. And that would prevent us from discovering the extent to which the project does or does not have a point. This is something we need to discover and know. Because this is so, we have reason, at least at the present time, to prefer the realist stance in ethics over the relativist stance.

I have tried to transpose the virtues of realism as being those of the nature of inquiry rather than directly of a certain conception of epistemically unconstrained reality, and I have tried to do so in a way that, unlike Peirce, does not make any idealized end point of inquiry the licit surrogate of the idea of such an unconstrained conception of reality. It’s not as if, by stressing inquiry and having criticized the contractarian tradition, I have tried to find a licit surrogate for their notion of a discoverable, contractable ideal in some Whiggish consummation of the progress that the path of ethical inquiry might take. No notions of progress, and no ideal consummation inform the realist project of ethical inquiry that I have tried to formulate. Nevertheless it is in inquiry, and its pursuit under the realist stance that I have elaborated and defended, that the doctrine of ethical realism will flourish, if it does.11

Notes

1. There is a large and varied literature on moral realism that is more or less sympathetic to this proposal. For two central examples, see Peter Railton, “Moral Realism,” *Philosophical Review*, 95 (1986) and William Lycan, “Moral Facts and Moral Knowledge,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 24, Supplement (1986: Spindel Conference).

2. For reasons of space, I must ignore the fact that there are rival accounts of scientific realism, as well as the fact that there are important objections to scientific realism. I must also forego any detailed account of attempts on the part of ethical theorists to extend the scientific realist position to ethics. The upshot, I fear, will be that I appear insufficiently critical of scientific realism in general and, yet, at the same time, overly critical of its particular bearing in ethics. As I’ve said, I hope to remedy these deficiencies elsewhere. Here I mean only to say enough to clarify the point of departure for my positive suggestions in this paper, which depart significantly from the scientific realist picture altogether.

4. I realize, of course, that those who propose to model ethical realism on scientific realism are aware of these obvious differences between ethics and science.


7. See his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1982).


11. I'd like to thank Stefan Baumrin, Akeel Bilgrami, Patricia Blanchette, Donald Davidson, Michael Della Rocca, Jerrold Katz, Philip Kitcher, Isaac Levi, Achille Varzi, Stephen White, Meredith Williams, Michael Williams, and Susan Wolf for discussing the issues of this paper with me.