ASSESSOR RELATIVISM AND THE PROBLEM OF MORAL DISAGREEMENT

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ABSTRACT: I consider sophisticated forms of relativism and their effectiveness at responding to the skeptical argument from moral disagreement. In order to do so, I argue that the relativist must do justice to our intuitions about the depth of moral disagreement, while also explaining why it can be rational to be relatively insensitive to such disagreements. I argue that the relativist can provide an account with these features, at least in some form, but that there remain serious questions about the viability of the resulting account.

Consider a modern variant on a classical theme: the argument from moral disagreement to moral skepticism. To make this argument precise, let P be a substantive moral claim one takes to be true—say, the claim that first-trimester abortion is morally (im)permissible. And define a “peer with respect to P” as follows. Someone is my “peer with respect to P” if the following are true of her: first, her grasp of the concepts that are relevant to her views about P is equal to mine; second, her views about P are no more likely than mine to be the product of inconsistency or some other clear failure of formal or structural rationality; and, third, her views about P are no more likely than mine to be the product of false beliefs about nonmoral facts. Now suppose that I have a peer with respect to P who believes that P is false—as seems true in the case under consideration. And consider the following brief skeptical argument.

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1 One might try to resist this argument by pointing to contingent facts about limits of actual (as opposed to merely possible) moral peer disagreement. But while it is plausible that actual moral
(1) I have a peer with respect to P who believes that P is false.
(2) Thus, I have a genuine disagreement with this peer concerning P.
(3) When I have a genuine disagreement about P with a peer with respect to P, I ought to suspend judgment concerning P.
(4) Thus, I ought to suspend judgment concerning P.

How might we respond to this argument? Four natural options are as follows:

(i) We might reject premise (1) by claiming that having the correct view about P is part of what it is to fully grasp the moral concepts involved in P.²

(ii) We might reject premise (1) by claiming that full practical and theoretical rationality involves patterns of inference that commit one to the truth of P.³

(iii) We might reject premise (3) by arguing that one should “stick to one’s guns” in the face of peer disagreement, at least to some degree, insofar as one is getting things right and one’s peer is getting things wrong.⁴

(iv) We might reject premise (3) by claiming that in cases of peer disagreement, each party is rationally entitled to give more weight to one’s own views than she gives to those of one’s peer.⁵

Each of these responses has its proponents in the literature. In fact, I have flirted with several of them myself. But it is fair to say that there are concerns about each of them in the present context. For example, while many of our moral concepts do have substantive moral views “built into” them in the way the first response requires, this does not seem to be true of all such concepts, including the most abstract. Similarly, while building substantive moral views into our understanding of theoretical and practical rationality may be compelling with respect to some “robust” conceptions of rationality—such as the conception of rationality as “responsiveness to substantive practical reasons”—it is much less plausible with respect to the thinner, formal notion of rationality to which our definition of “peerhood” appeals. Finally, while

² This is suggested by those who focus exclusively on “thick” moral concepts.
⁴ See Kelly 2010.
⁵ See Wedgwood 2010.
there is something attractive about the epistemological views at work in the third and fourth responses, many philosophers have found that both involve an unacceptable degree of epistemic chauvinism in the face of disagreement. Indeed, it can easily seem that we are “more chauvinistic” in the moral domain than we are in many other areas of thought. We often seem to be less responsive to moral peer disagreement than we are to peer disagreement about, say, empirical matters. As John MacFarlane notes about a case that generates similar (if not stronger) intuitions, in making moral judgments like the one above, “we do not seem to regard the fact that many others disagree with us as grounds for caution” (2007, 17) to the degree we would in many other domains. If this is in fact one aspect of moral discourse, it cannot be justified via an appeal to general facts about the epistemology of disagreement that apply equally to all areas of thought. Rather, if we feel less pressure to shift our moral views in the face of disagreement than we do in, say, the empirical case, the explanation of this must appeal to something about moral disagreement that distinguishes it from empirical disagreement.

Of course, none of this amounts to anything like a refutation of these responses to our toy skeptical argument. But it does give us some reason to consider alternative responses to it and arguments like it. After all, if it is true that we are less bothered by the existence of deep moral disagreement than we are by disagreement in other areas, then it is tempting to think that the explanation of this is something other than the options just canvassed. In particular, if we are less responsive to moral disagreement, perhaps this is the product of the degree to which we do not really take many moral disagreements to concern a fully objective matter of fact.

This idea might take one of two forms. First, one might interpret it as implying that I do not really disagree with my peer in cases like the one above, thereby denying premise (2) of our argument. For example, taking a traditional indexical contextualist line, one might take the content of moral beliefs to involve a tacit relativization to the believer’s moral views or attitudes. Given this, my belief and my peer’s might well be wholly consistent with one another, since they would concern quite different matters of fact.

In effect, on this view, any appearance of disagreement between my peer and me would be only skin-deep. Unfortunately, while this strategy may be plausible in some cases of moral peer disagreement, there are many such cases in which it simply seems wrong to say in this fashion that the parties do not really disagree. For example, when I take a different view from that of my

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7 For an important version of this view, see Dreier 1990.
8 See, e.g., the discussion in Kölbel 2003.
peer about the permissibility of abortion, it simply seems wrong to explain away the appearance of disagreement between us in this manner.

But this may not be the only way to flesh out the idea that moral discourse is less than fully objective. In particular, a number of philosophers have recently attempted to present views of moral discourse that allow us to block the skeptic’s argument in an analogous way, without explaining away the appearance of disagreement in the manner the indexical contextualist does. Thus, they claim that they can provide us with an account of moral disagreement that meets the following two desiderata.

**Depth of Disagreement**: It preserves our sense that my disagreement with my peer concerning P is more than merely skin-deep. At the very least, it explains why such disagreements have many—if not all—of the features we associate with genuine empirical disagreements.

**Resistance to Disagreement**: It explains why it can be rational to maintain our beliefs about P in the face of moral peer disagreement—at least, to a greater degree than is true in the empirical case.

A variety of metaethical views can be understood as aiming at an account of moral discourse that has these two features, including expressivism,\(^9\) non-indexical contextualism,\(^10\) and assessor relativism.\(^11\) But despite such views, it is natural to wonder whether anyone can coherently maintain that both of these principles are true. After all, one might well think that it is simply part of the definition of genuine “deep” disagreement that the response it requires from us is different from that recommended by Resistance to Disagreement.

As we will see by the end of this essay, there is something to this thought. There are forms of particularly “robust” disagreement that are incompatible with Resistance to Disagreement. But there are also forms of disagreement that are compatible with Resistance to Disagreement, which nonetheless go well beyond the sort of disagreement that is present in, say, indexical contextualism. Thus, by appealing to these forms of disagreement, one can go some ways toward satisfying both of these desiderata—although it is an open question whether doing so captures the depth of moral disagreement.

In what follows, I am going to explore one way of developing an account of this sort, with an eye toward responding to these concerns. In doing so, I will focus on one variant of this general family of views—namely, a form of assessor relativism about truth. But the same basic issues arise for all of the

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10. See Köhler 2003 and Brogaard 2008. For some discussion of the relationship between non-indexical contextualism and assessor relativism, see Schafer, forthcoming b.

views in this family when they attempt to respond to the argument from disagreement. So most of what I say can be applied to any of them.

1. ASSESSOR RELATIVISM

In order to make sense of the view I will be focusing on, we need to distinguish two contexts that might be taken to be relevant to the truth value of a moral judgment or assertion.

First, there is the context of utterance in which the judgment/assertion is made. This, in turn, might be taken to be relevant to its truth value in at least two ways. First, as in standard forms of “indexical contextualism,” the context of utterance might be relevant because it helps to determine the content of the judgment/assertion. In that case, the context of utterance would help to determine the judgment/assertion’s truth value by contributing to its content. But the context of utterance might also be taken to be relevant to the judgment/assertion’s truth value but not to its content. Such nonindexical contextualists claim that a single content or proposition can vary in truth value from one context of utterance to another, but they agree with the indexical contextualists that it is the context of utterance that accounts for any such variation.

My focus here will be on views that differ from either of these forms of contextualism in taking as relevant not just a judgment/assertion’s context of utterance, but also the context from which it is assessed. For example, if we imagine my peer making an assertion, both forms of contextualism will take her context of utterance to be the only context that is relevant to her assertion’s truth value. On the other hand, given a form of assessor relativism, in order to determine the truth value of this assertion, we also need to consider the context from which its truth is assessed. So, for example, when my peer assesses his utterance’s truth, it will be the moral standards in her current context that are relevant in this way to its truth value. But when I assess its truth, it is the moral standards in my context that are relevant.

Once again, views of this sort can be developed in at least two ways. First, we might take the context of assessment to be relevant to a judgment/assertion’s truth value because it helps to determine its content. Or, second, we might take a judgment/assertion’s content to be fixed by its context of utterance but nonetheless take the truth value of this content or proposition to vary from one context of assessment to another. It is not easy to adjudicate between these two views without appealing to further claims about the nature of semantic content. But both of them—and nonindexical contextualism as well—raise similar issues in the present context. So much of what I say below can be applied, with natural modifications, to any of these views. Still, for the
sake of simplicity, I will focus on views that take truth value, but not content, to vary with the context of assessment.

Thus, my focus will be on views that take the truth value of a moral judgment/assertion to vary with the moral standards of the context from which it is assessed—in which these moral standards are, in turn, determined by the moral standards that the persons in this context accept, or, more likely, those that they would accept under somewhat idealized conditions. Thus, we have the following definition.

**Moral Assessor Relativism:** The truth value of a moral proposition can vary with the moral standards in the context from which it is assessed, so that a single moral judgment or assertion can be true relative to one context of assessment and false relative to another.

In considering such views, it is crucial to remember that when someone who endorses Moral Assessor Relativism claims that the truth of a moral judgment/assertion varies with the context of assessment, he is not making a claim about the truth of this judgment/assertion in the ordinary sense of the word ‘true’. Rather, he must be understood to be making a claim about its truth in a more technical sense of this term—namely, the sense of ‘truth’ with which one works when doing compositional semantics. After all, our ordinary concept of truth obeys some variant of the equivalence scheme, which allows one to move freely between the judgment/assertion that P and the judgment/assertion that P is true. And this scheme no longer makes sense once we think of a proposition’s truth as being sensitive to the context of assessment.

Thus, someone who thinks of moral semantics in assessor relative terms should also think of our ordinary judgments/assertions about truth and falsity as assessor-sensitive whenever they concern moral judgments/assertions. We can preserve only the equivalence between the judgment/assertion that P and the judgment/assertion that P is true (in the ordinary sense), where the truth of P is assessor-sensitive, by taking the judgment/assertion that P is true (in the ordinary sense) to be assessor-sensitive in the same way as the judgment/assertion that P.

Given this, the assessor relativist must distinguish between a technical notion of truth, truth$_S$, and the ordinary (equivalence-scheme-governed)

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12 On some views, these two concepts of truth will be one and the same (compare Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009), in which case, the only sensible form of the view under discussion would be one that treated what we will call “truth$_S$-conditions” as merely pragmatic as opposed to semantic in character.
the notion of truth, truth\textsubscript{O}, that we all employ.\textsuperscript{13} When this theorist provides his compositional semantic theory, he will do so in terms of truths\textsubscript{S}. And it will be with respect to this notion of truth that the truths\textsubscript{S} of moral judgments and assertions will be sensitive to the moral standards of the assessor. Thus, the compositional semantics that the assessor relativist provides will involve an additional moral standards parameter that is fixed by the context of assessment and that determines whether a moral proposition is true\textsubscript{S} relative to that context.

On the other hand, this formal semantic theory will treat claims about the truth\textsubscript{O} of a judgment/assertion so that the truths\textsubscript{S}-conditions of these claims are the same as the truths\textsubscript{S}-conditions of the judgments/assertions they are concerned with. Thus, the truths\textsubscript{S} of the claim that some moral assertion is true\textsubscript{O} will be assessor-sensitive in just the same way as the truths\textsubscript{S} of the underlying moral assertion.

When read in light of this distinction, Moral Assessor Relativism becomes the following.

\textit{Moral Assessor Relativism\textsuperscript{*}}: The truths\textsubscript{S}-value of a moral proposition can vary with the moral standards in the context from which it is assessed, so that a single moral judgment or assertion can be true\textsubscript{S} relative to one context of assessment and false\textsubscript{S} relative to another.

Given all this, so long as we restrict ourselves to our ordinary notions of truth, fact, and the like, our assessments of other persons’ moral judgments/assertions will not, for the assessor relativist, betray any hint of relativism. Rather, as long as we restrict ourselves to such notions, moral discourse will appear to be fully objective. In this way, the view we are describing may be thought of as a form of “quasi-realism” about moral discourse. On this view, it is when we turn only to the more technical vocabulary of the formal semanticist (e.g., to truths\textsubscript{S} as opposed to truth\textsubscript{O}) that the assessor-sensitivity of moral truth becomes explicit.

Of course, this raises the question whether the assessor relativist’s truths\textsubscript{S}-conditions deserve to be regarded as “genuine” truth-conditions at all. To answer this question, we would have to take on the difficult task of specifying the purpose of giving truth-conditions in formal semantics. Thus, it is fortunate that very little, if anything, in the discussion to follow hangs on where we draw the line between semantics and pragmatics. That is, very little will depend on whether we treat these truths\textsubscript{S}-conditions as genuine truth-conditions or instead regard them as encoding facts about the compositional pragmatics of moral discourse. In fact, by reading the assessor relativist’s claims

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Kölbel 2008.
in the latter way, we can bring his view very close to contemporary forms of expressivism like those advocated by Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard—something that may be attractive to many readers.

Nonetheless, however we understand it, we should not lose sight of the fact that assessor relativism represents a way of formalizing a reasonably intuitive picture of the nature of moral truth. The guiding thought of the assessor relativist is, in effect, that the truth value of a moral judgment/assertion can vary depending on the moral perspective from which that judgment/assertion’s truth is assessed. And this seems to me to capture quite well the sort of moral relativism that is so attractive to undergraduates of every generation. Thus, it is hardly as if assessor relativism has no basis in our ordinary intuitions about these issues.

Of course, the success of a view at formalizing the metaethical views of undergraduates is at best a rather defeasible recommendation for it. But assessor relativism has other potential advantages. For our purposes, the most relevant of these is, of course, the manner in which it offers us an alternative account of the difference of opinion between my peer and me concerning P. For the assessor relativist, which moral propositions are trueS relative to some person’s context of assessment will be a product of the moral standards she accepts (or would accept under somewhat idealized conditions). Thus, in cases of peer disagreement about some moral proposition P, it will often be the case that P is trueS relative to one peer’s context of assessment and falseS relative to the other’s.

On its own, this fact tells us nothing about how we ought to respond to such disagreements. But when it is paired with a natural account of the pragmatic norms governing judgments/assertions, it may be able to explain why it is permissible in such cases to maintain our views in the face of disagreement. For suppose the assessor relativist takes moral discourse and thought to be governed, in part, by some variant of the following linguistic norms.

**Judgment:** It is permissible to judge that P if and only if P is trueS relative to one’s current context of assessment.

**Assertion:** It is permissible to assert that P if and only if P is trueS relative to one’s current context of assessment, and P is conversationally relevant, etc.14

Given these norms, so long as I know that P is trueS relative to my context of assessment, the fact that P is falseS relative to some other context of assessment

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14 Note that either or both of these norms can be strengthened to involve a reference to knowledge or justified belief if the reader prefers such accounts.
need have no rational impact on my judgments or assertions. Thus, the assessor relativist’s account (allegedly) allows one to resist the skeptic’s argument by providing a way of interpreting the pragmatic significance of moral judgment and assertion that makes it reasonable to reject the argument’s third step.

In the third section of this essay, I will return to the question of whether the assessor relativist can coherently maintain that this is the case. But first I want to consider whether his view does justice to our sense that my peer and I “genuinely” disagree with one another—since this is likely to be the most pressing question for many readers.

2. CAPTURING THE DEPTH OF MORAL DISAGREEMENT

Worries about this are very natural. For instance, a very common response to views like assessor relativism is the following. “Given that moral assertions, on your view, are really true or false only relative to contexts of assessment, and given that my moral assertion that P is true relative to my context of assessment, while my peer’s assertion that not-P is true relative to his context of assessment, in what sense can my peer and I be said really to disagree with one another about P? After all, suppose that all of the above is common knowledge between us. Once both of us recognize that the truth value of our assertions is assessor-sensitive in this way, surely we should recognize that there is no real disagreement between us about P. After all, we do not disagree with one another about what is true relative to any context of assessment. And, on your view at least, there is nothing more of real substance for us to disagree about.”

In effect, the thought here is that if the assessor relativist’s theory is true, the alleged disagreement between my peer and me does not go deep enough to satisfy our intuitive understanding of the character of moral disagreement. As the objection goes, once we understand that there is no wholly context-independent standard for evaluating the truth of moral assertions, there is no reason to take moral disagreements seriously when both parties’ assertions are true relative to their own contexts of assessment.

In considering these worries, it is helpful to begin, not with our intuitions about the state of genuine moral disagreement but, instead, with the acts of disagreement that seem to be permissible or obligatory when one has a moral disagreement with someone else. For our best hope of getting a theoretically neutral grip on the way in which moral disagreements are “genuine disagreements” is to begin with the actions that such disagreements license or require, and then ask whether these actions would be licensed or required given assessor relativism. If they are, then it will be difficult for the realist to
complain that the assessor relativist has not captured the sort of disagreement that is present in the moral case—even if there is a more robust sense in which the parties to such disagreements do not “really disagree.”

What actions, then, are licensed or required by an instance of moral disagreement? Such disagreements involve at least the following:

(i) The parties to the disagreement possess judgments that cannot be held by a single party at the same time without irrationality.

(ii) Indeed, the parties possess judgments that cannot simultaneously be true, in the ordinary true₀ sense.

(iii) So long as the conversation continues, the parties will generally regard themselves as being under some obligation to try to bring it about that they converge upon a shared view of the issues under dispute.¹⁵

(iv) Finally, the parties will regard straightforward moral assertions and conversations as fully successful only if they have achieved such a convergence.

Can the assessor relativist explain why the parties to a moral disagreement ought to behave in this manner? To do so, he must connect his formal semantics in terms of assessor relative truthS with the norms that govern moral discourse so that the result justifies the relevant patterns of behavior—while also making the resulting practice intelligible to us, given our aims in engaging in moral conversation.

To determine whether this is possible, consider a case of ordinary moral disagreement between two parties—Jacques and Ives—in which Jacques maintains that P and Ives maintains that not-P. And suppose that, according to the assessor relativist, this disagreement is explained by a variation in what is trueS relative to the parties’ contexts of assessment. In other words, suppose that Jacques and Ives disagree because P is trueS relative to Jacques’s context of assessment but falseS relative to Ives’s.

In this case, can the assessor relativist account for the features noted above? Let us begin with rational noncotenability. This raises a number of important issues that cannot be discussed in full detail here. But I do not think it is too difficult to describe the basic outlines of how the assessor relativist ought to deal with this aspect of moral disagreement. In particular, suppose that our assessor relativist is attracted to a conceptual-role account of the logical constants, as many assessor relativists and their kin are. Then he is likely to

¹⁵ For MacFarlane (2007), it is particularly important to stress that this sort of convergence will require the conversational parties to retract their previous assertions. For other authors, this is less significant—although some similar distinction will need to be drawn.
insist that it is a primitive fact about the concept NOT that it is never rational to both believe P and believe not-P simultaneously—rendering any further explanation of the rational noncotenability of Jacques’s and Ives’s beliefs unnecessary, at least in this case.\textsuperscript{16}

If a strategy of this sort is successful in the nonrelativistic case, I see no reason why the assessor relativist should not be able to appeal to it here. And while this simple account will not cover all such cases, it is not difficult to see how the assessor relativist might extend it in order to do so. After all, given the standard picture of how a conceptual role constrains truth-conditions, the assessor relativist is in a position to conclude from this fact about the concept NOT that P and not-P can never both be true\textsubscript{S} \textit{relative to a single context of assessment.}\textsuperscript{17} And, given the assessor relativist’s semantics for the ordinary word ‘true’, the same will also be true of the pair of propositions: P is true\textsubscript{O}, not-P is true\textsubscript{O}. Thus, the assessor relativist can easily explain why P and not-P can never simultaneously be true in both these senses.

Moreover, the assessor relativist can extend his account of these truth\textsubscript{S}-conditions, in the standard compositional fashion, to more complex propositions—arriving at the normal verdicts about when two (or more) propositions can simultaneously be true\textsubscript{S} (and, as above, true\textsubscript{O}). And this, when paired with the connections the assessor relativist makes between truth\textsubscript{S}-conditions and the norms governing judgment, will deliver the standard verdicts about when two propositions are rationally cotenable.

Of course, this account begins with certain basic relations of rational incompatibility like the incompatibility of P and not-P. But it is hard to see why this should be a cause for concern. For it is unclear how this element of the assessor relativist’s account could be avoided by anyone aiming to give a complete account of these issues. After all, the mere fact that the truth of one proposition is incompatible with the truth of another does not imply that these propositions are rationally incompatible in the manner that P and not-P are. There are many logically incompatible pairs of propositions, P and Q, where it is nonetheless perfectly possible to believe \textit{both} P and Q while remaining rational in the normal sense of the word. For not every logical or mathematical inconsistency carries with it the sort of rational noncotenability that comes with both believing P and believing not-P. And it is hard to see how the very strong and basic sort of rational noncotenability that is present

\textsuperscript{16} This is very much in the spirit of Gibbard’s appeal to primitive facts about “disagreement” in this context. (For skepticism about such appeals, see Schroeder 2010.)

\textsuperscript{17} Thus, in the terminology of MacFarlane (forthcoming), the corresponding beliefs satisfy “preclusion of joint accuracy.”
in such cases might be explained without making an appeal to something like the facts about the conceptual role noted above.18

If this is right, everyone will need to appeal to an account of rational noncotenability that involves at least two elements. First, it will appeal to certain basic relations of rational incompatibility to explain the strong sense in which combinations like belief that P and belief that not-P are rationally incompatible. And then it will build on these relations, plus its compositional semantics, to explain the sort of rational incompatibility that is present whenever a set of propositions cannot simultaneously be true. As we have just seen, the assessor relativist is in a position to offer an account of the rational incompatibility that has exactly this structure.

This, however, leaves the last two features of moral disagreement to be explained. So what can the assessor relativist say to explain why moral disagreements display them? To consider this question, it is useful to ask why ordinary cases of empirical disagreement display these features. In doing so, it is helpful to begin with Robert Stalnaker’s famous observation that the aim (or “essential effect”) of assertion is to add to the shared common ground within one’s conversational context.19 If this is right, then we should expect assertion to be governed by some version of the following:

**Aim of Assertion:** When one sincerely makes an assertion, one aims to bring it about that everyone in one’s conversational context accepts (for the purpose of that conversation) the content of this assertion.

Acceptance is Stalnaker’s term for the general attitude of treating something as true for some reason. Thus, believing that P is a way of accepting that P, but so too are pretending that P, supposing that P, assuming that P, and so on. Still, in the case of sincere and straightforward conversation, to accept something for the purposes of the relevant conversation is just to believe it. So while the difference between belief and acceptance is often important, it is not particularly relevant to the basic case in which someone makes a straightforward moral assertion.

If Aim of Assertion is true, it is not difficult to explain why ordinary cases of empirical disagreement display many of the features noted above. While accepting something for the purpose of a conversation can vary a great deal from conversation to conversation, the purpose of normal, straightforward conversations is precisely to bring about a convergence in what the parties to the conversation believe. Thus, when I assert some (nonindexical) empirical

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18 For example, even on Stalnaker’s preferred account in terms of “fragmentation,” we need to explain why the sort of fragmentation involved in believing P and believing not-P is so much more irrational than many other sorts of belief fragmentation.

19 See, e.g., Stalnaker 1999.
proposition P in a straightforward conversational context, the other parties to that conversation will accept P in the relevant sense just in case they believe P. So, if Aim of Assertion is true, by asserting P in such a conversational context, I am aiming to bring it about that all the parties to the conversational context share my doxastic attitude toward P. And so, at least as long as I remain engaged in the conversation and do not retract my assertion, I will be under some obligation to try to bring it about that the other parties share this attitude. Until I have done so, I cannot regard my assertion as being fully successful.

Moreover, it is not only assertions that are associated with success conditions of this sort. Rather, the exchange of assertions that makes up a conversation has closely related success conditions as well. In fact, the very notion of “accepting something for the purpose of a conversation” appeals to the idea that not just assertions, but also conversations, have aims or purposes. Thus, we can extend Stalnaker’s explicit account by making the following implicit principle explicit.

**Aim of Conversation:** When one makes an assertion, one aims to bring it about that everyone in one’s conversational context accepts (for the purpose of that conversation) the same view about the matter that one’s assertion concerns.

Again, it is important to stress that an aim of this sort is already implicit in Stalnaker’s discussion of assertion in terms of acceptance for a particular conversational purpose. So we are not really adding anything new to his view by making it explicit. But nonetheless it is important to stress that the aim at issue in Aim of Conversation can be satisfied even when it is not possible to satisfy Aim of Assertion. In particular, as noted above, straightforward conversations aim at achieving convergence in what the conversational parties believe concerning the issues at stake in the conversation. Thus, given Aim of Conversation, when we engage in a straightforward conversation about some ordinary empirical matter of fact P, neither of us can regard the conversation as being fully successful until we have converged on a shared doxastic attitude toward P. Therefore, so long as we both continue to be committed to remaining in such a conversation, we will both feel some pressure to shift our views so as to make such a convergence possible. 20

Can the assessor relativist use this explanatory strategy to explain the features noted above? In order to answer this question, we need to consider

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20 Of course, in the empirical case, your assertion that not-P will also provide me with a new source of evidence against P—evidence that counts against the correctness of my assertion that P. But this is a feature of empirical disagreement that the assessor relativist presumably does not take to apply in the same way to the moral case.
how these aims should be interpreted in the context of such views. In particular, we need to ask what is required, on assessor relativism, for someone to share my view about an assessor-sensitive moral proposition P.

Well, according to the assessor relativist, if I believe P and you believe not-P in such a case, then I will judge, not just the proposition P, but also your belief that P, to be false in the ordinary \((\text{false}_0)\) sense of this word. And if I judge your belief that P to be false, it is hard to see how we might be said to share the same view concerning P. As such, it seems clear that the assessor relativist should interpret these principles so that someone shares my view about an assessor-sensitive proposition P just in case she shares my doxastic attitude toward P.\(^{21}\)

If this is right, then the assessor relativist can offer an explanation of the behavior above that exactly parallels the explanation we offered in the non-moral case. In particular, given this, in making a straightforward assertion of a moral proposition P, I aim to bring it about that everyone in my conversation shares my doxastic attitude toward P. And, similarly, in engaging someone in straightforward conversation about P, I aim to bring it about that we converge upon a shared doxastic attitude toward P. Thus, just as before, I will feel pressure to bring about such a convergence or give up on the conversation in question.

Of course, this pressure to converge is contingent on remaining in the conversation, but nonetheless it is intrinsic to the nature of moral conversation as such. For this pressure is a product of Aim of Conversation when this general conversational norm is applied to the sort of straightforward moral conversations that aim at convergence in moral judgment. In this way, this account of such pressure is importantly different from the accounts of these phenomena offered by Gibbard and MacFarlane, who see such pressure as the product of purely contingent, psychological facts about us—such as the fact that we find these disagreements psychologically uncomfortable or unpleasant. To my mind, accounts of this kind fail to establish a sufficiently strong connection between moral disagreement and the relevant forms of rational pressure. Thus, it seems to me to be an advantage of the present account that it makes this pressure intrinsic to the pragmatic norms that govern moral conversation as such. Given this, anyone engaged in straightforward moral conversation will be rationally required to feel this pressure.

In other words, on the present account, we can characterize the sort of disagreement that is present in moral discourse as follows.

\(^{21}\) As a result, two individuals will share the same view of some moral question only if their beliefs about that question are rationally compatible with one another.
Disagreement in Conversation: A conversation involves a conversational disagreement if the parties to that conversation have performed speech acts that aim at shifting their conversational common ground in incompatible ways.

And similarly, we can say that unexpressed moral disagreements involve a “relatively deep” sort of disagreement insofar as they involve judgments that, if translated into explicit assertions in a single conversation, would aim at shifting the conversational common ground in incompatible ways.22

This does capture the features of moral disagreement noted above rather nicely. But here a worry about assessor relativism is likely to arise. Given this account, it can often be appropriate, in sincere and straightforward conversation, for me to adopt the aims involved in asserting P even though P is falseS relative to the context of assessment of those I am speaking to. And yet it is surely not appropriate, in such a conversational setting, for me to adopt the aim of making it the case that someone believes something that is falseS relative to her own context of assessment?23

This line of thought would be problematic if it were impossible to change what is trueS relative to someone’s context of assessment through conversation. But there is no reason to think this is the case. Given assessor relativism, what is trueS relative to someone’s context of assessment will depend on her moral beliefs and attitudes. Thus, since conversational pressures can lead someone to change these beliefs and attitudes, it will also be possible to shift what is trueS relative to a person’s context of assessment by conversing with her.

As a result, there need not be anything underhanded about aiming to bring it about that someone believes P, even when P is currently falseS relative to her context of assessment, so long as one aims to do so via making it the case that P is trueS relative to her context of assessment—or, in other words, so long as one complies with the following.

Aim of Assertion*: When one asserts an assessor-sensitive proposition in straightforward conversation, one aims to bring it about that this assertion is trueS relative to the context of assessment of every person in one’s conversational context.

Aim of Straightforward Conversation*: When one asserts an assessor-sensitive proposition in straightforward conversation, one aims to bring it about

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22 Note that Disagreement in Conversation, together with the norms above, rules out giving an assessor relativist treatment of areas of discourse in which disagreement of this sort is not present. So, for example, these claims appear to rule out certain sorts of assessor relativism about tense. But this does not seem counterintuitive.

23 For a version of this worry, see Egan’s (2007) presentation of his view.
that this assertion has the same truth-value relative to the context of assessment of every person in one’s conversational context.

In this way, one of the main points of assessor-sensitive assertion (in straight-forward conversation) is to bring about a convergence in the contexts of assessment of the parties to one’s conversation. Still, one might wonder whether the assessor relativist is entitled to appeal to Aim of Assertion and Aim of Conversation in the way just sketched. There are at least two variants of this thought that deserve to be taken seriously. First, one might think that we can make sense of the norms governing any area of genuinely assertoric discourse only in terms of a traditional non-assessor-sensitive truth predicate.24 But putting aside the terminological question of when a speech act should count as a “genuine assertion,” it is hard to see why the acceptance of a system of norms like the one described above would be incoherent or impossible in principle. Still, not every coherent system of norms is one it would make sense to adopt. So perhaps the real worry is that the linguistic practice the assessor-relativist is describing is one that it would be senseless to engage in. But the assessor relativist will surely take himself to have a ready response to this charge. He will insist that the point of engaging in this sort of linguistic practice is precisely to introduce into our language a means for bringing about moral convergence through conversation—a means that does not require us to be responsive to every case of peer disagreement in the manner that (he believes) would be true if a standard objectivist account of moral discourse were true. Surely, he will say, it is not hard to understand what the point of this practice would be.25

3. THE ASSESSOR RELATIVIST’S RESPONSE TO THE SKEPTIC’S ARGUMENT

But, of course, the assessor relativist can point to this as a reason to engage in the linguistic practice he is describing only if this practice in fact offers us a novel way of resisting the skeptic’s argument. Fortunately for the assessor relativist, his account appears to deliver this, at least up to a point. After all, given the assessor relativist’s understanding of the norms governing moral judgment and the preceding account of moral disagreement, when I disagree with a peer about some moral issue, I need only feel pressure to arrive at a

24 For a variant of this thought, see Wedgwood 2007, ch. 2.
25 Here I echo the response some expressivists have given to such questions—although, again, I conceive of moral disagreement as generating a more robust form of pressure toward convergence than they have.
shared view of this matter insofar as I am committed to remaining in conversation with her about it. In other words, on this view, disagreement with a peer should push me to shift my views only insofar as I do not want to write her off as someone who is “impossible to talk to about these things” or insofar as I have other independent grounds for wanting to achieve convergence in our moral views. Thus, I can always respond to cases of peer disagreement by simply ceasing to engage with a peer about the issue in question, without any hint of irrationality—provided, of course, that my view is in fact trueS relative to my own context of assessment and that I do not have overwhelming reasons to continue to search for a resolution of the disagreement in question.

In this way, the assessor relativist’s account of moral disagreement supports at most the following norm.

\[ \text{Peer Disagreement:} \text{ If a peer with respect to some assessor-sensitive } P \text{ asserts or judges that } P, \text{ and } P \text{ is not true}_S \text{ relative to one’s own context of assessment, then one must alter one’s confidence in } P \text{ only insofar as one is committed to achieving a successful resolution to potential conversations with that peer about such matters.} \]

On the assessor relativist’s account, our primary aim in forming moral beliefs is to arrive at a moral view that is trueS relative to our own context of assessment.\(^{26}\) On such a view, we need be sensitive to the moral views of others only insofar as we take those views to be a reliable guide to what is trueS relative to our context of assessment or insofar as we are committed to engaging in meaningful conversation with them about these topics.

Disagreements about fully objective matters are different, on this account, not because the norms noted above fail to hold in such cases but because what is trueS in these cases does not vary (in any interesting fashion) from context of assessment to context of assessment. Thus, cases involving fully objective truths are, in effect, cases in which we all share a single context of assessment. As such, in these cases I cannot write off the views of anyone else as the product of a permissible response to a context of assessment that is different from my own—for everyone else’s context of assessment is the same as mine in the relevant respects.

If this is right, then the assessor relativist is in a position to offer a coherent story about moral disagreement that is compatible with some form of both Depth of Disagreement and Resistance to Disagreement. But despite this, it is easy to feel as though the assessor relativist’s account of moral disagreement does not do enough to capture our intuitive understanding of the force and

\(^{26}\) Of course, any such view will also be true\(_O\) when assessed from our own context of assessment.
significance of moral disagreement. In particular, while assessor relativism
does give greater weight to moral disagreement than, say, indexical context-
tualism, the assessor relativist’s account still permits us to be quite insensitive to
the presence of moral disagreement so long as we have little desire to achieve
moral convergence with those around us. And yet, moral disagreement often
does trouble us, even when we have no particular interest in achieving such
convergence. The existence of this tendency, at least to some degree, does not
seem to me to be open to serious doubt. What is open to doubt, of course, is
whether this is a feature of moral discourse that our final metaethical theory
should explain and legitimate. Perhaps, the assessor relativist might say, this
tendency to take moral disagreement more seriously than we would if assessor
relativism were true is merely the remnant of a discredited and overly objec-
tivist picture of morality. If so, then assessor relativism—or some view like it—may well represent the best approach to understanding the distinctive
nature of moral disagreement. But if not, then it will be difficult to develop a
form of moral assessor relativism that captures the depth of moral disagree-
ment, while delivering a different verdict concerning the argument from
moral disagreement than more objective views do.27

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