Consequences of Ethical Relativism

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The typically heated, even shrill, nature of the debate over ethical relativism is connected with the important yet conflicting consequences that have been imputed to that doctrine. For many of its advocates, relativism is integral to a variety of liberal and humane ethical ideals – for example, that there is more than one way of living a decent ethical life and that those whose ethical practices and beliefs differ from our own should be treated with toleration and respect. But many of its critics urge a diametrically opposed view. They see relativism as corrosive of commitment both to the moral point of view and to specific ethical values, including toleration and respect. The main purpose of this article is to elicit the consequences of ethical relativism, not to determine its truth, although whether its consequences have any bearing on its truth is a matter to which we will return. Above all, I shall be concerned to argue for a variant of the second, pessimistic view of relativism’s consequences.¹

1. What is Ethical Relativism?

The question of relativism’s consequences is accentuated by the fact that it has probably eclipsed non-cognitivism as the leading philosophical expression of scepticism about ethics. In contrast to the classic mid-century non-cognitivist, the relativist admits that ethical judgments are proper objects of belief, that they are capable of being true or justified, and hence that ethical knowledge is possible. The distinctive nature of his scepticism emerges, instead, in his interpretation of these apparently anti-sceptical concessions. On the interpretation adopted herein, the fundamental contention of ethical relativism is that ethical judgments presuppose a background of standards by reference to which their truth or justification may be determined, and that there is a diversity of potential sets of standards between which no objective adjudication is possible. This means that judgments that are true or justified according to one set of standards may not be true or justified according to a different set, and that between the two sets of standards no assessment of rational superiority can be made or could in principle be made that is not simply question-begging. Thus, on the relativist’s view, for any ethical judgment \( J \), there is potentially a conflicting judgment \( J' \), and there is no objective manner through which the conflict between \( J \) and \( J' \) can be adjudicated. Consequently, ethical knowledge is always of a ‘local’ variety, one that presupposes the standards of some individual or community.
This is a robust version of relativism, and it is intended to apply to all types of ethical judgments. It could, of course, be qualified in various ways: for instance, with respect to the conditions under which, and the types of judgments for which, it holds. Three more general points are worth noting. First, the thesis of ethical relativism is not itself an ethical judgment. Instead, it is a thesis in meta-ethics, a philosophical hypothesis about the nature of ethical rationality. This characterisation is plausible if we do not rigidly confine meta-ethical inquiry to the semantic analysis of moral concepts. The point of the relativist’s thesis is to provide an explanation of the kind of truth or justification ethical judgments may attain, one that comports with pervasive features of ethical discourse revealed by the self-understanding of ordinary agents and by more specialised historical and sociological inquiry. In consequence, ethical relativism of this meta-ethical variety is logically distinct from various ethical doctrines frequently termed ‘relativist’ and which we may categorise as forms of normative relativism, e.g. the claims that the adherents of one morality should not pass moral judgments on the adherents of a different morality, or that individuals should abide by the moral norms and values endorsed by their community. This logical distinctness does not exclude the possibility that ethical relativism, in conjunction with one or more other premises, provides crucial support for some version of normative relativism.

Secondly, relativism is a thesis about the truth or rational justification of ethical judgments. (So, rather than always refer to ‘truth or justification’, I will often speak of relativism as a thesis about the ‘validity’ or ‘soundness’ of ethical judgments.) This is to accommodate within the scope of discussion an important group of Kantian-style or constructivist theories, which deny that ethical judgments are capable of truth or falsity, yet hold them to be subject to a significant form of validation. The characteristic motivation for this denial is that of differentiating the domain of practical reason from that of empirical cognition: ascriptions of truth, it is claimed, properly belong in the latter domain because in that domain the idea of bringing our judgments into accord with the contours of an external reality is tenable. But this idea is held by such theories to be untenable in the domain of practical reason: the objectivity of ethical judgments is not consequent upon their correspondence to the fabric of the external world, but upon formal or procedural requirements inherent in practical reason itself. It follows from this point that the relativism debate is distinct from that about ethical realism, which concerns whether ethical thought aspires to, and achieves, the aim of representing a reality that exists in some sense independently of human belief and motivation.

Thirdly, the formulation I have given leaves unspecified the nature and source of the background set of standards to which the validity of ethical judgments is relative. As such, it represents only a schematic or abstract hypothesis that relativists may be thought to hold in common, and which they try to endow with maximal explanatory power by specifying what determines the standards to which judgments are relative. Broadly, two general kinds of determinant are typically advanced: individualistic determinants and social determinants. According
to individualistic versions of relativism, the standards are determined by a suitably defined class of psychological or behavioural states attributable to individual agents, e.g. decisions to adopt moral principles or particular feelings or sentiments of approval and disapproval directed at types of actions or situations. By contrast, social versions of ethical relativism fix the background of standards by reference to some characterisation of the social context within which ethical deliberation takes place, e.g. ‘conceptual scheme’, ‘ideology’, ‘Lebenswelt’, ‘episteme’, ‘culture’, ‘tradition’, and ‘form of life’. In this article, I shall be concerned with the consequences of social forms of relativism in ethics.

Clearly, the version of ethical relativism I have outlined avoids the classic objection to all forms of relativism, namely, that they are self-refuting. One way of putting the objection would be that, as a matter of consistency, the truth or justification of ethical relativism must itself be relative to an arbitrary set of standards; therefore, the relativist lapses into inconsistency if he urges relativism as objectively valid. The general relativistic thesis outlined above avoids this sort of incoherence because it is not self-referring: first, it does not assert the relativity of all judgments to a set of arbitrary standards, but only of ethical judgments; and, second, its status is that of a meta-ethical thesis, not of an ethical judgment. Therefore, it does not fall within its own scope in a self-refuting way. Leaving further issues of coherence to one side, I want to suggest that ethical relativism poses a serious sceptical challenge to ordinary modes of ethical thought. But in order to see this, it is necessary to outline the broader philosophical problematic to which relativism is a response.

2. The Philosophical Background to the Problem

This broader problematic is that of formulating an explanation of ethical rationality. More specifically, the controversy over social versions of ethical relativism concerns the explanation of the relationship of ethical reasoning to its social context, and the implications of this relationship for our understanding of the validity of ethical judgments and for the critique and comparative evaluation of diverse and competing socially embodied forms of ethical thought and practice. It is their performance in this explanatory task that determines the outcome of the contest between the different versions of ethical relativism and the various theories ranged against them. But what are the criteria by which the success of competing explanations is to be judged?

My proposal is that the contending theories should be understood and assessed in terms of their ability to capture and reconcile two fundamental, yet seemingly conflicting, dimensions of ethical rationality. These are the immanence of ethical rationality in social contexts and its transcendence of them insofar as its deliverances lay claim to an authority that surpasses the dictates of any particular context, enabling us to subject all such contexts to criticism and to engage in a comparative evaluation of the claims of divergent forms of ethical thought. The idea that these two dimensions must be balanced in an illuminating and
defensible way by any explanation of ethical rationality that warrants our assent
is not an arbitrary stipulation. It expresses, for the specific case of ethical thought,
a requirement conditioning our understanding of rationality generally, one that
has been formulated by Hilary Putnam as follows:

There are two points that must be balanced...: (1) talk of what is ‘right’
and ‘wrong’ in any area only makes sense against the background of an
inherited tradition; but (2) traditions themselves can be criticized...
Reason is, in this sense, both immanent (not to be found outside of
concrete language games and institutions) and transcendent (a regulative
idea that we use to criticize the conduct of all activities and institutions).3

In the case of ethical rationality, the force of this dual requirement stems from its
encapsulating pervasive features of our ordinary moral self-understanding. So,
immanence refers to a number of pre-philosophically given facts, such as: that a
person’s capacity for ethical thought is developed and sustained within a linguis-
tic and social environment fostered by, and embodied in, historical communities;
that the beliefs and modes of deliberation so inculcated may diverge significantly
across different societies and traditions; and that the often interminable and deep-
seated nature of moral disagreement reflects this diversity in social inheritance.
The idea of transcendence designates equally familiar facts: that ethical discourse
displays an ingrained aspiration to objectivity, a claim that there is a validity to
be sought in ethical judgments that finds no analogue in, for instance, judgments
of taste; that the mere endorsement of a moral belief by social convention does not
of itself warrant it as correct; that we may engage in rational debate about the
merits of our own and alien ethical traditions, subjecting them to criticism where
appropriate; and that by means of reflection and dialogue we may discover moral
truths or learn that beliefs we hitherto espoused are mistaken.

The task of accommodating both the immanence and transcendence of moral-
ity enables us to systematise the relativist problematic as instantiating a recurring
schema for philosophical problems.4 According to Robert Nozick, such problems
often raise the question of understanding how something - typically, a fundamen-
tal category of human thought or experience - is or can be possible. The character-
stic form of such questions is: ‘How is $p$ possible, given or supposing $r_1,...,r_n$?’
The statements $r_1,...,r_n$ constitute a set of ‘apparent excluders’ of $p$: statements that
are assumed to be true or taken as given and that seem to conflict with the truth
or possibility of $p$. The problem raised by the relativist is: ‘How is the objectivity
claimed by ordinary ethical judgments possible given the facts of ethical imma-
nescence?’ The facts of immanence comprise the apparent excluders of objectivity,
and for the relativist’s purposes they broadly fall into two categories. The first
category is illustrative of the *socially dependent* character of ethical reasoning. Three
main forms of dependence can be distinguished. Productive dependence refers to
the causal necessity of a certain kind of social context for the emergence and main-
tenance of the capacity to engage in forms of ethical reasoning. Interpretative
dependence refers to the hermeneutical role of social contexts in determining the meaning and intelligibility of ethical reasoning. Finally, constitutive dependence embodies the more controversial notion that the standards of rational judgment in ethics are necessarily the standards of some social context or other, so that there is no workable conception of ‘ethical rationality’ that is not the conception inherent in, or derived from, some social context or other. The second category of facts of immanence builds on the first and concerns ethical divergence. At the simplest level, these include well-known facts about the historical diversity in ethical concepts, beliefs and practices between and within communities, and the often persistent and intractable character of ethical disagreements. At a more sophisticated level, it would refer to seemingly fundamental variations (‘incommensurabilities’) in the social contexts to which ethical reasoning is (productively, interpretatively and constitutively) dependent.

If the claim to objectivity inherent in ethical discourse is problematised by the set of apparent excluders constituted by the facts of immanence, then the success of different theories of ethical rationality will depend on the comparative power of the explanations they provide of this apparent conflict. Thus, the objectivist will seek to vindicate the transcendent dimension of ethical thought, to show that the claims embodied in the facts of transcendence withstand the apparent challenge posed by the facts of immanence. This will typically involve him in denying the truth of some or all of the apparent excluders, or else in interpreting some or all of them in such a way as to reveal that the conflict with the claim to objectivity is merely apparent and not real. More positively, he will need to give a more detailed elaboration of the idea of objectivity and of how it is attainable by ethical thought. The relativist, on the other hand, though he accepts that a claim to objectivity is inherent in ethical discourse, will advocate an explanation according to which the apparent excluders undermine that claim. This does not mean that he is committed straightforwardly to denying the facts of transcendence; rather, many of those facts will need to be accommodated, under some interpretation or other, by any convincing relativistic theory (see section 6 below). But the relativist’s account of ethical reasoning remains sceptical because the interpretation of these notions that it provides does not redeem the claim to objectivity inherent in ethical thought. Contrary to the view expressed by Mark Platts, that relativism is sceptical in this way does not disqualify it from being the best explanation of ethical rationality. He asserts that an ‘extreme’ relativism that denied the possibility of criticism between different moralities would be so revisionary as to ‘threaten our grasp of the very idea that the systems concerned are different systems of moral thought’. This argument is flawed by an illegitimate progression from appearance to reality. That ethical thought inherently lays claim to the possibility of objective, inter-systemic criticism may be an accurate description of its transcendent dimension. But this leaves the matter of relativism’s truth unanswered, for that doctrine is in issue only when we ask how the claim to objectivity is to be understood and accounted for in the light of an explanation encompassing other pervasive facts about morality, including the seemingly countervailing facts of immanence. The ‘facts of ethical experience’ from which
the relativist problematic takes its rise are not brute data that simply have to be taken as true or given by any ethical theory; rather, they are open to explanations that are either vindicatory or debunking of them in various degrees. This is why it is untenable for Platts to claim that our ability to identify systems of thought as ethical in character is incompatible with the truth of relativism.7

A particular merit of the explanatory account, I think, is that it reveals how the problem of relativism is emergent upon tensions that obtain between deeply embedded aspects of our ethical self-understanding, as opposed to being a problem posited by philosophical speculation unconnected with the realities of ethical experience. Given the source of the problem, it is futile to seek to resolve or dissolve it through the sort of ‘therapeutic’ description of the ‘grammar’ of ethical discourse sometimes recommended by Wittgenstein and his followers.8 Indeed, the impoverishing upshot of this approach would be the disappearance of relativism as a philosophical problem, and its replacement by an existential quandary. As well as being philosophically impoverishing, this upshot would be question-begging since it not only assumes that the debate about relativism boils down to a substantive ethical problem, it further holds that this problem is amenable to resolution by personal fiat alone. This is just to adopt, under the guise of responding to the exigencies of a neutral philosophical method, a particularly unsophisticated form of ethical decisionism. Of course, the Wittgensteinian strictures are in part well motivated by a desire to find a more modest mode of philosophising than the kind of speculative metaphysics that seeks explanations of the world by levitating to a standpoint beyond human experience. But this healthy emphasis on the limits of philosophy does not throw us back onto purportedly uncontroversial phenomenological description because, as the idea of philosophical explanation shows, these two alternatives are not exhaustive.

3. Empirical and Interpretative Consequences

On the view presented so far, ethical relativism is a meta-ethical thesis: an hypothesis aimed at explaining the nature of truth and justification in ethics. The assertion of relativism is not an ethical claim. It therefore does not logically entail ethical consequences in the way that the various forms of normative ethical relativism do. More generally, relativism makes no practical claim of a non-ethical variety either: it is a claim in theoretical, not practical, reason. It does not purport to instruct agents about how they ought to act, or what considerations should guide their practical deliberations. If relativism’s consequences do not flow from an ethical or practical claim, how should we construe them? We must, I think, distinguish two species of consequences – empirical and interpretative – that relativism may have. Empirical consequences are identified by answering the question: If individuals or groups come to believe in relativism, what other beliefs, behavioural dispositions and social practices (as a causal or statistical matter) is this belief likely to bring about or be associated with? Samples of the familiar claim that relativism leads to disastrous empirical consequences include that
belief in it is responsible for: increased immorality, crime and social breakdown; the rise of totalitarian political movements of both the right and left; and the corrosion of Western political and cultural values.

Given the recurrent imputation of disturbing empirical consequences to relativism, and also the tendency to view them as discrediting it, three general points need to be made. First, the claim that relativism generates these consequences has not been established to anything like a reasonable level of proof. An investigation aimed at yielding such proof could not be conducted a priori, but would also have to involve the deployment of a considerable amount of historical, psychological and sociological evidence. The need for such evidence is only underlined by the fact that relativists have been no less willing to ascribe disturbing empirical consequences to belief in objectivism. Moreover, we have good reason to be sceptical about empirical claims of this sort whether advanced pro or contra relativism. First of all, they grossly exaggerate the influence that an explanatory philosophical doctrine could achieve over the mass of ordinary people’s behaviour, even if they came to believe it. This is especially so given that relativism does not provide a reason for its upholders to endorse or bring about those consequences (though it may be thought of as eliminating the possibility of adducing a certain sort of reason for not endorsing or bringing about those consequences, i.e. a reason based on objective ethical standards). Further, the common assumption that the empirical consequences of belief in relativism are invariant across the different contexts in which that belief might emerge is highly questionable. It ignores the fact that those consequences are likely to be heavily influenced by background conditions that vary from case to case, such as the cultural traditions of the community in which relativism has taken hold. Second, the empirical consequences of belief in ethical relativism have no bearing on its truth or falsity because the truth of explanatory philosophical theories is an entirely separate matter from that of the empirical consequences (desirable or undesirable) of belief in them. Therefore, it is never a valid argument against the truth of such a theory that its acceptance is liable to yield undesirable results (but cf. section 7 below). Finally, there is a reason to reject the strategy of debunking an explanatory theory by reference to its bad empirical consequences that is specific to the objectivism/relativism dispute. Such arguments not only claim that certain effects are causally or statistically attendant upon a particular belief, they also involve an ethical evaluation of those effects, e.g. that totalitarianism is unjust. But to make such an assessment in the context of the objectivism/relativism debate seems question-begging. What motivates these empirical arguments against relativism is the idea that acceptance of it will lead to behaviour and social trends that are morally abhorrent, even if those who engage in them deny, or are oblivious to, this fact. But this is to presuppose an objectivist notion of ethical truth and to claim that the supposed empirical consequences of relativism include beliefs and practices that violate those truths.

If the oft-made appeals to the disastrous empirical consequences of ethical relativism fare so poorly in justifying the widespread antipathy towards relativism, it might be tempting to follow Philippa Foot in attributing that antipathy...
to various non-rational influences, such as the fact that ethics has a historical connection with religion and that ethical judgments ‘regulate our conduct in just those areas which arouse the deepest feelings of guilt, so that we want to erect the strongest possible barriers against what we fear we might do’. I do not deny that Foot’s diagnosis may reveal part of the motivation for the resistance to relativism, only that it exhausts it. We can see this if we turn to relativism’s interpretative consequences. The idea here is that the practice of ethical judgment is not a brute, inarticulate fact of human life. Instead, it is a reflexive practice in that it incorporates a complex self-understanding and it is only against the background of this tacit self-understanding that the practice is intelligible and distinguishable from other practices. Although our shared ethical self-understanding is not usually explicitly thematised by competent moral agents, it can be brought to light by articulating the presuppositions and pervasive features of the practice of ethical judgment. I crudely summarised some of these features earlier in terms of the transcendent and immanent dimensions of ethical reasoning (p. 175 above). Now the crucial point is that our ethical self-understanding is not incorrigible or self-certifying. As with any other reflexive human practice, the practice of ethical judgment may depend on a self-image that is illusory or flawed to a greater or lesser extent. In speaking of the interpretative consequences of a doctrine in philosophical ethics, I mean the implications that it has for the characterisation and relative viability of component features of our ethical self-understanding. If the practice of ethical judgment is oriented by deep presuppositions about its own nature, then these presuppositions are liable to confirmation or falsification by explanatory theses like objectivism and relativism. It is in urging the massively deflationary interpretative consequences of ethical relativism that, I contend, its opponents have a powerful case.

This emerges most clearly in relativism’s implications for ethical critique. We can best illustrate the point by reference to judgments of social justice. Such judgments are especially pertinent in the cross-cultural context since any society will seek to legitimise its practices and hierarchies, and the attempted legitimation will provide a basis for making critical assessments of the alternative conceptions of justice invoked to perform the legitimating role. As Bernard Williams has observed, ‘we are disposed to see past conceptions of justice as embodiments of ideas that still have a claim on modern people. To this extent, we see them as in real confrontation with each other and with modern ideas’. But it also belongs to our intuitive appreciation of sound ethical critique – to the self-understanding of such criticism – that we conceive of it as grounded in standards that are objectively superior to those that might be invoked in defence of the practices criticised. Indeed, it is partly because ethical thought involves this objectivist aspiration that we view rival conceptions of justice as genuinely confronting each other in a way that we do not regard, say, divergent notions of culinary taste as standing in a relationship of genuine confrontation. But if relativism is true, this objectivist aspiration cannot be vindicated; instead, ethical critique must be seen as a matter of determining the content and implications of the standards embodied in the psychological or social inheritance we simply happen to...
have, or else their renunciation in favour of the different, but no less arbitrary, standards.

This leads us directly into relativism’s troubling interpretative consequences. For it seems that only if ethical objectivity is attainable can there be an adequate basis for our self-understanding of ethical critique. Relativism appears to relinquish the possibility of the discriminations such critique purports to make: from the perspective of one tradition, for example, the institution of slavery is an unjust and barbarous practice; from the perspective of another, radically different tradition, it is a morally appropriate expression of the status of a certain class of beings – such as the members of a despised racial or ethnic group. An agent’s moral assessment of slavery will depend upon which standpoint is adopted, but there is never any non-question-begging reason for preferring one or other standpoint. This seems a potentially massive corrosion of the notion of critique that is integral to our ethical self-understanding. Reverting to the explanatory model elaborated in section 2, we can say that the disturbing interpretative consequences of relativism arise from its deflationary explanation of the transcendent dimension of ethical thought. Specifically, it undermines both: (i) the idea that we can subject individuals or communities that adhere to different ethical standards from us to critical evaluation, and (ii) the idea that we can subject our own (individual or collective) ethical standards to such evaluation. These two consequences interlock, since the idea of cross-cultural (or inter-personal) evaluation is implicit in the idea of self-directed critique: if our standards withstand critical scrutiny, then this at least partly means that they can survive critical comparison with the radically different standards of other, real or imagined, persons or communities. If our ethical standards could be justified in this way, then we would be entitled to a special reply to the question, ‘Why not convert to a different set of ethical standards?’, whenever it might be in our (communal) self-interest to do so, or simply as an exercise of arbitrary choice. This reply would appeal to the fact that those standards have a rational claim to our allegiance that is superior to, or at least not inferior to, the claim of the newly proffered set. (There may be other reasons for a negative response to such a question, e.g. the mere fact that an ethical tradition is one’s own and that one is committed to it in virtue of the features of it that are truly valuable, would constitute another such reason. But this presupposes the possibility of objective ethical judgments.)

With the idea of interpretative consequences in hand, we can see how they give some substance to fears about relativism’s empirical consequences. Those fears centre on two broad concerns: (i) that people will be less inclined to accord importance to morality in their lives, and (ii) that even if they continue to attribute importance to the ethical point of view, they will be more likely to make moral errors, since they will not appreciate that objective ethical truth is attainable. Now relativism is, at base, a sceptical explanation of ethical reasoning; one that shows vital aspects of our ethical self-understanding cannot survive critical scrutiny. This amounts to saying that ethical thought cannot be all that it claims to be. And it is only reasonable to suppose that the inability of a mode of thought to live up to its self-image is liable to be viewed as discrediting it with the result that people
will not, *ceteris paribus*, accord it the same importance in their lives that they would have previously been disposed to give it, nor will they believe in - and so orient their deliberation in the light of – the idea that objective ethical judgments are possible. But notice that, for the last two of the three reasons listed in my discussion of empirical consequences, neither of these consequences constitutes an argument against the truth of ethical relativism. Focusing henceforth on social versions of relativism, in the next two sections I draw out relativism’s troubling interpretative implications for ethical critique in two more specific directions.

### 4. The Reason/Power Distinction

I begin with the tendency of relativism to obliterate the distinction – central to our ethical self-understanding – between relationships and interactions mediated (or capable of being mediated) by reason and those that are *merely* expressive of power or force. The commitment to ethical values invariably implicates us in a rich and complicated network of relationships and interactions with others. Or, more accurately, it is precisely our – mostly unchosen – immersion in such a network that is the main source of our engagement with matters of moral evaluation. Innumerable social roles – those of parent and child, teacher and student, official and citizen, friendship, and so on – are deeply textured by the ethical standards we recognise. Indeed, such roles typically involve two closely related activities: the (potentially) coercive enforcement of ethical standards against those who transgress or threaten to transgress them and their articulation and transmission through other, not necessarily coercive, means such as praise and condemnation, dialogue and advice. The former sort of activity is paradigmatically illustrated by the sanctions that the legal organs of a state are authorised to impose on those who violate the moral standards enshrined in the community’s criminal law, as well as by the inculcation of a sense of values in children by their parents. The non-coercive articulation and transmission of our values can be illustrated in both the public and private spheres. First, there is the process of public dialogue, advocacy and debate with respect to ethical and political issues characteristic of a democratic polity. In this case the public sphere – legislatures, the media, universities, law courts, and so on – is a forum for transmitting, articulating and critically scrutinising the values of the community. Similar processes, usually less formal and discursive, are at work in the private sphere. For example, friendship typically involves ethical dialogue and the reciprocal offering of criticism and advice based on ethical standards thought to be valid.

Our ordinary understanding of both the coercive enforcement and non-coercive articulation and transmission of ethical values is pervasively informed by a distinction between reason and power. This distinction seems to be premised on the presupposition that some ethical standards are valid independently of any particular agent’s perspective, whether personal or social. It is in virtue of this assumption that we differentiate the arbitrary use of state power (*mere* power) from its use to enforce values we think are valid and which should, therefore, be...
rationally acknowledged even by violators of the law (justified power). Again, the same assumption enables us in both the public and private domains to differentiate between the promotion of ethical claims on the basis of reasoned argument and persuasion, on the one hand, and their promotion through rhetorical manipulation, emotional blackmail or ‘brainwashing’ on the other. But precisely this objectivist assumption is disputed by relativism, with the troubling consequence that these familiar demarcations appear to lose their essential basis. Relativism’s undercutting of this distinction is clearest in cases where the interaction involves two agents or communities that adhere to rival ethical traditions incorporating divergent standards. In such cases, the attempt by one agent or community to get the other to accept an ethical belief or to perform or acquiesce in an action that is unjustified by the latter’s standards, could not be plausibly interpreted as a matter of providing a rational justification for that belief or action. But the reason/power distinction is also problematised by relativism even in cases where the two agents or communities do share a common perspective. This is because a commitment to a set of standards seems premised on the assumption that if an agent or community that hitherto shared that commitment were to challenge those standards by appealing to a rival set of standards, then the former set could be defended in a non-question-begging way against the rival set. This is the point made earlier about the interdependence of cross-cultural and self-directed critique (see p. 180 above). Even in the case of a shared ethical perspective, for the relativist it will be power rather than reason that is at the heart of our relationships and interactions, even if it is only the relatively inconspicuous power of socialisation.

What this interpretative consequence further shows is that the objectivist aspiration of ethical discourse is not just a deep structural feature of our ethical self-understanding, it is also intimately bound up with fundamental substantive ethical notions as well. This is because our ethical self-image conditions the substantive ideals we hold, e.g., the kind of justification one is morally required to give to others will depend upon some notion of the sort of justification that is possible within the ethical domain. One way of expressing this point would be to say that the reason/power distinction is presupposed by a certain interpretation of the Kantian (but not only Kantian) injunction to treat others as ends and not just as means. The idea here is that one should not regard others solely as means: as instruments to be employed for one’s own purposes, or as obstacles to one’s purposes that have to be negotiated or neutralised. Rather, one should also treat them always as ends: and, at least minimally, part of what this means is that one should offer them justifications for one’s attitudes and behaviour towards them which appeal to standards that they are able to acknowledge as independently valid, not as mere rationalisations or as the arbitrary expressions of individual or collective commitment or inheritance. But it is precisely the point of relativism that the idea of such independent ethical standards is senseless. One strikes an argumentative baseline when one reaches a tradition’s fundamental ethical standards. There can be no further justification of those standards; one’s allegiance to them is just brute or ungrounded from an ethical point of view. And the upshot

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of this is a disquieting interpretation of what goes on when one purports to give ethical justifications. One can only get others to agree to or act in accordance with those justifications by whatever means are available and efficacious – for example, by coercion, or manipulation, or bribes, by hectoring or bullying them – but not by offering reasons that are sound in accordance with independent criteria. In the last resort, others are treated always as means, never also as ends.22

This is a familiar, if not yet totally perspicuous, line of thought. We have enough to go on, however, to consider a recent objection to it. Ronald Dworkin defends a theory of legal reasoning – ‘law as integrity’ – that requires judges to make ethical judgments in order to ascertain the applicable law in deciding a case.23 In a recent article, he confronts the claim that, if some version of ethical scepticism is true, then his theory of legal adjudication involves judges in simply foisting their value preferences, in a seemingly arbitrary and illegitimate manner, upon litigants and a wider society that may not share them.24 The thought behind this imagined objection is that the meta-ethical thesis of objectivity is required to underwrite the reason/power distinction in the judicial sphere of our public life. His reply to this criticism,25 is that no version of scepticism grounded in putatively philosophical considerations (e.g. of semantics, epistemology or ontology), could have such subversive implications whether in law or anywhere else, and this is because no version of such scepticism makes sense.

Dworkin’s ‘no consequences’ strategy turns on a distinction between ‘external’ (or ‘Archimedean’) and ‘internal’ moral scepticism. External scepticism contends ‘that there cannot be a single right answer to a controversial moral question’.26 It offers non-moral, philosophical grounds for thinking of disputes over such questions as e.g. projections of emotions, rationally non-arbitrable appeals to divergent ethical standards, and so on. Such external scepticism is directed at the status, not the content, of moral claims. It is opposed to the ‘face value’ of our moral opinions, i.e. our pervasive belief that our moral opinions are true and those who disagree with them are mistaken. According to the external sceptic, the belief about the ‘face value’ of our moral opinions is not itself a moral opinion, but rather a (mistaken) second-order view about those opinions.27 Internal scepticism, by contrast, does reflect moral considerations, being based on ‘ethical assumptions about the true or adequate ground of moral claims’, and it contends that ‘it is a mistake in moral judgment to make certain kinds of moral evaluation or criticism or . . . to make such judgments at all’.28 Such internal scepticism may be global or local, but not universal. This is because it is dependent upon the deliverances of a ‘moral sense’, i.e. ‘a set of deep beliefs that, when made explicit, count as a positive moral assertion, a claim about what the only ground of morality could be’, and so unlike external scepticism it cannot consistently deny the existence of truth ‘in the neighbourhood of the moral’.29 Examples of global internal scepticism mentioned by Dworkin include: that morality is meaningless because there is no God or because human beings do not have free will. Local forms of internal scepticism are directed at particular areas of morality, e.g. an internal sceptic about sexual morality responds to the belief that homosexuality is immoral with the counter-assertion – itself a moral view – that it is not.30
Dworkin contends that global internal scepticism is 'powerful and threatening', a fact connected to its revisionary practical implications: 'it must change the behavior of anyone who is converted to it'. External scepticism, however, has no subversive potential because the distinction on which it is based, between first-order moral views and the supposed second-order view about the status of those views, is itself mistaken. According to Dworkin, the second-order or face value view is itself 'a piece of morality', and therefore can be undermined only by a competing moral view, i.e. only by a species of global internal scepticism. Indeed, Dworkin claims that the second-order views that the external sceptic imputes to ordinary ethical discourse impale themselves on the horns of a trilemma: either they are redundant (insofar as they repeat or emphasise a first-order moral claim) or they are further moral convictions elaborating the content of an initial moral claim (so that the attribution of objectivity to the statement 'Slavery is unjust' is to assert that slavery is everywhere unjust, or would still be unjust even if everyone believed that it was just) or else they are unrelated to any belief or commitment that can plausibly be attributed to ordinary ethical agents (e.g. the view that moral judgments are made correct by 'atmospheric moral quaverings' or by the direct causal impact of 'special particles – morons'). If the external sceptic grasps either of the first two lemmas, his stance will have practical implications but only because he has abandoned meta-ethics and committed himself to a form of internal scepticism. If instead he grasps the third lemma, the question of the viability of the second-order views so construed has no bearing on ordinary ethical practice, since it patently does not embody them. It follows that '[t]he only skepticism worth anything is skepticism of the internal kind, and this must be earned by arguments of the same contested character as the arguments it opposes . . .'.

It is obvious that Dworkin's argument directly challenges the line of thought I have elaborated. I have urged that the thesis of relativism is not itself an ethical claim; instead, it is a meta-ethical claim that is backed up by an appeal to the best philosophical explanation of pervasive facts about morality. This would seem to be a version of what Dworkin calls 'external' scepticism, one to which I have attributed destabilising consequences for morality. But does Dworkin's argument against any such attribution succeed? I think not, and this because it unjustifiably allows no room for the notion of interpretative consequences. Dworkin's schema eliminates this notion by adopting an unduly narrow characterisation of external scepticism and, correspondingly, stretching the notion of internal scepticism beyond reasonable bounds. Thus, he characterises the second-order view that external scepticism is meant to debunk in absurd and outlandish ways that cannot plausibly be attributed to ordinary moral agents, e.g. that 'the wrongness of abortion is a weird physical fact'. The only alternative he contemplates is to represent that second-order view as itself 'a piece of morality'. But notice how wide-ranging is the class of beliefs he characterises in this way: that humans have free will, that God exists, and so on. Clearly these are not moral claims in the way that, for example, 'Slavery is unjust' paradigmatically is such a claim. The existence of God and free will have been subject to meaningful philosophical debates that, although capable of impinging upon morality, are not in any obvious sense

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about ‘positive moral assertions’. Admittedly, Dworkin need only contend that it is only the more specific claims – that the viability of moral judgments presupposes free will or the existence of God – that are positive moral assertions. But one might question whether, for instance, even the claim that morality presupposes free will is qualitatively on a par with straightforward moral statements such as ‘Slavery is unjust’. The difference is not just one between a global and a specific moral assertion. The former statement elicits a deep structural feature of ethical thought that recurs in most of the ethical traditions we are acquainted with; the latter is a specific moral claim which has been accepted by some, and rejected by other, such traditions. But whatever may be the proper view of the status of the thesis about the dependence of morality on free will, the claim to objectivity inherent in ethical thought is even less susceptible to portrayal as a ‘positive moral assertion’. The claim to objectivity inheres deeply in the self-understanding of ethical thought, to the extent that a code of thought and behaviour that did not manifest it may not even be classifiable as an ethical code. Would we regard judgments that were self-consciously advanced by their proponents as simply expressions of personal attitude or cultural convention as ethical judgments? Whether or not the presupposition of free will is a defining condition of ethical thought, the claim to objectivity has a stronger claim to that status.

On the alternative picture I am advocating, then, something can be ‘a piece of morality’ – in the sense that it is an inherent part of morality’s self-understanding – without itself being a substantive moral claim. It follows, on this view, that Dworkin should either expand his characterisation of external scepticism, in order to incorporate second-order views that genuinely belong to the self-understanding of ethical practice, or else concede that the claims challenged by internal scepticism are not all cogently presented as straightforwardly moral claims. In this way, the truth or falsity of ethical relativism would indeed be a matter ‘in the neighbourhood of the moral’, provided we have a sufficiently expansive and structurally differentiated map of that neighbourhood. To an extent, my alternative framework is a refinement of Dworkin’s. But it does, I think, have advantages over it. Most importantly, it allows us to formulate a claim of objectivity that Dworkin’s analysis tends to obscure or unconvincingly portray as one moral claim among others. This is the claim of objectivity, that ‘one moral conviction may be better than, not merely different from, others it contradicts’. This claim is distinct from those that Dworkin typically presents as matters of objectivity, such as the claim of determinacy (e.g. that there is ‘a single right answer to a controversial moral question’), and the claim of universality (e.g. that abortion is ‘wicked everywhere and at all times’). The objectivist can reject both determinacy and universality over wide stretches of ethical thought. For instance, species of objectivist pluralism deny that there is always a correct answer to questions about which is the most valuable tradition, life-style or action (see section 5 below), while species of objectivist particularism may confine objective ethical truth to ethical ‘perceptions’ of highly restricted scope. A subsidiary advantage of my analysis is that it makes sense of what Dworkin calls the ‘ancient and flourishing philosophical debate’ about ethical objectivity in terms that are broadly

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consonant with the self-perception of most contributors to that debate, whereas Dworkin awkwardly represents figures like Hume and Mackie as advancing ‘substantive ethical theories’ rather than explanatory philosophical doctrines.\textsuperscript{44}

Like Dworkin, however, I reject the magisterial conception of philosophy according to which philosophical thought occupies an authoritative standpoint outside ordinary forms of discourse and judges them by standards totally extrinsic to them. Instead, I have argued that the debate about ethical objectivity concerns the formulation of an account that provides the best explanation of pervasive features of the practice of ethical judgment. Those features belong to the self-understanding of morality itself. Therefore, that debate is concerned with the resolution of a tension intrinsic to ethical thought. There is no taint here of the hubristic notion of ‘a special philosophical platform from which a philosopher might look down on morality and pass judgment about it on the whole’\textsuperscript{45}. Further, in understanding the debate as hinging on the best explanation of such matters as ethical disagreement, it is evident that it cannot be resolved \textit{a priori} through the application to morality of the pre-given standards of ‘archimedean epistemology’.\textsuperscript{46} Its resolution will depend to a large extent on an assessment of the richness and power of the argumentative resources available in morality and whether in fact ethical arguments can be mustered in concrete cases which are best explained as attaining to objective superiority over counter-arguments favouring opposed conclusions, or whether instead the most compelling explanation is the debunking relativistic account according to which the various arguments advanced simply reflect adherence to incommensurable ethical standards. In this way, the objectivism/relativism debate is hostage to (our best understanding of) the actual course of ethical argument. But its status is not – as Dworkin would have it – that of one ethical debate among others.\textsuperscript{47}

So, although my framework reinstates the distinction between the ethical and the meta-ethical, it does not exclude important inter-relations between them. Two of these have been highlighted so far: ordinary ethical practice embodies a meta-ethical claim to objectivity and the resolution of meta-ethical debate turns in part on the explanation of the outcome of substantive ethical debates. And it is precisely because such inter-relations obtain that meta-ethical claims like relativism are highly consequential for our ethical self-understanding and practice.\textsuperscript{48} If this is correct, the relationship between the meta-ethical and the ethical is too complex and many-faceted to be captured by Dworkin’s bald thesis that the former term simply collapses into the latter, or else must be formulated in such a way as to be totally independent of it.

5. The Idea of Ethical Progress

The second direction in which I want to draw out the troubling interpretative consequences of relativism concerns the notion of ethical progress. We can broadly distinguish two forms of ethical progress a community might achieve. First, ‘internal progress’ occurs when the actual practice of a community comes
into greater alignment with its existing ethical standards. Those standards remain unchanged, but compliance with them has become stricter. This notion of progress abstracts from the question of the validity of the standards themselves; instead, it simply takes them as given and counts any trend in the direction of enhanced grasp of and compliance with their implications as a moral gain. ‘External’ progress, however, consists in an advance in the community’s grasp of just those standards that are valid. This is primarily a matter of cognitively locking on to valid standards, rather than enhanced grasp of and compliance with standards that are already acknowledged. Such progress will occur either when we come to grasp valid standards that hitherto we did not, or when we adopt standards that more closely approximate valid standards than those we hitherto espoused. Although ethical relativism is capable of accommodating internal progress, it is incompatible with the possibility of external progress. This is because the notion of such progress presupposes the idea of standards that are valid independently of their embodiment in the positive morality of any actual community, and which may be used to judge the relative soundness of any positive morality. In other words, the relativist can only point out, somewhat unilluminatingly, that a change in a community’s standards from an original state $S_1$ to a new state $S_2$, will be seen as regressive from the point of view of $S_1$ and progressive from that of $S_2$. But whether it is really progressive or regressive admits of no answer that is not question-begging in this way (and this is so even if one tried to make such a determination from the perspective of some third set of standards, $S_3$). Any fuller account a relativist might give of a change in standards would have to confine itself to the various causal factors that were productive of the transition, but the recounting of such factors would necessarily prescind from the question of whether the transition is a cognitive gain or loss.

It is important to be clear about what relativism’s implications in this area really are. The idea is not that external or objective ethical progress obviously is possible, and therefore that relativism is flawed insofar as it denies such progress. Bernard Mayo seems to make this error in seeking to adduce an absurd entailment of relativism with regard to ethical progress. The absurdity supposedly emerges in the relativist’s response to the following questions: How should I regard my own earlier standards, if they were different from the ones I now have? And how shall I think of possible future changes in my ethical standards? Mayo answers for the relativist as follows:

My previous standards, if they were different from my present ones, were necessarily wrong. Therefore, necessarily, I have progressed. And still more remarkably: My future standards, if they are going to be different from my present ones, are necessarily going to be wrong. Therefore, necessarily, I cannot progress any further, but can only degenerate! (The same will apply if we read, instead of ‘I’, ‘we’ or ‘our society’ throughout.). . . In other words, moral change between past and present is necessarily progressive, and moral change between present and future is necessarily retrogressive. But this is preposterous. We cannot possibly
suppose ourselves to have proved, by pure logic, that, by an amazing coincidence, the present age happens to be the most morally enlightened of all time."

This absurdity would be the clear upshot of a species of normative relativism according to which the objectively valid ethical standards for any particular agent were defined as the standards he, or his community, currently upholds. But the absurdity does not arise for the proponent of a meta-ethical version of relativism, for he is not urging the adoption of any particular set of standards from which assessments of progress and regress should be made. Instead, he is claiming that any such assessment cannot be established as objectively superior to an assessment made from a radically different set of standards. For Mayo to regard his argument as a telling one against the meta-ethical relativist is to beg the question since the paradox is generated by assuming the correctness of an objectivist interpretation of ethical progress in the first place.

Now one might imagine two objections being pressed against this deployment of the notion of ethical progress. The first is that the notion of such progress is indicative of a questionable optimism, and a closely associated complacency, about ethical matters. It conjures up the idea that the history of humankind, or some privileged segment of it, has been one of manifest, and perhaps continual or even inevitable, growth in ethical knowledge. Second, and more importantly, the objectivist idea of progress might be thought to be tainted by the chauvinism embodied in the prejudice that we in the West have achieved great ethical insights and advances, and that the progress of ‘backward’ cultures hinges upon their assimilation to our basic ethical notions, such as human rights, democracy, the free market and so on. It is just this sort of anxiety about cultural condescension, and the paternalistic or imperialistic intervention in other cultures that it seems to legitimise, that explains much of relativism’s popularity.

The first objection is readily scotched. Ethical objectivism is not advanced as a way of demonstrating that ethical progress has actually occurred throughout history. Rather, it is put forward as an explanation of how judgments of ethical progress – of the sort that seem to be inherent in our ethical self-understanding – are possible. That this does not necessarily implicate any utopian belief in an unremitting growth in ethical enlightenment across time is shown by the fact that the possibility of judgments of ethical decline logically stand or fall together with those of progress. Even thinkers such as Steiner and MacIntyre, whose accounts of the development of Western ethical thought would be pessimistic narratives of loss, fragmentation and decline, also presuppose an objectivist conception of ethics. They just place our comparatively superior grasp of the objective truth towards the opposite end of the historical continuum. So, the proper response to the first objection is that whether objective assessments of ethical progress are possible, and whether or not progress has in fact occurred in human history, are two separate questions. Thus, in spelling out this second interpretative consequence, I limited myself to its implications for the ability to discriminate between different stages of a tradition’s moral practice as progressive or regressive. I put
aside the further questions (i) whether objective ethical truths could figure in the
causal explanation of transitions in practice and belief, and (ii) whether their
causal efficacy is (sometimes, mostly or always) potent enough to overcome all
countervailing causal factors, thus ensuring that objective ethical truths ulti-
mately come to be generally believed and acted upon. The objectivist is therefore
not committed to an affirmative stance on points (i) and (ii) simply in virtue of his
objectivism (even if some realist forms of objectivism are so committed).
Regarding the second objection, it is true that relativism is corrosive of the idea
that other cultures have a great deal to learn from the West’s supposedly superior
ethical standards. But the situation is perfectly symmetrical: if others have nothing
to learn from us, we too have nothing to learn from cultures whose ethical
traditions differ markedly from our own. The relativist thrust cuts both ways, and
not simply in the direction of a laudable circumspection on the part of a histori-
cally imperialistic and interventionist West. Relativism’s consequences cannot be
so confined; they are more general, and undermine the idea that a community can
progress in its grasp of ethical standards through a learning process sparked by
an encounter with a community that adheres to different ethical standards – an
encounter that results in the first community’s acknowledgement of the superi-
ority of at least some of those alien standards to the standards it currently
upholds.

The relativistic undermining of the notion of ethical progress through cogni-
tively productive interactions with other communities can be shown, like the
reason/power distinction, to have a destabilising impact on substantive ethical
notions, in particular that of the respect and recognition owing between members
of communities that are significantly divergent in ethical culture. This line of
thought has been elaborated powerfully by Charles Taylor, who argues that one
important basis for giving recognition to discrete cultural groups – according
them respect, the opportunity for free self-expression and even the means for
ensuring their survival through indefinite future generations – is the ‘presump-
tion of equal worth’. This requires that we should orient our interactions with
other groups on the basis of the presumption that ‘all human cultures that have
animated whole societies over some considerable stretch of time have something
important to say to all human beings’. Although akin to ‘an act of faith’, it has a
compelling rationale, quite independently of anything resembling the Herderian
belief in the divinely ordained dispersion of values amongst all peoples and
epochs:

[J]It is reasonable to suppose that cultures that have provided the horizon
of meaning for large numbers of human beings, of diverse characters and
temperaments, over a long period of time – that have, in other words,
articulated their sense of the good, the holy, the admirable – are almost
certain to have something that deserves our admiration and respect, even
if it is accompanied by much that we have to abhor and reject. Perhaps
one could put it another way: it would take a supreme arrogance to
discount this possibility a priori.
Two observations that Taylor goes on to make reinforce the objectivist presuppositions of his argument. First, the presumption of equal worth is rebuttable in particular cases. It functions as a starting hypothesis orienting our approach to the study of any other culture, the validity of which has to be substantiated concretely in the course of actual study. Moreover, a favourable judgment of worth cannot be peremptorily demanded as of right in advance of such study. This is not just because further investigation may reveal that a culture is not truly valuable (in certain of its features), but also because, in the case of a sufficiently different culture, ‘we may have only the foggiest idea ex ante of in what its valuable contribution might consist. Because, for [such a] culture, the very understanding of what it is to be of worth will be strange and unfamiliar to us’.55 Indeed, this latter possibility reveals the complicity between ethnocentrism and extreme forms of multiculturalism that do issue a peremptory demand for judgments of equal worth. Such a demand is ‘paradoxically – perhaps one should say tragically – homogenizing’ because it assumes that the standards we presently have – those of North Atlantic civilization – are already adequate to make such judgments, with the result that those judgments will ethnocentrically subsume those others within our existing categories.56 Second, Taylor emphasises that any form of subjectivism or relativism could not underwrite, or easily co-exist with, this articulation of the basis of a politics of recognition. For, in the absence of objective discriminations of worth between different cultures, the endorsement of another culture’s creations as valuable is indistinguishable from the act of arbitrarily declaring oneself ‘on their side’ irrespective of whether they possess little or no value. But these two acts have significantly different meanings, not least for the members of the relevant culture: ‘the first is normally understood as a genuine expression of respect, the second often as insufferable patronizing’.57

There is yet another objection to the idea of ethical progress. This is that it presupposes that there is a single form of ethical life that is objectively best and that it is our relative proximity to this ideal state of affairs that determines the extent of our ethical progress and underwrites comparisons between ethical cultures. The problem with this ideal, as Isaiah Berlin has argued, is that it sharply contradicts the facts of ethical diversity and conflict, and the ineliminable allegiance of human beings to the distinct ethical cultures and traditions in which they are enmeshed and which partially constitute their identities. Moreover, on a more directly practical level, this conception of progress has been invoked as an ideological justification for some of the gravest crimes in human history: tyranny and inhuman deprivation, the wiping out of entire cultures and ways of life, being presented as necessary means in order to attain the ultimate goal of the human species.58 I think this line of thought is a compelling one; but equally, ethical objectivists are not committed to resisting it simply in virtue of their adherence to objectivism. And this is because, as Berlin himself insists, the meta-ethical issue of objectivity is distinct from the substantive ethical question of the unity or plurality of ethical values and their ability to identify uniquely best answers to ethical questions, notwithstanding the historical fact that most objectivists have been monists about ethical value, conceiving of it as unitary, non-conflictual and
Consequences of Ethical Relativism

highly determinate. Thus, the prospect opens up that an objectivist, when he proceeds to endorse and elaborate a substantive ethical doctrine, could embrace an ethical pluralism that rejects the monistic idea that, abstracting from all variation in historical circumstances, there is ideally a single best ethical tradition, as opposed to a multiplicity of ethical traditions, each with their distinctive virtues and which cannot be ranked as better or worse overall (or, indeed, as simply equal in value). In place of the linear idea of progress terminating with a single ethical tradition which is best, there will be a variety of ethical traditions left within the bounds of objectivity, yet those bounds will be sufficiently constraining to make sense of the idea of objectivity. How one should argue for ethical pluralism at the level of traditions or codes, and whether any such argument would finally pass muster, are among the most vexed questions in contemporary ethical theory. I do not address them here; it is enough to note that the potential availability of a pluralist stance means that objectivists are not necessarily vulnerable to the third objection.

6. Some Versions of Relativistic Critique

But imagine now the following broad objection to my elucidation of the consequences of relativism. It claims that, although relativism cannot of course validate an objectivist understanding of ethical critique, it can still accommodate many other forms of critique that can be brought to bear on ethical thought. In this way, it can capture much of the transcendent dimension of ethical thought – its critical force and, through that, the reason/power distinction and the idea of ethical progress – though re-interpreting it in a way that does not implicate objectivism. This means that relativism is far more congenial to our ordinary self-understanding than the objectivist would have us believe; or, at the very least, that the account of ethical reasoning it offers is not so radically discrepant with it as to powerfully motivate the search for an objectivist alternative. We might imagine a list of relativism-compatible forms of critique comprising six items.

(i) Internal criticism. The idea here is that the existence and content of a community's ethical standards are sufficiently independent of the actions and beliefs of particular members of that society, and even of widespread beliefs and practices in that society, to furnish a yardstick against which the latter may be subject to critical evaluation. This is because people may fail adequately to work out and consistently abide by the implications of the standards to which their community is committed. Internal critique even allows criticism of the standards themselves, since one can appeal to some standards in order to criticise or modify others. Alternatively, adopting a more holistic approach, a critic might mutually adjust each standard by reference to each other in order to secure the greatest degree of coherence overall among the community’s standards.

(ii) External criticism. The relativist can accommodate criticism that draws upon
standards that are external to those of the society being criticised, e.g. a critic can use the standards of some other community in order to criticise his own community’s practices and standards; he can use his community’s standards in order to criticise the practices and standards of some other community; or he can use the standards of another community in order to criticise the standards and practices of yet some other community.

(iii) **Functionalism.** The relativist’s starting point is the idea of morality as a kind of complex social institution. Compatible with this is the observation that this institution is properly to be understood in terms of its performance of a characteristic function. So, for example, David Wong holds that moral truth is always relative to some adequate moral system, where ‘adequacy’ as a moral system is subject to certain constraints (it is the fact that these constraints do not single out one such system that ensures for Wong the truth of relativism). A major constraint pertains to the social function performed by anything we might recognise as a morality: it must be a set of rules imposing ‘requirements (stemming from an individual’s different needs, desires, and goals) that affect others and for resolving interpersonal conflicts of interest in general’. Different social moralities can be judged in terms of their success in providing an effective and relatively stable mechanism for regulating intra- and inter-personal conflicts. For surely the fact that they all, *qua* moralities, perform this role to some degree does not entail they perform it (equally) well.

(iv) **Fact-based criticism.** The conclusions of ethical reasoning depend at various points upon the deliverances of different varieties of theoretical reasoning, e.g. psychological, historical, sociological, scientific, metaphysical, etc. For instance, one’s view on the permissibility of capital punishment may depend in part on an empirical assessment of its deterrent effect, just as the morality of abortion turns in part on metaphysical issues concerning the ascription of personhood to foetuses. To this extent, the relativist can admit the critique of ethical beliefs, practices and standards on the basis that the reasoning that led to them presupposes some erroneous assumption about a non-ethical matter.

(v) **Prudence-based criticism.** Ethical standards, and the requirements they impose, can be criticised in the light of some conception of practical rationality which does not manifestly implicate any notion of morality. One way in which this notion of rationality might be spelt out is in prudential terms, e.g. that which accords with a person’s or group’s *interests* or *needs*.

(vi) **Preference-based criticism.** Another way of specifying the idea of rationality is in terms of that which is most effective in realising a given set of preferences. Thus, Max Hocutt confronts the situation where a practice like slavery is morally valid (according to the standards of the community in which it exists) and further benefits everybody just as well as would any other workable arrangement. The possibility he invokes is criticism in terms of the *preferences* of the critic or his...
How far do the considerations adduced above go towards undermining my elucidation of the subversive consequences of relativism? In a sense, the answer to this question will depend partly on our success in devising an objectivist account of ethical rationality and critique. The more plausible the latter account, the more dissatisfied we are likely to be with the idea that a relativistic construal of ethical reasoning is all that is available. But something more can be said here with respect to each mode of critique. The fundamental problem with (i) and (ii) is what would appear to be their arbitrariness. My actions may be condemned by the ethical standards of my community, or some other community, but this fact by itself seems to have little or no force unless I am entitled to the thought that those standards are in some non-question-begging sense sound or correct. After all, there are many existing and imaginable bodies of standards, some of which will yield diametrically opposed injunctions. An initial problem with (iii) is that some moral codes seem calculated to enhance social tension and conflict rather than to eliminate them, while there are features of some moralities that could no longer be said to subserve any social function. A deeper problem with (iii) is that it generates a dilemma. One may grant that the notion of a morality imports certain social functions, such as the idea that what is in question is a normative code with the purpose of providing an effective and stable mechanism for resolving personal and inter-personal conflict. One might also grant that different moral systems perform this function with varying degrees of success, and that this furnishes a standard for ranking them. But the question arises of the status of the criterion of functional success. One might think of it as a moral principle. But this then begs the question of how it is to be justified and, further, why it should be accorded overriding weight as against other possible principles, such as the preservation of life or the safeguarding of the interests of all individuals subject to the system. Alternatively, it might be thought of as a hermeneutic constraint on anything that might properly be identified as a morality. But then it is unclear what sort of normative (let alone ethical) force it possesses. And even if we could understand it as possessing some authority, it is not clear how critical such a principle would be, since anything that is rightly characterised as a morality will already have satisfied the constraint at least to some minimal extent. To endow it with greater critical power, we will have to start elaborating the idea of morality’s function in a richer and more controversial way, thereby moving away from a hermeneutic constraint and towards a moral principle. But this means re-encountering the problems on the first horn of the dilemma.

The most general problem with (iv)–(vi) is that they are not presented as modes of ethical critique. Indeed, the relativist regards this as an advantage, because it enables him to press the possibility of such criticism independently of questions as to the objective/relative status of ethical thought. Yet the whole issue
here is that of capturing the critical or transcendent animus of distinctively ethical thought. There are also more specific problems. First, it is highly unlikely that criticism in terms of (iv) is going to achieve much, for we can readily conceive of the possibility of deeply flawed moral standards that are not bound up with any kind of factual or non-ethical error. Further, we cannot always separate such supposedly factual questions entirely from ethical judgment, especially if the facts are to have any real critical purchase. For instance, James Griffin argues that there are factual matters – about the nature and limits of human motivation, or the workings of society – which are potentially quite powerful bases for discriminating among competing moral views, but that it will not be possible to attain an accurate fix on these matters independently of any valuation. The determination of the limits of the human will, for example, is partly dependent upon our judgments as to what goals are available and how attractive or inspiring they are, with the result that ‘any “fact” likely to get far in testing competing moral views will be partly constituted by beliefs about values; we shall not know whether it is highly reliable without knowing whether its constituent ethical beliefs are too’.64

Both (v) and (vi), on the other hand, suffer from arbitrariness: why should we accord criticism from the point of view of interests or desires any special weight, especially when there are conflicting interests and preferences that may be relevant in any given case? When we start to explain why interests or preferences should be accorded weight, or how conflicts between them should be resolved, then we start moving into the ethical domain. We can already detect such a shift in Hocutt’s example of preference-based criticism: the institution of slavery is there not simply condemned because it conflicts with a preference against it that is bluntly given; rather, that preference itself is justified by an appeal to a complex ethical consideration, i.e. that enslaving people is inhumane. But with this move into the ethical the question of the objective vindication of a particular ethical stance is reactivated. There is also a more radical point in this vicinity. The last comment accepts (or brackets) the notion that we can independently identify interests and preferences, and thereafter formulate ethical questions as to their status and the resolution of conflict between them. But it is possible that ethical considerations are related to prudential and preferential considerations even more fundamentally. This possibility is most plausibly sketched for prudential reasoning, especially if we do not confine it to some narrow (perhaps self-perceived) conception of self-interest, but rather treat interests in an objective way. Thus, the Aristotelian tradition makes the notion of human flourishing, an unmistakably prudential notion, central to ethical reasoning, without reducing the ethical to the prudential nor vice versa.65 This tradition disdains any rigid dualism of prudential reasoning and ethical reasoning.66 If credence is to be given to this view, then the notion of the prudential does not afford escape from the ethical and the problem of its objectivity, but rather deeply implicates it. Can something similar be said about preference-based reasoning? I think so, although the degree of implication with the ethical is not nearly as strong. I simply mention two possibilities. First, Onora O’Neill has argued that instrumental reasoning is not autonomous because the very specification of the relevant options that bear...
on preferences in a particular case will be parasitic on non-instrumental forms of practical reasoning (some of which will be recognisably ethical). This is because instrumental reasoners cannot begin by surveying all possible acts; instead, they begin from some listing of act-descriptions which will typically ‘incorporate the socially accepted and prized categories of action which participants view as the “real” options for a given situation’. But an even more radical challenge can be envisaged, one that relates directly to the specification of the preferences themselves (rather than just the specification of the options bearing on pre-given preferences). On this view, the normativity of preferences derives from their value-ladenness. Thus, Warren Quinn has argued that preferences generate reasons only if they are seen as reflecting (consciously or unconsciously) ‘the thought that the direction in which I am psychologically pointed leads to something good (either in act or result) or takes me away from something bad’. The relevant goods and bads may be ethical, or at least prudential and thereby indirectly related to ethical considerations.

The upshot of these considerations seems to be that (v) and (vi) generate a dilemma of their own: the more we divorce them from ethical thought, the less relevant they will seem to the project of accommodating the transcendent dimension of ethical rationality within a relativistic theory; but the more we view them as implicated with ethical considerations, and thereby relevant to that project, the more they activate the issues about the objectivity of ethical thought that the relativist had sought to by-pass in relying on them.

7. The Relevance of the Consequences

I have argued that ethical relativism has subversive implications for ethical thought’s self-understanding. Do these implications have any bearing on the truth of relativism as a philosophical doctrine? One ambitious line of argument – taking the form of what Hilary Putnam has called an ‘indispensability argument’ – contends that relativism’s consequences undermine the case for its truth. Indispensability arguments insist on the following pragmatist premise, which is intended to reflect the pragmatist’s commitment to the primacy of practice in philosophy. It says: if we are compelled to adopt a certain belief or viewpoint in our practical activity, then it makes no sense to subscribe to the claim that that belief or viewpoint is fallacious or delusive. So, the argument would be (i) that adoption of the ethical point of view is indispensable to our lives as rational agents, and (ii) that an objectivist self-understanding is in turn integral to that point of view. Taken together with the pragmatist premise, it follows that any philosophical doctrine, like relativism, which is incompatible with the objectivist self-understanding of ethical thought cannot be true, or at least is questionable to the extent of its incompatibility.

Let us, for the sake of argument, accept the pragmatist premise. Let us accept also premise (i), whether on inductive grounds or on deeper Wittgensteinian and Davidsonian grounds about participation in a recognisably ethical form of life.
figuring among the intelligibility conditions of rational agency. Does the argument against relativism then go through? Not obviously, since at least two objections might block it. First, a radical pragmatist like Rorty would challenge premise (ii). Rorty contends that the objectivist aspiration is an illusory philosophical excrescence imposed from the outside on ethical discourse; in reality, the ethical point of view is quite autonomous from any claim to objectivity. As Rorty has recently made clear, this argument does not purport to be an accurate description of the phenomenology of ethical thought; it is instead a revisionary claim made on the basis of ‘convenience’. It would better serve our ‘interests’ if we ceased to entertain objectivist aspirations, insofar as this would enable us to avoid ‘fruitless, irresolvable, disagreements on dead-end issues’. The explicit parallel here is with the way in which our formerly religious ethical self-understanding has supposedly proved to be dispensable; the call is for a post-philosophical, and not just post-theological, ethical culture. If Rorty’s argument is compelling, then the objectivist self-understanding does not inherit the indispensability of the ethical viewpoint itself. In fact, however, this approach confronts serious objections. Most importantly, there is a problem with Rorty’s tendency to portray the objectivist aspiration in such grandiosely ‘foundationalist’ terms – the hope for ‘a presuppositionless critical reflection, conducted in no particular language and outside any particular historical context’ – that it is readily dismissed as a philosophical construct foisted on ordinary ethical thought. Given a less ambitious rendering of objectivity, it becomes questionable whether Rorty’s argument from convenience succeeds.

But even if the Rortian strategy is unavailing, the indispensability argument is subject to a further challenge. For we cannot so easily eliminate the anxiety that we are in some sense pragmatically committed to a practice that embodies unrealisable aspirations, so that consciousness of its true nature would not readily co-exist with continued endorsement of its self-understanding. To suppose otherwise comes dangerously close to attributing an unwarranted incorrigibility to our self-understanding, something that would jar with the pragmatist’s fallibilist sensibilities. Indeed, Putnam would acknowledge as much. In attempting to meet the objection that indispensability arguments ignore truth in favour of successful practice (or identify the former with the latter), he insists that indispensability has to be assessed in the light of critical reflection (as opposed to the simple invocation of metaphysical dogmas that are thought to be incompatible with our practice). And such reflection must include ‘critique of those metaphysical criticisms of practice that make it look “irresponsible” to take practice as seriously as pragmatists do’.

Therefore, to show that the objectivist self-understanding is truly indispensable is to show that arguments constructed from within the ethical viewpoint are compelling enough to overcome the rival explanations – proffered by relativists among others – which deny or dispense with the idea of objectivity. But to embark on this process is not so much to derive the falsity of relativism from its subversive interpretative consequences as to challenge its validity head-on, by attacking it on its merits as a philosophical explanation. The indispensability argument then amounts, at best, to a presumption in
favour of the objectivist self-understanding of ethical thought pending the final outcome of philosophical explanation; the deference philosophy shows to practice is presumptive rather than determinative.

The interpretative consequences of relativism then, corrosive though they may be of our ordinary ethical self-understanding, cannot be straightforwardly presented as ‘refutations’ of relativism. So to present them would be to beg the question of whether some version of objectivism is the best philosophical explanation of ethical rationality. What force they do have, however, is bound to depend on an inevitably controversial understanding of how the interpretative consequences of a philosophical explanation bear on its acceptability. For present purposes, I confine myself firstly to the minimal claim that these interpretative consequences help illuminate precisely what is at stake in the objectivist/relativist dialectic. Beyond this, relying on a modest version of the indispensability argument, I would also contend that they provide us with a good reason not to accept the relativist’s thesis in the absence of a truly compelling argument in its favour, while at the same time furnishing us with a powerful motive for trying to construct an objectivist conception of ethical rationality that is able to save many more of the appearances – and thereby preserve intact much more of the self-understanding – of ordinary ethical thought than would seem to be possible on a relativistic explanation.  

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NOTES

1 It follows from this that relativism does not have the attractive consequences – such as underpinning toleration – with which it is often associated. However, I do not directly rebut such arguments here. For a recent article that does, see Graham 1996.

2 Some forms of relativism deploy individualistic and social constraints in tandem, e.g. in Gilbert Harman’s hybrid version, the validity of ‘inner’ judgments is relative to motivating attitudes the content of which is determined by social convention. See Harman 1982.

3 Putnam 1982, p. 8. Putnam’s second point may seem inconsistent with relativism, but I use it only to bring out an aspect of the phenomenology of ethical thought for which even relativists must account, if only sceptically.

4 It is the insistence that there is an inherent claim to objectivity, but that it cannot be sustained, that differentiates relativism from Rorty’s ‘frank ethnocentrism’, which denies that ordinary ethical thought embodies or needs to embody such a claim to objectivity and
so denies that non-objectivity has damaging consequences. See, e.g. Rorty 1989, ch. 3.

6 Platts 1991, p. 183; see also pp. 166–7, 184.

7 A more sophisticated argument to this effect, which I cannot consider here, has been derived by some from the writings of Wittgenstein and Davidson. This claims that the constraints imposed by intelligibility as a form of rational or ethical action eliminate the possibility of the sort of radical ethical diversity to which the relativist must appeal. See e.g. Hurley 1989, Part I. For criticism, see Griffin 1996, p. 13.

8 See e.g. Wittgenstein 1958, §§89, 109, 124, 126 and 128. For a subtle critique of this methodology, one that emphasises that philosophical reflection originates ‘right there in the form of life out of conflicts that are generated in living that life’, see Lear 1989, p. 35.

9 ‘[I]n ethics the objectivity question presents us with a substantive choice and not one which can be resolved by philosophical or conceptual analysis: whether he believes that there are absolute standards independent of the individual is something each person must decide for himself.’ (Johnston 1989, p. 167.)

10 See, e.g. Wilson 1993, p. 10.


13 For a rebuttal of claims that belief in ethical objectivity leads to religious persecution, slavery and authoritarianism, see Bambrough 1979, pp. 38–49.

14 A related problem here is that the putative ‘consequence’ of relativism may be such as to vitiate the identification of any determinate causal relationship. Thus, Hans Sluga has argued that both objectivist and non-objectivist theories of ethics could plausibly be linked to Nazi ideology because that ideology was so amorphous and internally diverse. See Sluga 1993, pp. 93–94, 108–110, 156, 164–167, 210–214, 230.

15 See, e.g. Hume 1973, p. 409 (‘There is no method of reasoning more common, and yet none more blameable, than in philosophical debates to endeavour to refute any hypothesis by a pretext of its dangerous consequences to religion and morality’). See also Westermarck 1932, p. 58.

16 This third point would not apply to empirical arguments that specify the consequences of relativism in non-ethical terms (e.g. their impact on self-interest) or in terms that do not implicate a seemingly objectivist conception of ethics (e.g. condemnation in terms of the ethical code we simply happen to adhere to already).


18 Williams 1985, p. 165.

19 For examples of the centrality of this point to the contemporary resistance to relativism (both neo-Aristotelian and neo-Kantian), see MacIntyre 1987, p. 397 and Gewirth 1994, p. 29.


21 The collapse of the reason/power distinction is candidly admitted in Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s radically relativist essay, e.g. that “political justification’ in this sense is, of course, a form of “manipulation”. (Smith 1988, p. 176.)

22 The point that the distinction between treating someone as a means and treating them as an end is rendered illusory by emotivist (or relativist) analyses of ethical discourse is powerfully made in MacIntyre 1984, pp. 23–4. Precisely the ‘disquieting suggestion’ of After Virtue is that, although emotivism is a flawed analysis of ethical discourse in general, it accurately depicts the de facto condition of such discourse in contemporary societies. See also MacIntyre 1988, p. 343.

23 Dworkin 1986, ch. 7.

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25 See also Dworkin 1986, pp. 76–86; Dworkin 1995b, pp. 596–7; and Dworkin 1996.
26 Dworkin 1995a, p. 6.
27 *ibid.*, p. 7.
28 Dworkin 1995b, p. 596.
29 Dworkin 1995a, p. 7. Italics in the original.
30 *ibid*.
31 Dworkin 1995b, p. 596.
32 Dworkin 1995a, p. 7.
33 Dworkin 1986, p. 80.
35 Dworkin 1995a, pp. 7–8. See also Dworkin 1986, p. 80–2.
36 Dworkin 1986, p. 86.
37 *ibid*.
38 As he makes clear in Dworkin 1996, p. 123.
39 For this view of the matter see Berlin 1969, pp. xxii–xxiii (‘The proposition that it is unreasonable to condemn men whose choices are not free rests not on a particular set of moral values (which another culture might reject) but on the particular nexus between descriptive and evaluative concepts which governs the language we use and the thoughts we think’). However, as Dworkin seems right in pointing out, the idea that moral judgment presupposes free will has been rejected by many cultures, including the Greek, and by many religious traditions including some within the Catholic and Protestant churches’, Dworkin 1996, p.123.
40 But aren’t substantive ethical judgments also among the defining conditions of ethical thought? This is the burden of the Wittgenstein/Davidson argument about the limits of intelligible ethical diversity. But notice that this argument is typically thought to establish that there must be some locus of commonality in substantive judgments between divergent ethical codes. It does not establish the stronger conclusion that any specific (set of) ethical judgment(s) is presupposed by all ethical codes; see Hurley 1989, p. 48. The claim to objectivity, by contrast, seems not only to play such a deep structural role, but to be invariant across different systems of ethical thought in precisely that way.
41 Dworkin 1986, p. 428 n. 27.
42 *ibid.*, p. 81. Curiously, it is the ‘single right answer’ thesis of determinacy that Dworkin takes to be the prime target of internal scepticism in Dworkin 1996, pp. 129–39. In that piece, however, he differentiates objectivity from universality, *ibid.* p. 99.
43 Dworkin 1986, p. 80.
44 Dworkin 1995a, p. 8.
45 *ibid.*, p. 7. See also Dworkin 1996, pp. 93, 128.
46 Dworkin 1996, pp. 118–9. See also Dworkin 1986, p. 84, on the external sceptic as offering ‘peremptory or a priori’ arguments.
47 The view that I advance, therefore, chimes with that of a number of others who take the question of ethical objectivity to be heavily responsive to our best understanding of the a posteriori fate of substantive ethical debates, but who do not dissolve that philosophical question into a substantive ethical issue. See, e.g. McDowell 1988, p. 5; Taylor 1995, p. 55; Wiggins 1995, pp. 249, 251–2; and Nagel 1997, pp. 102–6, 115.
48 Perhaps one reason the idea of an interpretative consequence, as I understand it, does not feature in Dworkin’s account is that he understands interpretation in a deeply evaluative way, i.e. ‘it aims to make the object or practice being interpreted the best it can be’. Dworkin 1986, p. 77. I see no reason why all philosophical explanation should be
understood on the model of this conception of interpretation; nor do I think it is a sound conception of interpretation generally.

49 Mayo 1986, pp. 91–2.
50 For an argument to the effect that some legal changes can be accounted for by judges being moved by correct moral arguments, see Fried 1980. See also Cohen 1997 (arguing that the objective injustice of slavery – as opposed to simply the belief that it is unjust – helps explain the historical fact of that institution’s demise).

51 Relativism is not the only possible strategy for undermining this idea. The objectivist too could be sceptical about it. But his reasons would be quite different, based on a purportedly objective assessment of the validity of Western values and their appropriateness in non-Western environments, as well as on the basis of objectivist forms of ethical pluralism. And even where he concluded that (some) Western values were superior, he might invoke other principles, e.g. toleration and non-intervention, to constrain severely the policies Western nations could adopt to promote those values.

52 Taylor 1993.
53 ibid. p. 66.
54 ibid. pp. 72–3.
55 All preceding quotations, ibid. pp. 66-7; see also pp. 68-9.
56 ibid. p. 71.
57 ibid. pp. 69-70.
58 See, e.g. Berlin 1990, pp. 1–19.
60 Wong 1984, p. 38, see also pp. 38-40 and Appendix A.
61 Hocutt 1986, p. 197.
62 For more on the limitations of ‘internal criticism’, see Tasioulas 1995.
63 Copp 1995, p. 80. Indeed, it has been argued that the ‘functionalist’ conception of morality reflects a particular historical inheritance, i.e. the early modern crisis of authority; see Stout 1981, pp. 238–9.
64 Griffin 1996, p. 143 n. 32.
69 Perhaps a sophisticated relativist theory can overcome the problems I have identified through the combination of two or more of (i)–(vi) while avoiding any taint of implication with the ethical. Copp 1995 pursues this strategy by appealing to both prudential and preference-based criticism. I outline some difficulties facing his argument in ‘Can Relativism be Critical?’ (unpublished MS).
71 Rorty 1989, p. 189.
73 Rorty 1989, p. 54.
74 Putnam 1994, p. 177.
75 For instructive comments on earlier versions of this paper I am indebted to James Griffin, Graeme Marshall and Nigel Simmonds. I also benefited from presenting sections of it to seminars at the University of Glasgow (School of Law and Department of Philosophy) and the Centre for Law and Society at the University of Edinburgh.

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