Two Levels of Pluralism*

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Pluralism in ethics, as I understand it, is the view that there is an irreducible plurality of values or principles that are relevant to moral judgment. While the utilitarian says that all morally significant considerations can be reduced to quantities of pleasure and pain, and the Kantian says that all moral judgment can be reduced to a single principle having to do with respect for rationality and the bearers of rationality, the pluralist insists that morality is not at the fundamental level so simple. Moreover, as many use the term, and as I shall use it in this essay, the pluralist believes that the plurality of morally significant values is not subject to a complete rational ordering. Thus, it is held that no principle or decision procedure exists that can guarantee a unique and determinate answer to every moral question involving a choice among different fundamental moral values or principles.

My aim in this article is not to argue for the truth of ethical pluralism but, rather, to explore some implications of its truth, or even of the self-conscious recognition of the possibility of its truth. Specifically, I shall argue that pluralism, or, indeed, even the possibility of pluralism, has implications for the way we understand issues concerning moral objectivity and moral relativism, as well as implications for the positions we take on them. I shall begin by sketching a common pattern of thought about these issues.

RESPONSES TO MORAL DISAGREEMENT

In day-to-day life, we seem to presuppose the existence of moral truth. We operate with confidence about some moral truths—that cheating on exams, shoplifting in stores, and killing innocent babies are wrong, for example. In areas about which we have less confidence, our very doubts and uncertainties about whom to believe or what to think seem to express the presupposition that there is a right answer to these

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more troublesome moral questions. For our problems tend to have the form of problems of discovery; our task is the task of finding out which answer is correct.

A certain kind of reflection, however, raises doubts about the notion of moral truth—reflection typically initiated by attention to persistent disagreements. We find some of these disagreements within society, on such issues as abortion, capital punishment, and pornography. We find them also, even more extreme, across societies. We learn that the Greeks practiced infanticide, that the Eskimos killed their sexagenarian parents, that the Samurai tested their swords by splitting the random passerby in half.

Finding ourselves unable to find a non-question-begging way to convince others of our positions on these issues leads many of us to relativism, that is, to the view that moral principles or codes are relative to a society, or even to an individual. "What's right (wrong) for you is not necessarily right (wrong) for me" is a slogan expressive of relativism.

The lack of decisive arguments or reasons in support of one's own positions on these issues may also lead one to a further position. It may lead one to suspect not only that one's own moral code is relative to certain facts about oneself but also that one's own moral code (and, for that matter, any other) is grounded in nothing but brute, nonjustified emotional reactions or attitudes, consequences of a combination of biology and social conditioning. This amounts to subjectivism, a position which, though often confused or identified with relativism, it is important, for the goals of this article, to distinguish. Subjectivism is, as you might expect, the view that morality is subjective; that is, it is the view that moral judgments are not matters of fact, but merely expressions of deeply held but unfounded emotional attitudes, the results of human psychology and social conditioning.

In principle, one may be a subjectivist without being a relativist, for one may hold that what is right or wrong for oneself is right or wrong for everyone and yet take this thought to be necessarily nothing more than an expression of nonrational emotion. But commonly relativism and subjectivism are linked: one suspects that moral standards may legitimately differ from one individual or society to another and explains this by the hypothesis that there is nothing to these standards (nothing, i.e., by which to evaluate them) beyond the subjective judgments of the people to whom the standards apply.

There is, then, a common two-step pattern of metaethical reflection. Pondering the existence of persistent disagreement leads one to relativism. Pondering the conditions under which relativism would be true leads one to subjectivism.

Opponents of subjectivism offer two standard responses, both intended to block the first step. First, they note that much apparent moral disagreement is not real, that is, is not real moral disagreement.
Often disagreement in value is based on disagreement of fact, and the evaluative disagreement evaporates when factual disagreement is removed. Thus, differences in opinion about the deterrent value of capital punishment, about the correlation between pornography and sex crimes, about the existence or the metaphysical status of human souls may account for much of the controversy about the related moral issues.

Second, they note that even where disagreement persists in the face of agreement on matters of nonevaluative fact, it doesn't follow that both moral positions are equally right. People, even intelligent people, make mistakes. Sometimes people are just wrong. At one time almost everyone believed the earth was flat; Isaac Newton would never have accepted the possibility of quantum mechanics.

Like those who offer these responses, I am an opponent of subjectivism. But these responses do not seem sufficient to explain without remainder the variety and persistence of the moral disagreements around us.

The first response is simply insufficient by itself to account for all moral disagreement. Though it is true that a considerable portion of evaluative disagreement rests on disagreement about empirical fact, many conflicts remain despite their participants' sharing all the apparently relevant empirical data. In some cases of intercultural conflict it may not even be clear what sorts of empirical data could be relevant.

The second response consists basically in the acknowledgment that it is always possible that one of two conflicting views is just wrong. But that is no reason to assume that one of two conflicting moral views must be wrong. Moreover, there is evident moral danger in how such an assumption is likely to be used—for, since one obviously finds one's own view more convincing or more plausible than one's opponents', the thought that one of us must be wrong is apt to be followed by "and it isn't me." In other words, the unjustified assumption that moral standards cannot be relativistic can be a license to closed-minded intolerance.

Both these responses try to defend objectivity in ethics by explaining away moral disagreements, by seeing such disagreements as reflections of at least one of the parties' cognitive errors. Recognizing the possibility of a plurality of moral values, however, particularly one that is not subject to a complete rational ordering, suggests a more tolerant, though still antisubjectivist, response to moral disagreement. Indeed, I shall argue that the possibility of pluralism allows two different responses: at one level, pluralism provides a way of acknowledging the legitimacy of some moral disagreement without any assumption of relativism. At another level, pluralism does encourage us to accept a kind of relativism, but it is a kind that does not support or lead the way to subjectivism.
PLURALISM WITHOUT RELATIVISM

In understanding and interpreting moral disagreements, pluralism offers an alternative to the relativist position that my views are right for me and your views are right for you, as well as to the absolutist position that only one of us can be right. For the pluralist can understand moral disagreements, at least potentially, as cases in which the plurality of values don’t add up to a uniquely right answer. If, as pluralism says, there is a plurality of values or principles or reasons for favoring and disfavoring things that does not form a complete well-ordered system, then it seems reasonable to expect that the realm of moral facts will contain pockets of indeterminacy. There will be cases in which there are good reasons for one position and good reasons for an incompatible position and no further overarching principle and perspective from which these can be put into any further objective balance. In such cases, one might say that both positions are equally right. Or one might say that there is no right answer, no fact of the matter about what is right.

This position is somewhat different from the position, compatible with monistic views, that allows the possibility of cases in which there is, so to speak, an exact (or approximate) tie for the best act or policy. If one’s sole moral goal is to maximize pleasure, it may be a matter of indifference whether one votes to establish a public park or to support an equally costly symphony; if one’s goal is simply to save as many lives as possible, either of two health care proposals may be equally and maximally good. In such cases, it seems rational to be indifferent about which choice gets made—either decision would be (perfectly) fine.

When a plurality of values pulls one in different directions, however, one is less likely to be simply indifferent about which of two options is taken, for the costs and benefits of the different options are incommensurable rather than equal. Though this is of little use in solving the practical problem of selecting—or “plumping”—for one choice rather than the other, it helps explain the fact that in situations of this kind, even one who accepts the claim that it is indeterminate which option is the right one may feel conflicted and uncomfortable about taking one option, thereby denying the values that favor the other.¹

From a certain perspective, pluralism seems to fall between relativism and the kind of absolutism that is typically identified with objectivism. For the issue of the objectivity of values is often posed in terms of such questions as, Is there a true view of morality? And of two conflicting views, is at least one of them wrong? To these questions, the relativist answers “no”—there is no single right answer, no true

¹. See Michael Stocker, Plural and Conflicting Values (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), for further discussion.
moral view; the absolutist answers "yes"—there is always a right answer, given by the single correct moral system. The pluralist can be expected to answer "sometimes"—for even if some situations will set irreducibly different values into oppositions that cannot rationally be resolved, there is no reason to expect that all, or most, moral issues will be of this sort.

If one focuses on those cases that the pluralist interprets as indeterminate, one might think that, at least with respect to those cases, pluralism just amounts to an acceptance of relativism and subjectivism rather than, as I have been urging, a position that takes away the motivation for these views. For what is the difference between saying that it is indeterminate what is right in a given case and saying that it is a subjective matter, and therefore that whatever you think is right is right for you?

One difference has to do with the idea, or the status, of moral truth. For we can express the idea that morality is subjective by saying that there is no such thing as moral truth or, at any rate, that there is no standard for moral truth independent of the subject herself. The pluralist, however, is in no way committed to that view, either in general or in the cases in which morality is indeterminate, for pluralism does not say that it is up to an individual subject to determine which moral issues are indeterminate. Nor does it say that it is up to the individual to make one position right and the others wrong in the cases in which it is indeterminate. If the subjectivist can be understood as denying the existence of moral truth, the pluralist is better interpreted as believing that, though there may be a moral truth, the truth will be more complicated than one might have wished—complicated, specifically, in such a way as to make the answers to certain questions indeterminate.

The considerations that show that pluralism does not collapse into subjectivism also show that pluralism does not collapse into or imply relativism. For unlike the relativist, who believes that what is right for you is different from what is right for me, the pluralist holds that, for each and every one of us, the question of what is right in some cases lacks a unique and determinate answer. Rightness, on this view, is not relative to anything, it is not a matter of perspective. It is just indeterminate.

Pluralism, as I have presented it so far, is offered as a schematism for a type of first-order moral theory. A further specification of it, detailing precisely which irreducibly plural values have moral significance and how (and to what extent) they can be compared and balanced would be on a par with and stand as an alternative to, among others, utilitarianism and Kantianism. Just as either of these other first-order views are compatible with objectivism, so is moral pluralism. Pluralism, indeed, can offer an explanation of why these other first-order theories
are as attractive as they are. For a pluralist is likely to acknowledge that both pleasure and respect for rational autonomy are fundamental moral values and that maximizing pleasure and expressing respect both constitute plausible forms of moral commitment. Both utilitarianism and Kantianism thus can be seen to capture a very significant portion of the moral truth. This, in conjunction with the deep human longing for simplicity, completeness, and, most of all, uniqueness, moves us, wrongly, to accept one or the other of these theories as the whole moral truth.

If there is an irreducible plurality of morally significant values and no principle that orders it completely, then at least some persistent moral disagreements are apt to be a consequence. Different parties to the disagreement may be focusing on different, independently significant values, and, since there is no decision procedure for balancing these values, any attempt by one party to claim priority over the other will simply beg the question. In such cases, the pluralist will say that there is no right answer about what one morally ought to do. But it is important to see that this does not imply that there are no wrong answers. Pluralism does not commit one, as subjectivism does, to the view that "anything goes" in morality. For example, even if a pluralist believed that two positions on capital punishment are both reasonable, she would not thereby be committed to the claim that any position on capital punishment would be reasonable. She would not, for example, be committed to the view that capital punishment could be appropriate for blacks but not for whites.

Bernard Gert makes this point to his students at Dartmouth by offering an analogy between such morally controversial questions as, What's the best policy regarding active euthanasia? and the question Who's the best hitter in the major leagues? In most years, one can expect that there will be several plausible candidates to the latter question, and no non-question-begging way to choose among them. For one person may have the most RBIs, another the highest batting average, another the most home runs. Taking all the relevant statistics into consideration, there may be no fact of the matter as to which hitter is the best. But regarding the vast majority of players, it will be uncontested that they are not the best. Nor will this judgment be subjective—after all, there are lots of statistics with which to back it up.

In practical terms, this may be the most important point in this article. For, at least in moral philosophy classrooms, there is a strong tendency to react to difficult, apparently irresolvable disagreements by throwing up one's hands about the whole enterprise of moral justification, giving up the very project of sorting good reasons for a moral position from bad ones. Of course, one message one wants to

get across is that disagreements that appear irresolvable today may yet admit of a resolution tomorrow. One shouldn't give up too easily. But, in the meantime, we needn't lose sight of how much moral agree-
ment is lurking in the background, nor need we interpret this agreement as a matter of brute, blind luck.

In theoretical terms, we can put this point in terms of the caution
not to confuse or identify objectivity with uniqueness. Ethics can be
objective, or at least partly objective, even if it cannot yield a uniquely
best solution to every moral problem. If we formulated the issue of
objectivity in somewhat different terms from the customary ones, this
point is less likely to be missed.

Earlier I expressed the issue in terms of the questions, Is there a
ture morality? and Is at least one of any two competing views wrong?
These questions urge us to choose between the position that there is
a single, uniquely best moral position on every issue, on the one hand,
and a vague but subjectivist stance toward morality on the other. If
we want, however, to associate moral objectivity with the position that
some actions and attitudes are morally intolerable, that some things are
morally required, that, in other words, there are limits and constraints
on what constitute acceptable moral thought and action, and that these
limits and constraints are to be found and justified by the exercise of
intellectual and imaginative skills—by means, for example, of reflection
and dialogue, logic, argument, perception, experience—then there
will be better questions to identify with the question, Is morality objective?
I suggest that we think of the question of objectivity in terms of the
questions, Does the conjunction of reason and empirical fact constrain
value judgments? and Does reason (in conjunction with empirical fact)
allow us to ascertain that certain positions are better than others? As
debates about the best hitter in the major leagues can illustrate, reason,
in conjunction with empirical fact, can constrain judgment even if it
does not dictate a single objectively best answer. If we understand the
distinction between objectivist and subjectivist ethical stances in these
terms, then pluralism can be a form of objectivism.

Once one has explicitly recognized the possibility that a plausible
moral theory might take a pluralist form—that is, once one has rec-
ognized the possibility that there might be a plurality of incommen-
surable morally significant reasons, values, and principles—one may
be drawn to pluralism, not only at the level of individual moral judgments
of policy and action but also, or independently, at the level of moral
codes, moral outlooks, systems of moral principle which a society might
adopt and internalize as a whole. Moral pluralism, in other words,
can be understood at either of two levels, and either or both can be
attractive. If one accepts it at the second level, one can, indeed, must,

3. I shall refer somewhat awkwardly to first-level and second-level pluralism to
avoid confusion with the way the distinction between first-order and second-order moral
accept a kind of relativism, but relativism based on pluralism would neither constitute nor provide any support for subjectivism.

RELATIVISM WITHOUT SUBJECTIVISM

To explain the sort of relativism that second-level pluralism may support, it will be helpful to have an example before us. I shall use a scene from Witness, a 1985 movie directed by Peter Weir and starring Harrison Ford, in which events conspire to bring it about that a police detective (played by Ford) whose name is John Book, is forced to live in an Amish community, disguised as a member of that community for some time. The police detective is unambiguously presented as a righteous human being, a man of integrity and conscience, who devotes his life to protecting his fellow men against murderers, kidnappers, rapists, thieves, and the like, in the manner in which policemen typically do these things—namely, by the use of violence and the threat of violence. The Amish, on the other hand, are pacifists—they will not bear arms nor even strike another human being. Moreover, it is clear in the movie—and, I gather, in fact—that their strict adherence to nonviolence is a deep part of their moral outlook and more generally of their way of life.

There is a scene in the movie in which one of the Amish men, Daniel, is insulted by a bully in the town through which they are passing. As is his way, the Amish man simply stands there, submitting to the bully's abuse. Indeed, to him, it would have seemed wrong to do anything but submit to it. But Book, the detective, cannot just stand there, allowing the thug to go on with his merciless taunting—he hauls off and breaks the bully's nose, thus ultimately blowing his own cover and leading to the movie's exciting conclusion.

Most of the audience, including myself, do not ascribe to strict policies of nonviolence. When John Book punches the villain in the nose, it seems to us perfectly appropriate and morally acceptable that he does so. In fact, a fair portion of the audience audibly cheered in the theater the first time I saw it, a response that the movie evidently allowed or even encouraged. At the same time, however, the movie presented the Amish culture as one with considerable appeal. Not necessarily a better way of life than ours, but one that is not obviously inferior either.

So we have a situation in which the Amish man, Daniel, refrains from violence, believing himself bound by duty to refrain. Book, on doctrines is often made. This latter distinction is often associated with the distinction between ethics and metaethics, where the first is understood to advance normative moral positions and the second to cover discussion about the concepts and assumptions common to any of these positions. First-level and second-level moral pluralism cuts across this distinction, however: both doctrines aim at advancing moral prescriptions, and both are committed to some controversial metaethical claims.
the other hand, uses violence, obviously believing that morality permits it. If we want to heighten the intellectual tensions of the example, we might even imagine without too much strain that Book believes himself duty bound to strike the bully. In either event, it seems to me—and the movie evidently wants it to seem—that both men come off well. They are both admirable men.

I am not an authority on Amish culture and do not want to defend any particular moral view about the Amish way of life. The movie may not be accurate in its portrayal of the Amish, and it is certainly not comprehensive enough to provide by itself a sound basis for such judgments. But it is sufficiently coherent and detailed to provide us at least with a fictionalized example of two cultures, both of which a single reflective observer can find appealing, with two moral codes leading persons of integrity to conflicting judgments and patterns of behavior.

What are we to say, in the end, of these men, their behavior, and their beliefs? A moral pluralist of the sort I have so far discussed—that is, a first-level moral pluralist—may well say something that appears to satisfy our wish, as it were, to commend both individuals. For she may acknowledge that there is something to be said for hitting the bully and something to be said for refraining from hitting. Either action, then, will appear to her alright. She can thus approve of each man's behavior.

Moreover, the pluralist can acknowledge that there is something to be said for the policy of fighting injustice with violence and something to be said for the policy of pacifism. Therefore, she can approve not just of the actions, but also of the policies and the behavioral patterns of our two heroes.

While this position approves of, maybe even admires, the choices and actions of the Amish man, however, it seems to me that it does not fully approve of the man's moral point of view, for although, according to the pluralist position, it was not wrong to refrain from violence in this instance, neither would it have been wrong to use violence here. From the Amish man's point of view, on the other hand, it would have been wrong for him to use violence, in that instance or any instance. That is precisely why he refrained.

It was not, for Daniel, a matter of choosing between one morally reasonable option and another, even between one morally reasonable policy option and another. For him, as he sees it, it would have been morally wrong to hit the bully who was taunting him. But, according to the moral pluralist position, it would not really have been wrong to do so. So, according to the moral pluralist, the Amish man's moral beliefs are false, his moral point of view mistaken.

This is not to say that the moral pluralist must actively disapprove of the Amish point of view. If she thinks Daniel's beliefs are false, she
might yet think that they are harmlessly false. Although Daniels' actions are based on illusions, she might say, they are, at any rate, noble illusions.

If we take seriously the supposition that Daniel's culture is no worse a culture than ours, however, I am not sure that we want to say that his beliefs are false and his views mistaken. For if, as I have supposed, a commitment to the principle of nonviolence is fundamental to Amish culture, and if that culture, that way of life, is no worse, if also no better, than Book's way of life, or mine, or yours, then Daniel makes no mistake in accepting the commitment to nonviolence that is essential to that culture. And if he makes no mistake in accepting this commitment, then isn't it truly wrong for him to use violence? Isn't it at least truly wrong for him to use violence in this instance if he has no interest or intention to opt out of his culture, to leave his whole world behind and join the world of John Book? Isn't this, in other words, a case in which it is truly wrong for one man (Daniel) to do something (use violence against injustice), but not truly wrong for another (Book) to do it? And so isn't this a case in which each man acts correctly on moral beliefs that are correct relative to them and their cultures?

One may doubt that such a tolerant position could truly be compatible with the moral systems that this position here means to approve, for it may be most natural to imagine that the Amish conceive of their commitment to nonviolence in universal terms. They may believe, that is, that it is not just wrong for them to strike people but for anyone to do so, presumably because what makes it wrong holds equally for everyone. If Daniel's belief that it is wrong for him to hit the bully reflects a more general belief that it is wrong for anyone, independently of his or her culture, to engage in violence for any reason, then his position is ultimately inconsistent with both the first-level and the second-level versions of moral pluralism I have described. The moral pluralist would be right, then, in characterizing Daniel's moral beliefs as, at best, harmlessly false.

Interestingly, the movie does not encourage that interpretation of Amish morality. Just before John Book intervenes in the scene I have been discussing, one of the Amish leaders recognizes Book's intentions and tries to stop him, using the words "It's not our way." In actuality, the Amish may believe that violence is universally absolutely morally forbidden, but, as the movie suggests, such a position is not required for the case to be conceptually coherent. One may believe that it is wrong for oneself, or for members of one's culture, to do something, while yet believing that others may be morally permitted to do it. More plausibly, perhaps, one may believe that it is wrong for oneself, or for members of one's culture, to do something, without having any position at all about what others, sufficiently distant from
one, are morally permitted to do. Daniel need not judge Book, nor Book judge Daniel, in order for them each to act from a proper sense of what is morally required and forbidden for them.

This case thus offers us an example of a situation in which we may be drawn to judging what is right for one person is not right for another, and that, furthermore, what is right for these people is relative to their respective cultures. According to the definition of relativism I offered earlier, such a position would be explicitly, unequivocally relativist. For relativism just is the position that moral standards of right and wrong are relative to cultures.

Now it must be admitted that my definition of relativism is so broad that virtually any plausible moral theory would qualify as relativist according to it. For any plausible moral theory will acknowledge that the rightness or wrongness of actions will vary according to context and that facts about one's culture, or facts relying on facts about one's culture, will be crucial to the specification of the relevant context. The culture of which one is a part will significantly determine the expectations and the interests of the people one's actions are likely to affect, as it will determine their interpretations of various behaviors as offensive or respectful. These will significantly affect the amount and kind of good or harm one's actions will produce and whether one's behavior will cement or disrupt, harmonize with or unsettle one's relations to one's community and individuals within it. For these reasons, even the most absolutist of moral theorists, who believes that there is a uniquely best set of moral principles that apply universally to all, is apt to admit that, in a sense, what is morally right for one person may not be right for another and that this may be due to differences in the agents' respective cultures. Such a position, while relativist in letter, would not be relativist in spirit. It would fail to capture anything of the doubts or commitments that have traditionally moved people to embrace the relativist label.

What I mean to be considering here, however, is a form of relativism based on moral pluralism. According to this position, standards of moral rightness or wrongness from which one can derive moral requirements and prohibitions might themselves not be derivable from the set of principles, values, and patterns of thought that can be justified on grounds that are independent of culture, or on grounds that will be common to all cultures. Though there may be moral truths concerning values, principles, and patterns of reasoning that all cultures have reason to accept or reject, taken together these truths may be insufficiently precise and insufficiently well-ordered to yield a set of

4. This may be related to the position Bernard Williams advocates in chap. 9 of Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985).
principles that can be conjoined with a set of nonevaluative cultural data to generate a determinate moral code. As first-level moral pluralism acknowledges the possibility that there may be good reasons to support each of several conflicting positions on a specific issue and no further reason or principle that can settle the choice among them, second-level moral pluralism allows that this kind of evaluative situation can occur with respect to whole moral systems. As reason can constrain moral judgments within a moral system, it can also constrain moral assessments of the systems themselves, providing a basis for comparisons among different systems as well as a basis for criticism and revision within these systems. But in none of these cases can we assume that the constraints of reason will determine uniquely best positions.

Returning to the incident from Witness, then, the second-level moral pluralist may reason as follows: it seems morally required of Daniel that he refrain from striking the bully because the society of which he is a self-affirming member absolutely prohibits violence. Is it right for this society to have such a prohibition? If there were decisive moral reasons against it, Daniel's being a member of a society that enforces it would not be sufficient to make it right for him to comply. But there are not apparent decisive moral reasons against the prohibition—that is, the prohibition does not seem wrong. There are obvious moral reasons that support it, though there may also be moral costs, for example, to personal liberty. Daniel's moral code may not be better than Book's, but it is not obviously bad. The crystallization of principles, values, and priorities that his culture has come to embrace falls within the range of acceptable codes to which we are limited by reason in conjunction with empirical fact. Since, in addition, it is his code, it is right for him to comply. What is right (and wrong) for Daniel is relative to his moral code, and what is right (and wrong) for Book is relative to his.

According to the second-level pluralist's position, then, an action may be morally required of someone not because it is a consequence of a universal principle in conjunction with nonevaluative fact, but because it follows from an acceptable component of a moral code that constitutes one good, or good enough, set of standards among others. Such a position does seem to me to capture much of the spirit of relativism, for it acknowledges that culture may contribute to the determination of a person's moral requirements and prohibitions in a much more thoroughgoing and fundamental way than absolutism appears to allow. At the same time, such a relativism can be sharply distinguished from subjectivism, for a relativism based on pluralism, while admitting the limitations of what philosophers have sometimes called pure practical reason, is not skeptical of its existence. Second-level pluralism like first-level pluralism recognizes the possibility that there will be moral questions for which there are no unique and
determinate right answers. Yet it also recognizes grounds for judging that plenty of possible answers are wrong answers.

It doesn’t follow from the pluralist’s thoughts about the encounter in Witness that it really was alright for Nazis to report the Jews hidden in the attic next door, or that it really was alright for plantation owners to own slaves. For the codes that required or permitted the behaviors in question in these latter cases (assuming that there were consistent codes available at the time) were not among those within the range to which reason constrains us, and, significantly, the reasons against these codes had direct bearing on the specific actions and institutions at issue.

Second-level pluralism and the relativism that is based on it, then, are not versions of the doctrine that anything goes, nor even of the view that anything you really believe is right is right for you or that anything that a society endorses is right for that society’s members.

CONCLUSION
My goals in this article have been both theoretical and at least loosely practical. For it seems to me both that our philosophical thinking about issues involving objectivity and relativism has been hampered by some unduly narrow formulations of the relevant questions and that this sort of thinking, which is not confined to philosophy classrooms, tends to lead people into one of two morally regrettable responses to moral controversy. At the theoretical level, I have urged that we recast our inquiries about moral objectivity in ways which will separate the issue of objectivity from the issue of uniqueness. More specifically, I have proposed that we identify the question, Is ethics objective? with the question, Does reason, in conjunction with empirical fact, constrain values? By doing this, the option of pluralism will be much more evident than it has been until now.

Moreover, as we have seen, the pluralist option is an option at either (or both) of two levels: the level of first-order decision making—Which is more important, equality or liberty? Does the legitimation of pornography harm women more or less than its censorship harms society?—and the level of moral codes or moral systems. For there may be several moral systems that are all incommensurably good, so that living within one of them, and according to its principles, is perfectly, unequivocally good, even though another person may live within another good system and so accept principles that conflict with the first. This is second-level pluralism. Unlike first-level pluralism, which may appear to accommodate a form of relativism but really does not, this one really does accommodate a kind of relativism but does so within an objectivist framework. This undoubtedly complicates the issue of moral truth in ways one would happily avoid. But if its doing so helps us avoid both the ultimately nihilistic consequences of subjectivism and
the closed-minded intolerance of moral absolutism, it is worth putting up with the added complexity.

Is moral pluralism true? I don't know, and, as I announced at the beginning of this article, I did not set out to offer any arguments for it. Indeed, to confess, most of the hard problems—for example, capital punishment, abortion—that may seem incapable of resolution are ones which, after much reflection, I find myself thinking have a right answer after all. To prove that, at any rate, some hard problems do not have a right answer, or that, at the level of moral systems, there is certainly no maximally best or most rational one, would take a transcendental argument of a sort I cannot even imagine. In offering pluralism as an "option," then, I offer it only as that, with no argument against, or even wish to discourage, the person who continues to search for a single best theory, a viable absolutism.\textsuperscript{5} Pluralism is offered, not as a challenge to absolutism, but as an option for those of us who find ourselves for other reasons unable or unwilling to be absolutists. Pluralism offers an answer to the question of how a commitment to objectivity in ethics can be reconciled with pervasive and persistent disagreements, given the very significant possibility that rational reflection and empirical fact may never be sufficient to resolve them.

\textsuperscript{5} This project is admirably represented in Alan Donagan's work in moral philosophy.