

METAETHICAL MORAL RELATIVISM AND THE ANALOGY WITH PHYSICS

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Abstract

This paper deals with a specific version of metaethical moral relativism, known as “speaker-relativism”. It starts by explaining the position, focussing on the views of two prominent contemporary relativists, Gilbert Harman and James Dreier. Both authors draw an analogy between ethics and modern physics: just as Einstein showed that judgments about time or mass were always relative to a specific frame of reference, Dreier and Harman argue that “absolutist” judgments about moral rightness or wrongness need to be reinterpreted as relative to some particular moral system. They also claim that this analogy allows us to salvage ordinary moral talk. I consider a number of possible objections to their argument, beginning with one, concerning the possibility of moral disagreement, which I think can be successfully answered, and then presenting two criticisms that I take to be more problematic for the relativist. I argue that despite its initial appeal, Harman and Dreier’s suggestion regarding our use of moral language seems to be a source of confusion in certain cases of moral disagreement, and does not appear able to preserve specifically *moral* normativity – which leads me to conclude that it is best viewed as a variant of an error theory about morality, rather than as the distinct metaethical position it purports to be.

Metaethical Moral Relativism

Briefly put, metaethical moral relativism (henceforth MMR) is the view that the truth or falsity of moral judgments, or their justification, is always *relative* to some

particular moral code. (In what follows I shall focus on the most challenging view, the one that takes truth and falsity to be relative.) The view comes in several different versions. The moral code that is relevant for the truth or falsity of the judgment in question can be said to be that of a *group* of people, for instance the community to which the person making the judgment belongs; or the moral standards of one particular individual (e.g. the speaker herself) can be singled out as relevant. On the other hand, assuming that it is the moral outlook of one particular person that is relevant, a distinction should also be drawn between theories that make moral judgments relative to the *speaker's* outlook, and those that tie them to the convictions of the *agent* whose action is being judged. In the former case, we get what is often called “appraiser-relativism” or “speaker-relativism”, whereas in the latter case we get “agent-relativism”.¹

No matter what particular form of the theory they endorse, metaethical moral relativists (henceforward, relativists) agree with error theorists like John Mackie that we have no good reasons for believing in the existence of “absolute” moral values. (See Mackie, 1977.) However, contrary to the latter, they do not conclude that in the absence of such values, all the substantive moral evaluations we make are, as far as we can tell, purely and simply false.² As my rough statement of MMR shows, relativists believe that there is such a thing as moral truth – they just claim that it is relative. Now what, more precisely, do they mean by that? In what follows, I will focus on two prominent modern-day relativists: Gilbert Harman and James Dreier. Harman and Dreier subscribe to slightly different forms of MMR. Dreier explicitly describes himself as advocating speaker-relativism, in a form that has

¹ A similar distinction can of course also be drawn for theories that make moral judgments relative to the convictions of a *group*: we would then get “speaker’s group relativism” and “agent’s group relativism”, respectively.

² “Substantive” moral evaluations, as I understand them, typically refer to judgments of the form: “X is right/wrong”, as opposed to “It is not the case that X is right/wrong”; or “S ought/ ought not to...”, as opposed to “It is not the case that S ought/ ought not to...”. Yet as we shall see, relativists seem to want to make the class of substantive moral judgments more inclusive.

affinities with noncognitivism. He proposes to understand moral terms on the model of indexicals, like “here” or “now”. According to this proposal, “ ‘x is good’ means ‘x is highly evaluated by standards of system M,’ where M is filled in by looking at the affective or motivational states of the speaker and constructing from them a practical system” (Dreier, 1990, 9). Since the motivational states in question are not cognitive states, Dreier’s view incorporates a noncognitivist element without nevertheless qualifying as a form of noncognitivism (given that for him moral statements do possess truth-value). Harman’s position, on the other hand, may be closer to speaker’s group relativism, since he thinks that moral judgments (at least those that are adequately phrased) involve an implicit reference to moral standards that are shared by the speaker and his audience. However, his position still implies that the *speaker’s* moral standards are relevant to the truth of or falsity of his statements, and he also acknowledges the possibility that the group with which the speaker stands in implicit agreement might include only himself (see Harman, 2000, 8-19; 36). In what follows, I will thus focus on speaker-relativism, and treat the analogy which both Harman and Dreier appeal to as a defense of that particular version of MMR (I shall henceforth use “MMR” to refer to speaker-relativism).

I have said that relativists believe they are able, contrary to error theorists, to salvage talk of moral truth, even when substantive moral judgments are concerned. Here it might be asked what exactly they mean by that. As we have just seen, Harman and Dreier think that an adequately phrased moral judgment will involve a reference to the speaker’s set of moral standards. Let us consider a judgment which seems to fit that description: “according to my own moral convictions, abortion is morally wrong”. If I really do happen to endorse a set of moral standards that prohibits abortion, then, according to the relativist, my judgment will be correct. Yet such a claim cannot allow the relativist to distinguish himself from the error theorist. The latter will readily agree that, under the conditions just stipulated, my judgment is correct – but this is because the judgment in question does not constitute a genuine

moral judgment. It is more adequately described as a “sociological” judgment concerning a particular person’s moral standards and its implications, which any observer, whatever his moral convictions, might appropriately make. Therefore, if the relativist wants to salvage the notion of truth as applied to substantive moral evaluations, he cannot content himself with pointing out that judgments of the sort just mentioned can, when the relevant conditions are met, be true.

However, this is not all that authors like Harman and Dreier have to say. First, they would presumably insist that the kind of judgments I have described as “sociological” are, strictly speaking, the best we can get, given antirealism about values, and thus that we should agree to treat them as genuine, substantive moral judgments.³ To make this point more plausible, they might stress the fact that since every true moral judgment worth describing as “substantive” by their standards will be made in conformity to a moral code that the speaker himself accepts, every such judgment will carry normative weight for him, i.e. it will give him a reason to behave as that moral code prescribes. Secondly (and this may seem paradoxical given what I have just said, but the paradox will be resolved in subsequent sections of this paper), they think that MMR allows us to rescue the notion of moral truth even for “absolutist” judgments of the kind “abortion is wrong” – which everyone will acknowledge to be a substantive moral evaluation. How can they make such a claim? This is where the analogy between ethics and contemporary physics comes in.

The Analogy Between Ethics And Physics

Harman and Dreier both draw an analogy between MMR and the theory of Relativity in physics. Here is one way of presenting it. Before Einstein put forward his Special Theory of Relativity, it seemed obvious that the passing of time was a

³ Dreier, for instance, talks about “toning down” the aspirations of moral judgments. See Dreier, 2006, 261, and also Harman, 2000, 38.

perfectly linear and homogeneous process. Whether you were at rest or traveling very fast in a futuristic vehicle wasn't supposed to affect in any way the pace at which time elapsed. Yet Einstein's theory precisely demonstrated that common sense was mistaken in this respect. The answer to the question of how many years have passed since George W. Bush first became president of the USA will be different for us, who spent the whole period busy with our earthly affairs, and for an astronaut who had been traveling all the while and at very high speed in his spaceship. In fact, fewer years will have elapsed for the astronaut than for us, since as Einstein has taught us, time passes more or less quickly depending on how fast one is traveling. Thus there is no 'absolute' answer to the question. Any answer will have to be relative to a particular frame of reference – relative to us, seven years have elapsed since Bush was first elected, whereas only three or four years might have elapsed for the astronaut in his spaceship. Relativists like Harman and Dreier propose to understand moral judgments on a similar model. Even though, as we have seen, they agree with error theorists that we have no good reasons for believing in the existence of objective values that might validate "absolutist" moral judgments, they maintain that such judgments can still be true if they are understood as being *relative* to a particular moral code, in the same way as judgments about time, in order to be correct, need to be made relative to a particular frame of reference. Thus for the relativist, it is no more necessary to declare that absolutist moral judgments are all false than it is to say, if someone claims that seven years have elapsed since Bush first became president, that that person is wrong if he fails to specify a frame of reference to which his judgment might be tied. Indeed, it is perfectly legitimate to regard the relativizing clause "for us on the surface of the earth" as implicit in that judgment. Similarly, says the relativist, many moral judgments framed in absolute terms can legitimately be regarded as true if they are reinterpreted as relative to the relevant moral outlook: for instance, "abortion is wrong" will count as true if its relativistic translation,

“abortion is wrong relative to the set of moral standards that I accept” is true (see Harman, 2000, 37-38, and Dreier, 2006, 261-62).

Problems With The Analogy

What about the possibility of moral disagreement?

Though the analogy drawn by Dreier and Harman might seem appealing, it raises a number of difficulties. I will begin with a possible objection which I think can be successfully answered, before considering others that I take to be more problematic. Harman and Dreier propose to reinterpret absolutist moral statements by making them implicitly relative to the moral standards of the speaker. Now doesn't their view have the undesirable implication that moral disagreements actually do not occur, despite our very strong intuition that they do?

I think that the relativist should not have too much difficulty replying to that objection. He can agree that when we do mean to make moral judgments in an “absolute” manner, genuine moral disagreements are possible. However, this need not worry him, for the suggestion made by Harman and Dreier is a *reformative* one; they do not pretend to be merely describing the way we ordinarily use moral language. It is only once moral statements have been suitably relativized that people with different moral outlooks won't be disagreeing with each other anymore.⁴ And neither need this be a problem for the relativist: he can remark that the same would happen if we and the astronaut, in the example given above, initially made our claims about the amount of time that had elapsed since G.W. Bush was first elected in absolute terms (thus disagreeing with one another), and then came to realize that Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity was true. We

⁴ Though two people sharing the *same* moral outlook might still disagree as to the exact implications of the set of moral demands they both accept.

would then suitably modify our claims and the disagreement would disappear – but the fact that it leads to the removal of such disagreements is certainly not something we can hold against Einstein’s theory. And so it also goes, the relativist might say, for MMR. True, the impossibility of coherent disagreement between speakers with different moral outlooks is something we might find more difficult to accept than the kind of relativism about time implied by Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, given the importance of the pretension to absolute truth in moral talk,⁵ but the relativist might still insist that we ought to accept such a consequence, for the only alternative – sticking to absolute moral statements and rejecting the relativist’s reform – will lead us to conclude with error theorists that all substantive moral judgments are false, a conclusion the relativist will say we should avoid.

The loss of moral normativity

Paul Boghossian has raised what I think is a more serious objection against MMR. He himself observes that – as I have mentioned before – the relativistic translations that authors like Harman and Dreier propose for ordinary moral statements seem to turn them into what I have called mere “sociological judgments”. For Dreier, as we have seen, “X is good” means “X is highly evaluated by the standards of (moral) system M”. Harman holds quite a similar position. He thinks that morality depends on an agreement in intentions between different agents, each of them intending to act in keeping with a particular set of principles, provided that others intend to do so too. Harman’s translation of an absolutist moral statement like “it would be wrong of me to lie” would thus be something like “it would be wrong of me to lie given my intention (which you share) to act in keeping with set of principles M, which prohibits lying”. However, when taken by themselves, Harman and Dreier’s

⁵ Assuming of course, as relativists do, that ordinary moral statements of the sort ‘it was wrong of him to break his word’ are to be given a cognitivist analysis.

relativistic statements do not seem to carry any normative weight whatever. Any non-relativist might accept them, even people who reject M.

True, since we are dealing here with speaker-relativism, the moral code that will be relevant to the relativistic translation of an absolutist moral statement will always be one the speaker himself accepts, and as I have said earlier, the relativist might insist that the speaker's adherence to M is sufficient to yield normative force, at least for *him*, to the judgment that X is good, or highly evaluated, by M's standards – in other words, it gives him a reason to treat X as good. Yet even if we concede that point, another worry awaits the relativist: is the normativity thus bestowed on the relativistic translation really the specific kind of normativity required if it is to count as a genuine moral statement, namely *moral* normativity? This leads us to Boghossian's challenge to MMR. The moral evaluations made by the supporter of MMR are supposed to be relative to a moral code that he accepts. But how, Boghossian asks, could the relativist still endorse a particular moral code, since he is committed, just like the error theorist, to the claim that there are no absolute moral facts? This seems to imply that no moral code can be correct, and how could the advocate of MMR go on subscribing to some moral code while believing the propositions constituting that code to be all false (see Boghossian, 2006, 25-27)?⁶

If we assume that only a belief in the existence of objective moral values might provide adequate justification for accepting a given moral code, then Boghossian's objection would seem to deal a fatal blow to MMR. However, Dreier and Harman would not agree with such a claim. As we have seen, Dreier identifies the particular "system"

⁶ I shall ignore here the alternative claim that the moral principles that enter into particular moral codes are not false, but rather involve *incomplete* propositions, a bit like the proposition "Tom is taller than...". Indeed, I take such a suggestion to be rather implausible. The judgement that slavery is wrong, for instance, seems to us complete as it stands, and we seem to understand perfectly well what it means. The claim that we are actually mistaken in our impression, and that all the people who have been making such judgments so far were only under the delusion of making full-fledged moral claims, would seem, in the absence of very strong arguments, rather difficult to accept.

to which moral judgments are supposed to be relative with a set of *motivational attitudes*, i.e. *noncognitive* states. Harman's intentions to keep an agreement are also noncognitive, motivational states. Now doesn't that remove the worry raised by Boghossian, since we certainly do not need to believe in the existence of absolute moral facts in order to have such motivational attitudes?

I am not convinced that such an answer can suffice. Moral systems typically involve one or more principles of the sort: "lying is wrong" (though these principles need not have such a simple and general form; as Hare has suggested, they may also be of extreme complexity).⁷ Now the motivational attitudes Dreier refers to presumably involve being motivated to act in keeping with such moral principles. But then we will be entitled to ask whether the propositions in which those principles find expression are true or false. Clearly, they cannot be true absolutely speaking, or else MMR would be false. And it does not seem they could themselves be true in a relative manner, for if we said they were true in relation to still other principles, the same question would arise at this more fundamental level. Of course, we might say that the propositions in question are true in relation to themselves (after all, any proposition logically follows from itself), but this would be perfectly trivial, and would not give us any reason to accept a principle, or set of principles, we did not already subscribe to. It thus seems we ought to assume that all such propositions are false, and that Boghossian's challenge to MMR holds good.

I suppose Dreier might reply that what matters for the truth of a specific moral statement is not whether it follows from some true moral principle, but whether it is consistent with the speaker's set of motivational attitudes. For example, the speaker's judgment that some particular act of lying is wrong will be true if this person is reliably motivated to act in keeping with the general principle according to which lying is wrong, even if that principle does not state anything

⁷ See Hare, 1981.

like an objective moral truth. Yet such a reply could not alleviate our initial worry. While the fact that I am motivated to act in keeping with a certain moral code arguably does endow the corresponding specific statements (e.g. “it was wrong of you to lie to him”) with some sort of normativity, it does not appear to give us *moral* normativity, as opposed to the broader kind of normativity that one might attribute to motivational states in general insofar as they provide reasons (broadly understood) for action – what Bernard Williams called “internal” reasons (see Williams, 1981, 101-13). Perhaps Dreier might argue that since the affective attitudes in question involve a motivation to act according to what are unambiguously *moral* principles, the normativity they carry is indeed moral normativity. But he would then seem to be putting forward a *new* way of understanding moral normativity, rather than describing our ordinary understanding of that notion, which appears to involve, as Richard Joyce has argued, a *categorical* dimension: moral reasons and imperatives are supposed to apply to us regardless of the conative attitudes we contingently happen to have (see for instance Joyce, 2001, 157). Now one cannot show that relativistic moral statements deserve to be regarded as substantive moral claims by arguing that such statements do preserve moral normativity, if the notion of moral normativity one appeals to is not the standard one, but a new proposal.

Another possible option for Dreier would be to adopt a noncognitivist analysis of moral principles based on a minimalist theory of truth, holding for instance that to say that the principle “lying is wrong” is true, is simply to express one’s disapproval of lying. He would then not be committed to an error theory about moral principles. But we might then ask why Dreier, if he chose to take that route, does not extend his noncognitivist analysis to specific “absolutist” moral statements like “it was wrong of you to lie to him” – which of course would amount to abandoning MMR in favour of a full-fledged noncognitivism.

Harman, as we have seen, grounds morality in an agreement in intentions between different people regarding the ways they are to behave towards one another. He explains why people have such intentions by reference to the notion of “moral bargaining”: intending to observe a certain “agreement” about our ways of treating each other, provided that others similarly intend, brings mutual benefit (think for example about the agreement not to do harm to each other). That doesn’t mean, however, that Harman’s theory reduces moral motivation to self-interest. It may be that the most effective way of promoting the interests of people who intend to observe a particular agreement is precisely for them to develop, through habituation, genuine non-self-interested concerns for others (cf. Harman, 1977, 148-50). Yet in spite of this, Harman’s position seems in no better shape than Dreier’s when it comes to preserving moral normativity. Even if, not shying away from sophistication, we were to translate the statement “it would be wrong of me to lie” as “it would be wrong of me to lie given my intention to act in keeping with set of principles M, which prohibits lying, an intention wholly founded in a genuine concern for truthfulness”, it seems that we would lose the specific sort of normativity (moral normativity) that was present in the initial statement. This suggests that we cannot retain that kind of normativity while at the same time avoiding absolutist moral talk. And if we cannot retain it for relativistic moral statements, it then seems that such statements have no claim to be considered “substantive” moral judgments.

Here, two possible options for the relativist *à la Harman* (though not necessarily desirable ones) would be, first, to endorse ethical egoism, claiming that the intention to adhere to a particular “agreement” because this furthers one’s own interests is sufficient to count as a moral reason, but this is not the stance taken by Harman. Moreover, ethical egoism would seem to make moral relativism dispensable: if it goes against my interests to lie under circumstances C, then it is simply (morally) wrong for me to lie in such a case, and there is no need to add a relativistic clause to that statement. The second option would be to declare that we get *moral* normativity

as soon as we have an *agreement* in intentions, without implying that the agreement must necessarily be in the interests of all the parties involved. But obviously such a suggestion would be too crude, for it would not allow us to distinguish, for instance, between moral judgments and judgments of etiquette. And even if this proposal could be improved upon so as to pick only the right kinds of agreement in intentions, it would still run into the problem we mentioned before regarding nonstandard conceptions of moral normativity. Since it does not appear possible to show that relativistic moral statements retain moral normativity in the standard sense, I think that the relativist should agree to say with the error theorist that all substantive moral judgments are false, and present his main claim within the framework of the error theory, as a proposal for reforming our flawed ways of speaking.

A misleading use of moral language

Finally, another problem, which specifically concerns the analogy between ethics and physics, is that the way authors like Harman and Dreier use the analogy seems to be a source of confusion when two people subscribing to different moral codes make incompatible absolutist moral judgments. As we have seen, the point of the analogy with physics is to support the relativist's claim that we can salvage much of ordinary moral practice and talk even while accepting antirealism about values, by showing that there is nothing wrong, as such, with making moral judgments phrased in absolutist terms. Just as in the case of physics, what matters is that we don't make the false background assumption that such judgments are "absolutely" true. Whenever we use them, we should understand them as involving an implicit relativizing clause. A possible source of concern here is that this seems to imply that two conflicting absolutist moral judgments can both be true at the same time. Suppose Tom accepts a set of moral standards that prohibits the use of violence to defend oneself against an attack, whereas John adheres to a moral code that regards

that practice as perfectly legitimate. Tom says that it was morally wrong of Bob to resort to violence when a young hoodlum attacked him in the street; John says that Bob did the right thing. According to Harman and Dreier's proposal, both Tom and John are right in their judgments. Harman himself explicitly acknowledges that MMR has that paradoxical implication:

According to meta-ethical relativism, there can be conflicting moral judgments about a particular case that are both fully correct. The idea is that two people with different moralities might reach conflicting moral judgments concerning a particular case – for example, one saying the agent was morally right, the other saying the agent was morally wrong – where both opinions are correct. (Harman, 2000, 24)

Now it might seem that Harman's contention is simply untenable, because it involves a straightforward contradiction: two incompatible judgments like those of Tom and John cannot both be true at the same time. A number of authors have faulted speaker-relativism precisely for leading to a logical contradiction (see for example Lyons, 1976). Yet Harman would reply that his view does not have such a consequence, because, as we have seen in section 2, the notion of "truth" to which he appeals when he says that two conflicting absolutist judgments can both be true at the same time is a special one: he thus writes that "we should count a nonrelativistic moral judgement right if the corresponding relativistic moral judgement is right made in relation to the morality accepted by the person making the nonrelativistic moral judgement. The relativist can intelligibly suppose that really conflicting nonrelativistic moral judgements are both right in this sense" (Harman, 2000, 38).

The first problem I see with such an answer is that this appeal to a special notion of truth would seem to considerably diminish the force of the relativist's claim to salvage the notion of truth with respect to substantive moral judgments. Strictly

speaking, it is *not* the conflicting absolutist moral judgments of Tom and John that are both true together, but only their relativistic translations. So, even if we agree to reinterpret absolutist moral judgments in the way Harman and Dreier suggest, it still seems that we won't have salvaged the notion of truth for such judgments in any significant sense. Even if the relativist insisted that the relativist translations of absolutist moral judgments should be treated as substantive moral judgments, since strictly speaking they are the most we can get, this would at most allow him to make a purely verbal point against the error theorist. Indeed, the latter has no problem agreeing with the relativist that such judgments can, literally speaking, be true. He will just deny, for the reasons already given, that they really constitute substantive moral judgments. And no matter what stance one takes on this particular issue, the main thrust of the error theory is to deny that any absolutist moral judgment can, strictly speaking, be true. The analogy between ethics and physics used by Harman and Dreier does nothing to show that such a claim is incorrect.

Secondly, I do agree that when two people share the same moral outlook, it might seem a legitimate and useful shorthand to make moral judgments without attaching to them any relativist clause, even if antirealism about values is true. Indeed, such a clause might then be considered implicit, just as the claim that seven years have elapsed since Bush first became president can be understood without distortion as bearing an implicit relation to the relevant frame of reference. However, it seems that the situation is not the same when people *differ* in their moral outlooks. To say to two people who are making incompatible nonrelativistic moral judgments that they are both right is only likely, in the absence of any further explanation, to puzzle them, and not to resolve the disagreement. If he is to make himself understood, the relativist will have to explain that by this he means that each of them is right according to his own particular moral convictions; and if the speakers insist that they themselves meant to say more than that when making their judgments, the

relativist will have to reply that their pretension to absolute truth is unwarranted. Now since moral judgments seem to involve such a pretension to a degree that is not found in judgments about physics (a novice who first learns about Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity is unlikely to want to continue making judgments about mass or time in an absolute manner, but it seems more difficult to many of us to abandon absolutist moral talk), it would seem more advisable for the relativist to call for a partial reform of moral talk, and to demand that at least in cases where people with different moral outlooks are facing each other, we make it clear that their absolutist judgments are both false, and should be supplemented with a relativizing clause tying their judgments to their own particular moral standards. Such a reform has actually been called for by a number of supporters of moral relativism, notably anthropologists like Melville Herskovits, and it would avoid the defects that Harman and Dreier's proposal seems to have.

Of course, supporting such a reform would seem to blur much of the difference between MMR and the error theory. We have seen that error theorists agree with relativists regarding the ontology of values, and that they are also happy to concede that statements such as "cruelty is wrong for me", i.e. relative to the moral standards I accept, can perfectly well be true. They may perhaps even accept the idea that "absolutist" moral statements might be used as shorthand for their relativized versions between people sharing the same moral outlook. So if it endorsed the reform just suggested regarding our use of moral talk, MMR would appear more like a possible way of developing the error theory,⁸ rather than a genuinely distinct metaethical view. Harman and Dreier's more conservative proposal makes MMR more distinctive, but as we have seen it seems to have misleading consequences,

⁸ Not even necessarily the best way of developing it. Indeed, in some cases error theorists might still want, for practical purposes, to go on using absolutist moral talk even when their listeners do not share, or not yet, their own moral standards – if only when educating children. In such cases, a position like moral fictionalism, in the form defended for instance by Richard Joyce, according to which we ought to go on *pretending* that the substantive moral judgments we accept are true even though we know them to be false, might seem a more attractive option for the error theorist. (See Joyce, 2001.)

in that it is likely to elicit confusion when two non-relativists with different moral outlooks disagree with each other.

Conclusion

What emerges from the preceding discussion is that metaethical relativism, even when construed as speaker-relativism – a version arguably superior to its alternatives – does not live up to its promise, which was to salvage talk of moral truth despite the relativists’ commitment to antirealism about values. Indeed, it is only thanks to a kind of verbal trick that relativists are able to retain talk of truth for absolutist moral judgments. Strictly speaking, the only kind of moral truths they are successful in preserving is one error theorists can perfectly acknowledge. The conclusions drawn by Dreier and Harman from the analogy with physics are difficult to accept: it does not seem advisable to retain absolutist moral discourse in cases where people do not share a common moral outlook. The often-made suggestion that we ought then to replace moral statements phrased in absolute terms by statements of the kind “action X is right/ wrong *for me*” (at least in cases when we are having a honest discussion with each other, and our primary purpose is not persuasion), seems to be a better option for the relativist. Yet even such a version of MMR does not manage to preserve specifically moral normativity, as opposed to the more general kind of normativity that is peculiar to motivational states as internal reasons for action. Thus understood, MMR seems to be better described as a particular variant of the error theory, rather than as a rival metaethical view.⁹

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