

Marie-Luisa Frick

# A Plurality of True Moralities? Tracing ‘Truth’ in Moral Relativism

**Abstract:** Commonly understood, moral relativism calls into question the capability of moral judgments to be true in an absolute manner. Yet, what truth means in that regard remains contested. If there is no single true morality, as moral relativists typically suggest, does this imply that there are multiple equally true moralities without any nuances of truth and error? By what standards would the assumption that there are no moral truths itself be either true or false? Setting apart moral relativism as a branch of limited or local relativism from types of universal relativism, it can be shown how moral relativism is relying upon a certain notion of truth in order to sweep away another. Far from shying away from it or fearing it, moral relativism embraces truth as a ‘weapon’ and a criterion of its own adequacy. Without it, moral relativism would not only risk self-defeating inconsistencies; it also would lose its critical potential rendering it a vital enrichment of ethical discourses not only in the eyes of its proponents but also in those of many of its antagonists.

**Keywords:** Moral relativism, ethics, disagreement, framework, metaphysical truth

Moral relativism is as much controversial as it is afflicted by ambiguities and misapprehensions. In fact, quite a variety of theories or ideas are subsumed under this umbrella term and distinctions between relativism, skepticism, nihilism, contextualism or constructivism are sometimes blurred. Moral relativism, as I understand it, is a complex set of assumptions in three different, yet relating domains: epistemological/hermeneutical, ontological, and normative-practical (see Frick 2010). There is not *the* moral relativism, but – here I agree with Michael Krausz without fully relying on his classification (see Krausz 2010) – various moral *relativisms* are imaginable depending on their peculiar arranging and combining these assumptions. However, at its core moral relativist approaches share a distinct assertion that also is the starting point for reframing the meaning of truth in the context of morality. It is one of my main arguments that understanding “truth” in relativism is crucial in order to assess the traditional charges against moral relativist thought. In particular, two charges have commonly been raised against moral relativism: that it violates the law of non-contradiction and that it is self-refuting. I will argue that both are by no means necessary objec-

tions and that reflected and accordingly cautious theories of moral relativism are not affected by them. The key to that finding lies in understanding what notion(s) of truth are applied by moral relativists. This will be the first part of my remarks. In a next step, I will pay attention to implications of such an understanding of truth with regard to moral disagreement and discuss alternative approaches of *non-metaphysical* moral truth.

## 1 True Morality/True Moralities: The Two Understandings of Truth in Moral Relativism

Having described moral relativism as a complex set of epistemological or hermeneutical, ontological and finally normative-practical assumptions, it is now time to elaborate on this definition a bit more. Not every complex set of such assumptions represents a genuine moral relativist view or theory. To be regarded as such it is necessary that this set involves one proposition in particular which I call the *thesis of ontological relativity*. It can be described in the words of Gilbert Harman as the view that there is “no single true morality” (see for example Harman 2001). The word “single” in that regard seems to suppose that instead of there being no true morality at all; we should imagine at least two or even a plurality of true moralities. In order to understand how relativists like Harman, David B. Wong<sup>1</sup> or also John Leslie Mackie whose antirealist and non-cognitivist stance is a classic example of relativist argumentation,<sup>2</sup> arrive at this assumption, we have to look closely at their path of thought. This starts with what one can call *the observation of an antagonist plurality* of moral views and opinions. This observation, however, is not all at restricted to moral relativists but rather is an anthropological universal at least for those life forms in respective environments where they can encounter diverging judgments, value and moral. What distinguishes the moral relativist from others in that regard is her interpretation of that plurality in general and its inherent disagreement in particular, i. e. the way she makes sense of it (see Frick 2010). From the relativist point of view, moral disagreement

---

1 Despite his insistence on “universal constraints” Wong can be considered a moral relativist since he argues the case for “an alternative to the universalist view that a single true morality exists” (Wong 2010, p. 245).

2 Mackie’s error theory, although sometimes considered as a version of cognitivism, is not concerning moral but *metaethical* error. Even if, as he admits, the “belief in objective values is built into ordinary moral thought and language”, this belief nevertheless is false or implausible when confronted with Mackie’s two arguments (from relativity and queerness) (see Mackie 1977, 48f).

– at least when it comes to uncircumventable axiological-/moral premises – is irresolvable. It cannot be resolved simply by pointing to facts or by demonstrating logical errors. Referring to flaws in such regard, moral relativists argue, is futile since no moral facts do exist which could guarantee the truth of moral judgments. This antirealist view is central to moral relativist thinking and its understanding. If no objective reality is at hand that could be used for testing opposing moral judgments and norms (and moral arguments at large), from this it follows that no true morality exists since no set of moral judgments and norms whatsoever could aspire to match with “moral facts”. From the assumption that no true morality exists, it is however quite a way to the claim that no single true morality exists or that a plurality of true morality exists, respectively. How then, does the moral relativist get from here to there? He gets there by changing – implicitly in the most cases – a former *correspondence theory* of truth to something that can best be described as a type of *coherence theory* of truth.

This switch has significance in several important regards: First, it helps clarifying the meaning of the thesis of ontological relativity. In the new understanding, a true morality no longer is something conforming to an external objective reality independent of us; it rather appears as a set of judgments conforming to or capable of being integrated into some non-objective reality, such as a certain worldview or cultural framework. Such non-objective realities do, however, not exist in singular: there are many worldviews – some would argue as many as there are people alive – and there is certainly more than one cultural framework. Any morality then, which has the ability of fitting into such a social reality coherently, is ‘true’ by the moral relativist. Since many and potentially all moralities that people have adopted can satisfy such standards of framework-coherence, the idea of a plurality of true moralities now appears not only to be meaningful but also inescapable. A moral judgment or a set of moral judgments could then be considered true in the relativistic sense if it is warranted by a respective larger belief system as its justificatory framework of reference. It is important to mind, however, that whereas a plurality of moralities can be considered true in terms of being warranted by their respective frameworks that does not mean that these frameworks are equally flawless. They can still be criticized on the grounds of non-moral truth and logics. But the blade of rational critique is blunt when we get down to the fundamentals of moralities in terms of ultimate values and existential orientations.

Second, with this particular notion of truth, we can now reconsider the charges according to which moral relativism is at risk or even destined (a) to conflict with the law of non-contradiction and (b) to contradict itself. Self-refuting inconsistencies are among the most common charges raised against relativist thinking. Here I will be concerned with a peculiar charge of *theoretical inconsis-*

*tency* as contrasted with the charge of practical self-contradiction that refers to the alleged impotency of moral relativists to take a stance in terms of normative ethics. In order to answer the charge of theoretical inconsistency, the reference to the notion of truth embedded in moral relativism is important insofar as it sheds light on the nature of this sort of relativism that is no *global* relativism, but only a *local* one. In contrast to the latter which only holds some kind of judgments, e. g. in the context of values and morals, to be relative to a corresponding framework whose truth cannot be established entirely, the former claims that truth is relative in any context. It thus provokes the question if its own assumption is merely a relative one too, i. e. if its form is in accordance with its content. The two horns of the dilemma accompanying any global relativism can be described as follows: In the first case, it might prove difficult convincing someone of the superiority of the all-truth-is-relative-claim; in the second, this claim is obviously contradicting itself since at least one true judgment is said to exist that is above all frameworks-relativity. Being a local relativism only, this dilemma does not apply to moral relativism. Its own truth condition is the *factual* truth according to which no morality (ever entirely) corresponds to an objective reality. Another, indeed more serious risk of self-contradiction awaits the moral relativist as soon as he enters the domain of normative ethics. This is especially true for – what Bernard Williams has called – “vulgar relativism” (Williams 1982), i. e. for those moral relativists who propagate tolerance as the only legitimate conclusion of their metaethical insight into the relativity of all morality.<sup>3</sup> Some (see e. g. Schaber 2008) – argue that not only vulgar relativism constitutes an inconsistent position in that regard, but any theory assuming relative moral truths. They claim that once the moral relativist is committed to moral truth relative to framework A, she is also forced to make a *normative* claim regarding the obligation of members or adherents of A to follow this truth’s respective norms. Whoever is convinced that a moral judgment is true for members of framework A, is equally convinced that they should act accordingly. I am afraid this argument is misleading. As we have seen, the relativized moral truth in terms of a coherence theory of truth is no genuine moral truth at all. Hence, to say that something is true in that sense does not entail the request to act upon it. Whereas claiming that a moral judgment is true in a non-relative sense equals demanding its compliance and respect, presenting a moral judgment as relatively true to a certain referential belief system is a more complex operation since it has two dimensions: the first one

---

<sup>3</sup> This is why in order to avoid such fallacy I have proposed to regard a hypothetical principle of reciprocity based on the motive of fairness as the only normative implication of the ontological relativity thesis. It works in both directions of tolerance *and* non-tolerance (see Frick 2010).

is a descriptive one: Members of framework A believe judgment X to be true given their respective axiomatic scheme; the second dimension embedded in the assertion according to which a given moral judgment is relatively true to a certain belief system, is indeed a normative one. It is, however, not the *categorical* statement that members of A are obliged to comply with this very judgment, but rather a *hypothetical* imperative. If a member of A would ask the moral relativist: "Shall I act according the judgment X?", the reflective relativist will not answer "Yes!", but tell this person to act according to judgment X *if he wants to conform to the rules of his framework or belong to his moral community*. The relativist could add: "And do not act accordingly if you want to conform to the rules or belong to another". Absolutist, non-relative normative claims are nothing a moral relativist is inevitably committed to as long as she is aware of the fine, but crucial line between categorical and hypothetical imperatives.

Let us now look at the implications of moral relativism's understanding of truth relating to the law of non-contradiction according to which – given the same context – something cannot both be true and non-true at the same time. At a first glance, moral relativism – when applying its coherence moral truth criterion – states exactly that: something, say a moral judgment, is true according to system of reference A and false according to system of reference B. But how could the same judgment be true and false at one time depending on which framework is concerned? Recalling the switch in truth understandings moral relativism has performed after establishing its thesis of ontological relativity, we now see that once truth *has* been relativized to some sort of framework, moral relativists no longer talk about truth in a genuine sense: At the utmost, the moral relativist can speak of a relative truth in question marks. For any judgment, moral and factual alike, coherently fitting into a larger web of judgments means to manifest a sort of "correspondence" with not the slightest metaphysical weight.

To sum up, minding the conception(s) of truth operating in moral relativism, the two charges of violating the law of non-contradiction and of self-refuting inconsistency can be avoided. Yet, other questions arise.

## 2 Further Questions Discussed: Relative Moral Truth and Genuine Disagreement; Non-Metaphysical Truth

One discomfort with moral relativism's underlying notion of truth has been expressed by Nicolas Sturgeon who confessed to be confused by the way moral relativists seem to "fallback" from the claim that there is no moral truth to the as-

sumption that there are only relative moral truths (see Sturgeon 1994). To him, this maneuver amounts to affirming moral nihilism first and then to diverge into relativism. I am not sure if his confusion could be diminished by the moral relativist's conception(s) of truth as outlined here, but what is more is that his confusion is only part of a larger argument which seems to put the moral relativist into a dilemma since with the fallback from nihilism to relativism, the primarily relativism-inducing disagreement no longer appears to be genuine.<sup>4</sup> If two people disagree about a moral issue and one's judgment is true relative to belief system A and the others' relative to belief system B, can one really say their views conflict? Do they actually *meet*? A genuine disagreement from this perspective would only be possible if the two strive for a single moral truth – which moral relativism just has excluded. In her *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* Carol Rovane portrays such pseudo-disagreement in quite detail: two women – one from India, one from the USA – “disagree” about the moral relevance of carrying out filial duties, this is, compromising one's own happiness for the sake of the parents' happiness (Rovane 2013). In Rovane's example they both ‘agree to disagree’: they come to the conclusion that the moral relevance of carrying out filial duties is higher in one and lower in the other society and that it is ok for both of them to see or have it their respective ways. According to Rovane, there is nothing to resolve between the participants in a controversy on moral issues and therefore no genuine disagreement can be said to exist.

I am not convinced by this account and the argument as such. On one hand side, there is the difference between the perspective of the disputants and the perspective of an observer: What might be experienced as a genuine disagreement might not however appear so to a bystander or an expert in moral philosophy – and vice versa. In addition, one should mind the various forms of moral controversies: people can disagree whether a certain judgment is preferable either because it is objectively true or because it is more adequate to one particular belief system. The latter possibility would still exist even if the former seems to be obsolete in a world of moral relativists. Imagine for example the discussion between my friend Caroline and myself. One could say we both more or less share the same system of beliefs – let's call it a secular-human-rights-feminist framework for the sake of argument –, yet we are divided over the extent to which abortion should be allowed. Whereas I tend to argue that the right of

---

<sup>4</sup> This dilemma goes back to David Lyons who described it as follows: Either the moral relativist “seems to endorse logically incompatible judgements as simultaneously true” or he cannot speak of genuinely conflicting moral judgments anymore and thus “forsakes relativism entirely” (Lyons 1976, 292f).

women to reproductive self-determination should be balanced against the unborn child's right to life, Caroline argues for a principle priority of the women's decision. For us, this is not about finding objective moral truth in that matter. It is merely about what position is more in line with a secular-human-rights-feminist framework. This, however, is not simply a question of coherence and norm logic that a more competent third party could resolve for us. This is a question about the weight attached to values and moral principles shared within one general framework of reference. One could even say: It is a question about how an ideal secular-human rights-feminist framework should look like, i.e. a fundamental *intra-framework disagreement*.

In the example mentioned by Rovane, another sort of disagreement is imaginable that in my view is of even greater importance: an *inter-framework disagreement* pertaining to the question which of the (cultural) belief systems of the two women involved is more able to make the world a "better place". Just add to Rovane's example a third woman asking the two how to act when confronted with the wish of her parents to get married and found a family instead of pursuing her career. They most probably will advise her according to their own respective systems of belief and try to make it appear more attractive to her than the other. They may not have absolute reasons to do so or any substantial truth on their side of argument, but they nevertheless will be inclined to propagate their respective culture or framework and the way of life it entails. This is all too natural because the disposition to universalize one's own morality in terms of wishing it rather observed by many than by few is by no means peculiar to non-relativists but a key feature of any morality. Seen in that light, the Indian and the US-American women in Rovane's example not only disagree about the right thing to do according to two rivaling belief systems but also about their preferability which they cannot – in the eyes of the moral relativist – decide by resorting to empirical facts and laws of logic only.

Both cases, the extended example of Rovane and my own, finally support the moral relativist's claim that even in ideal situations disagreement would continue over moral issues and that we have no good reason to assume that such disagreement never would be genuine or fundamental. Attempts to show that moral truth as understood by moral relativism does away with genuine disagreement, in general seem to overestimate the significance of the disagreement argument. Disagreement as such neither is an argument in favor of moral relativism, nor does its absence prove right absolutist theories. Of course, the path of moral relativist thought is – practically speaking – more likely to start with observation of disagreement than universal consensus, but that is not necessarily the case. One could well think of some hypothetical individual who is living in a society where everyone shares the same morality and who starts to ask himself one day

what guarantees the truth of their common moral judgments and norms irrespective of their consensus? Or who even imagines a group of people who share another moral code and starts searching for a standard to adjudicate between his and theirs? He can, however, not derive from this factual universal consensus that this consensus constitutes a single true morality because two options would both be perfectly sound: (a) that this consensus constitutes the one and only true morality since consensus is a characteristic mark of moral truth; (b) that this consensus does not constitute the one and true morality since concealment or singularity are characteristic marks of moral truth. Thus, moral relativism would not be defeated just because an antagonist plurality of moral views was absent. Just as uniformity in moral views does not induce the belief that a true morality exists, moral disagreement as such is not relativism-inducing.

Here the question arises why then moral relativists interpret moral disagreement – at least such pertaining to irreducible moral axioms and values – in terms of the thesis of ontological relativity according to which no single true morality exists? We now have arrived at the question of *moral relativism's own truth condition*: Why should we believe in moral relativism at all? The short answer is: because it best explains moral disagreement. People naturally are divided over certain moral issues since there is no single true morality. Being an argument to the better explanation, moral relativism is bound constantly to engage with rivaling perspectives; it can never assume its case to be settled; it can never claim its truth without a minimum of skeptical caution. In the words of Krausz: “The relativist cannot rise up to the absolutist’s challenge for a frame-independent argument against the absolutist” (Krausz 2010, 14). I hence suggest the thesis of ontological relativity being moderated to “no single true morality *presumably* exists”.

What are then these rivaling perspectives challenging the relativist reading of moral dissent? The most important is the idea of *moral error*. Seen in this light, when people disagree over moral issues, some of them simply do not get it right (see for example Brink 1989). However, one could ask: “do not get it right” in what regard? In regard to empirical facts – then some, by no means all moral dispute would cease. In regard to moral facts – how are we possible aware of them and more importantly, how could we exclude the chance of not getting them right ourselves? I have always wondered why those arguing with moral error virtually without exception assume that those occur to be in error with whom they disagree.<sup>5</sup> Other interpretations of moral disagreement

---

5 Even framing the idea of moral error in terms (im-)partiality, if it is not an ad-hoc argument after all, is itself not an innocent strategy since it rests upon the implicit claim that each person



would be the suppositions of irrationality or evil. Again, they too have considerable flaws (Frick 2010). Another, likewise unconvincing strategy is what can be called a *universalist reduction*: Moral conflicts are 'eliminated' by reducing the apparently contradicting views to shared principles or values. Apart from the fact that it does not succeed in all circumstances, this maneuver raises the question as to what is gained by presenting conflicts about the legitimacy of capital punishment, for example, as a conflict merely about different versions of the shared principle of (criminal) justice?

The problem of moral error accompanies also another question that could be raised in view of moral relativism's antirealism and emphasis on the classical notion of truth in terms of correspondence: Why focus so much on metaphysical truth when there are alternative understandings of (moral) truth? Indeed, several approaches exist to conceive of "moral truth" without relying onto an objective reality or moral facts. Take for example Derek Parfit's version of "non-metaphysical cognitivism". According to Parfit "[t]here are some claims that are, in the strongest sense, true, but these truths have no positive ontological implications" (Parfit 2011, 479). They simply do not exist in some empirical sense, but – like numbers and logical truths – are (sometimes) "self-evident". In Parfit's view we have "intuitive abilities" to recognize such moral truths like: "Torturing children merely for fun is wrong". Some people however – Parfit is referring to psychopaths and sociopaths – lack this faculty: "Most of us can see, though some of us are blind" (Parfit 2011, 544). What are we to make of this approach? I argue it does not bear close examination – no matter how much we are inclined to agree with Parfit that torturing for fun is morally disgusting. It is the problem of all moral-error-theories: Why is Parfit so sure to belong to the seeing camp? He has no (ontological) basis for this. If producing true normative judgments is conditioned by the faculty of intuition and the functioning of intuition is not ascertained otherwise than by producing certain normative judgments, we ultimately have a circle.

In a similar vein already Thomas Nagel has argued for non-metaphysical moral objectivity which nevertheless supports a "normative realism", that is "the view that propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true or false independently of how things appear to us" (Nagel 1986, 139). This was no truth about the external world, "but rather just the truth about what we and others should do and want" (Nagel 1986, 139). This truth according to Nagel lies in an "impersonal standpoint" that we can reach once "stepping out-

---

is entitled to equal consideration. But why should moralities incorporating selfish or aristocratic ideals be ipso facto false?

side ourselves” (Nagel 1986, 140). The example Nagel gives as moral truth arrived at by this reasoning, is “[t]he objective badness of pain”. Anyone “capable of viewing the world objectively [should] want it to stop”. Again, I am not convinced that truth talk is adequate here. Apart from the fact that pain, at least the ability to feel it, is not inherently bad seen from an evolutionary or simply medical point of view – just try to live one week without it and then count your bruises –; it also begs the question: Who should have reason to stop whose pain? Why should I have a reason to stop the heartache of an artist, for example, who is dependent on such sort of pain in order to be productive? Should we all have a reason to stop the pain women endure when giving birth even when they refuse anesthesia? Moreover, even if we agree that we should have a reason to stop the pain of elderly patients of Alzheimer disease, wouldn’t we soon start quarreling over the pros and cons of euthanasia? What sort of moral truth is this that leaves open so many doors and finally room for contradicting views?

A third approach to do without the classical notion of truth and its metaphysical weight in the realm of morality is Crispin Wright’s (Wright 1992). He suggests – similar to Jürgen Habermas’ truth analogon “justification” (Habermas 1999) – the criterion of “superassertability” which could function as a truth predicate in moral contexts. A judgment is considered to conform to the standard of superassertability if it is warranted based on all information available and if it continues to be warranted unaffected by any enlargement of that information and any objections raised against it. Wright’s attempt is more modest compared to Parfit and Nagel, but his problem is that this theory contains in fact two gateways for moral relativism: first, since superassertability is a formal criterion only, the question when exactly a moral judgment might be warranted, is still open to controversies without any gold standard to adjudicate between different opinions and their corresponding belief systems. The vagueness of the concept of superassertability raises serious doubt whether or not it can really function as an analogon of truth in moral contexts. Second, even if we all could agree on a single clear-cut definition of what makes a moral judgment warrantable – let’s say for example a judgment is superassertible if and only if it fulfills the criterion of impartiality – could we really expect that no two moral judgments possibly continue to exist that are not impartial but nevertheless contradict themselves? The question can be put in the following way: Which specific justificatory demands judgments have to meet in order to exclude this sort of pluralism or relativism of moral truths that initially made us wish for an instrument of adjudicating between them? Superassertability seems rather powerless to function as such an instrument.

All in all, it seems to me that nothing is gained by exchanging truth for justifiability, impersonal objectivity or other surrogate truth predicates. They simply don't escape the(ir) framework. Apparently, these three theories of non-metaphysical moral truth dash against the well-known truth (this time it is one) according to which you can't have a cake and eat it at the same time. If – for whatever reasons – you do not want to base your theory of morality on the idea of a mind-independent objective reality ensuring something like moral facts, you better stick to the implications of antirealism and learn to live with the outlook that there is no true morality. You can of course end the journey here and align yourself with moral nihilism (no true morality, no meaning to moral discourse etc.) – or else embrace moral relativism. It is, I would argue, the more daring way given all the snares lurking when handling relative moral 'truth'. However, it is a way, and as I hope to have been able to show, a way not necessarily without coherence and not without an element of plausibility.

## References

- Brink, David (1989): *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Frick, Marie-Luisa (2010): *Moralischer Relativismus. Antworten und Aporien relativistischen Denkens in Hinblick auf die weltanschauliche Heterogenität einer globalisierten Welt*. Wien/Münster: Lit.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1999): *Wahrheit und Rechtfertigung. Philosophische Aufsätze*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Harman, Gilbert (2001): "Is there a Single True Morality?". In: Moser, Paul K.; Carson, Thomas L. (eds.): *Moral Relativism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 165–184.
- Krausz, Michael (2010): "Mapping Relativisms". In: Krausz, Michael (ed.): *Relativism. A contemporary anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 13–30.
- Lyons, David (1976/2010): "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence". In: Krausz, Michael (ed.): *Relativism. A Contemporary Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 286–302.
- Mackie, John L. (1977/1990): *Ethics. Inventing right and Wrong*. London: Penguin.
- Nagel, Thomas (1986): *The View from Nowhere*. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Parfit, Derek (2011): *On What Matters*. Vol. II. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rovane, Carol (2013): *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Schaber, Peter (2008): "Ethischer Relativismus: eine kohärente Doktrin?". In: Biller-Andorno, Nikola (ed.): *Gibt es eine universale Bioethik?* Paderborn: Mentis, 159–168.
- Sturgeon, Nicholas L. (1994): "Moral Disagreement and Moral Relativism". In: *Social Philosophy and Policy* 20, 80–115.
- Wong, David B. (2010): "Pluralism and Ambivalence". In: Krausz, Michael (ed.): *Relativism. A Contemporary Anthology*. New York: Columbia University Press, 254–267.

Williams, Bernard (1982): "An Inconsistent Form of Relativism". In: Krausz, Michael; Meiland, Jack W. (eds.): *Relativism. Cognitive and Moral*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 171–174.

Wright, Crispin (1992): *Truth and Objectivity*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.