

A coherent moral relativism

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Abstract Moral relativism is an attractive position, but also one that it is difficult to formulate. In this paper, we propose an alternative way of formulating moral relativism that locates the relativity of morality in the property that makes moral claims true. Such an approach, we believe, has significant advantages over other possible ways of formulating moral relativism. We conclude by considering a few problems such a position might face.

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Moral relativism is an attractive position, but also one that it is difficult to formulate. In this paper, we propose an alternative way of formulating moral relativism that locates the relativity of morality in the property that makes moral claims true. Such an approach, we believe, has significant advantages over other possible ways of formulating moral relativism. We conclude by considering a few problems such a position might face.¹

1 Why moral relativism?

There are many reasons that one might want to defend moral relativism, but one of the most plausible concerns moral disagreement. There are moral disagreements had by intelligent, careful and informed parties that seem intractable. No amount of information will resolve their argument. The realist may be forced to explain such disagree-

¹ The authors' views on moral relativism vary widely: from outright hostility (Massey) to sympathetic rejection (Lynch) to cautious acceptance (Capps). Thus our interest, as the text indicates, is in formulating a coherent form of moral relativism as opposed to defending it as the correct meta-ethical theory.

ments in terms of moral facts that some parties simply cannot appreciate regardless of all possible improvements in evidence. Some moral facts, the realist must contend, are simply inaccessible to some unfortunate souls. If the disagreement is just right (i.e., each of the two parties of the disagreement straightforwardly contradict each other), then one of the parties is right and the other is wrong—one's judgment is true and the other's judgment is false—and yet there is no way to resolve their disagreement.

The moral relativist offers a way around this problem. In such cases, says the moral relativist, there simply is no absolute fact of the matter. It is not that one party is right, one party is wrong and there is no way to find out which is which. Rather, *both* parties are right. They disagree and their disagreement is intractable, but only because they are both correct relative to their respective ways of looking at the matter. In such cases, there are only moral facts relative to a parameter that can vary with individuals. The moral relativist then has a handy explanation of what is going on in seemingly intractable moral debates that does not appeal to epistemically inaccessible moral facts. The intractability of the debates is not to be understood epistemically. Rather, the disagreement is, as it is often described, *faultless*.²

So explaining intractable moral disagreement is a problem for moral realism, and on the surface moral relativism offers an appealing alternative. Notoriously, however, moral relativism is beset with a host of thorny problems all its own. One of the thorniest concerns how to even formulate the position. As we see it, any formulation of moral relativism should meet at least the following two demands or constraints. Relativism must (1) allow for genuine disagreements over a common subject matter; and (2) offer an explanation—grounded in our moral practices—for *why* moral judgments are only relatively true.

Let us explain each of these constraints a bit further. First, if the realist has problems explaining how intractable disagreements could be resolved, the relativist has problems explaining how disagreement is even possible. The relativist simply cannot point to moral disagreements and claim that, as the parties are using moral language, each is simply expressing distinct propositions. If what one party is affirming the other is not denying there is no real disagreement. To claim otherwise is simply to view moral disagreements as cases of people talking past each other.³ In other words, the moral relativist must explain how the parties of a disagreement can *share content*—how it is that one can affirm the same proposition that the other denies.

The shared content constraint suggests that it will be difficult for the moral relativist to claim that the propositions—the content—of our moral judgments are themselves relational or relative to some parameter such as moral frameworks. That is, it will be implausible to take it that the proposition ⟨murder is wrong⟩ is in fact elliptical for ⟨murder is wrong according to moral framework F⟩. For if the contents of seemingly incompatible moral judgments are really elliptical for moral judgments that are actually compatible when suitably expanded, (e.g. ⟨murder is wrong according to F⟩ and ⟨murder is not wrong according to G⟩) then the sense that the parties are genuinely disagreeing disappears. The parties to the alleged dispute are only making moral judgments that on their surface seem to disagree; they are actually talking past one another.

² Max Kölbel (2003); Wright (2006), p. 52; Brogaard (forthcoming).

³ Lynch (1998), pp. 27–29. See also MacFarlane (2007).

The second constraint on relativist theories is that the source and nature of the relativity invoked should be explained. An illustration helps to illuminate this point. Consider a simple relativism according to which the *meaning* of the truth predicate itself contains a hidden indexical: *true* is elliptical for *true-in-framework F*. Any such view faces well-known problems concerning possible self-refutation (e.g. is the claim that “‘true’ means ‘true in F’” true?) But even if such problems can be resolved, a simple truth indexicalism of this sort does not say *why* the meaning of the truth predicate should be understood in this way. Just saying it contains a hidden indexical doesn’t explain what is about *the property* denoted by the predicate that determines that this is so, nor what it is about the moral judgments to which it is applied that makes the position plausible in the first place. In general, we take it that any view that claims that moral judgments are relatively true should explain both the nature and source of the relativity.

2 Some options

Gilbert Harman is well known for defending a version of moral relativism. Harman is sensitive to the shared content constraint discussed above. Thus moral relativism, as he construes it, is not a position about the content of moral judgments. It is not the *propositions* moral judgments express that are relative, but their *truth conditions*. As he says,

For the purposes of assigning truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D*. Similarly for other moral judgments.⁴

According to Harman-style relativism, the truth-conditions for one’s judgment that, e.g., it is wrong to have an abortion, are relative to some moral framework or other. There is no single set of truth-conditions that can be given for the judgment. Nonetheless, since this is an account of truth conditions and not content, Harman denies that this implies that people employing different moral frameworks are actually talking about different things. He is no more committed to this view, he says, than the relativist in physics is committed to the claim that ordinary people are talking about different matters when they discuss the motion of an object while occupying different vantage points.⁵ Furthermore, there is no objectively correct moral framework.⁶ A single, absolute moral truth concerning the morality of abortion cannot be snuck in the back door by claiming there is a single true framework. The moral facts, so to speak, are relative to these frameworks.

Harman-style relativism can and has been challenged.⁷ But even if these challenges are met, the general position still faces the second constraint mentioned above. Namely,

⁴ Harman and Thomson (1996), p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 17–19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁷ See Thomson’s contribution to Harman and Thomson (1996). Also see Boghossian (2006).

what explains the fact that truth conditions of moral judgments are relative—in virtue of what are they so? One answer might be: the nature of the moral concepts we employ in making those judgments. But this seems ruled out—since if our moral concepts were relative, one would expect that this relativity would infect the propositions that we express by such judgments. And that is not Harman’s position. Yet it seems equally implausible to say that the relativity is due to the moral *properties* our moral concepts denote. For talk of “moral properties”—relational or absolute—seems poorly motivated by, indeed even ontologically antithetical to, a broadly antirealist view of morality.

John MacFarlane’s recent development of a relativistic semantics might seem to offer an alternative way of developing moral relativism.⁸ MacFarlane suggests that propositions be assigned truth-conditions relative not only to ordinary *circumstances of evaluation* (world and time), but also relative to a further parameter determined by what he calls the *context of assessment*. Thus, roughly speaking, when you judge that abortion is wrong, I assess it according to the moral standards operative in my context as an assessor—most plausibly my own standards. I might find, quite correctly by the relevant standards, that you are simply mistaken. Abortion is morally permissible. But when you consider your own judgment (i.e., when you become the assessor of your own judgment) you might just as correctly by your standards find that you were right. Abortion was wrong all along.

Adopting MacFarlane-style relativist semantics has its advantages. Among other things, since it allows that one and the same proposition can be assessed for truth relative to different standards, it allows for shared content. But the problem for making use of MacFarlane’s semantics for moral judgments to develop a moral relativism is that MacFarlane’s semantics are just that—semantics. MacFarlane gives us a semantics that might be adapted to moral judgments, but, for all the semantics actually tells us, there could be some absolute fact of that matter concerning each and every moral question.⁹ So it seems that if our semantics are as MacFarlane suggests, then we ought to have some account of *why it is* that truth in the moral domain is such that it varies with a parameter set by the context of assessment.

In general, a mere semantics for moral talk does not insure that our ways of talking and judging are responsive to moral reality. The moral relativist should not be a mere recorder of human behavior. She should also provide an account of the actual moral phenomena. The account of moral relativism we present here attempts to do that by locating the relativity of moral facts in the nature of the property that makes moral judgments true. If this account is correct, then a relativistic semantics will be appropriate for morality not only as a record of how competent judges behave, but also as an account of how they should go on behaving.

3 Superwarrant and true relativism

Having now surveyed what the moral relativist needs to say, and briefly discussed, and offered reasons to find inadequate, two ways of saying it, we now want to examine

⁸ MacFarlane (2005).

⁹ Boghossian (2006), pp. 18–19—Boghossian credits the point to Kit Fine.

a different approach in more detail. According to this approach, the source of moral relativity is not our moral concepts but the property *that makes moral judgments true*.

As a way into our suggestion, it is helpful to consider a proposal of Crispin Wright's. Wright's position, while distinct from ours, is our jumping-off point. According to Wright, one reason to take any antirealist approach to morality seriously is that moral judgment fails to exhibit what he calls cognitive command. A domain of judgment exhibits *cognitive command*, roughly, when it is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within that discourse, saving those that can be excused because of vagueness, "involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming"¹⁰ As Wright notes, it is quite plausible that many disagreements in ethics are not like this. As he says:

Any student of morality who has come to feel, therefore, that a substantial body of the principles that inform our ordinary moral thought are essentially contestable, and that no rational or cognitive deficiency is needed to sustain the clashes on things like sexual morality, the value of individual freedom, the moral status of animals and the ethics of suicide and mercy-killing, which are freely exemplified within and across cultures, won't give much for the realist's chances.¹¹

Wright then makes the following interesting suggestion: if moral judgment fails the cognitive command test, we should take the "truth predicate" for "moral discourse" to be what he calls "superassertibility". That is, "the morally true is that which can be morally justified and which then retains that justification no matter how refined or extensive an additional consideration is given to the matter".¹² Superassertibility, in other words is a type of *superwarrant*—eternal, undefeated warrant

Recently Wright has gone on to argue that appealing to an account of truth in terms of superassertibility helps to make sense of what he calls *true relativism* about "disputes of inclination"—that is, disputes where we are inclined to think that there is faultless disagreement. A true relativism, as Wright puts it, is a position that allows that the very same proposition can be true relative to one parameter but not true relative to another.¹³ The thought is that where truth is superassertibility, a single proposition could be superassertible relative to one parameter but not superassertible relative to another parameter. Wright himself does not try to develop a relativist account of morality; yet we take Wright's view to be suggestive.

Nonetheless, there is a significant problem with Wright's basic framework that must be confronted at the outset. As his remarks above indicate, his position is married to a very strong (and to our minds, implausible) form of *pluralism* about truth, according to which there are distinct "truth predicates" or properties denoted by "truth": sometimes it denotes being superassertible, sometimes a property more like correspondence. But this position faces a host of difficult problems. Here's one. Consider the following familiar type of inference: Any prisoners subjected to water-boarding have had their

¹⁰ Wright (1992), p. 144; see also Wright (2003), p. 198.

¹¹ Wright (2003), p. 199.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 194.

¹³ Wright (2006), p. 52.

rights violated. Prisoners have been subjected to water-boarding; therefore there are some prisoners whose rights have been violated. The argument is surely valid, but if “true” were to name distinct properties in the moral and nonmoral domain, it is not clear why it would be. The ordinary way of understanding validity is that valid inferences preserve a single property—truth. But the second premise of our argument is surely a nonmoral judgment, while the conclusion is moral. Consequently, were “true” to denote distinct properties, no single property is being preserved in the argument.

This and similar problems can be avoided by talking about a property that makes judgments true rather truth itself. One way to do so is to endorse:

ST: Necessarily, for any proposition, if it is true, then it has some property F such that, necessarily, if a proposition is F, it is true.

What ST proposes is that truth is a *supervenient* property, in that it strongly co-varies with other properties. And ST is compatible, clearly, with two further thoughts: first, that truth not just co-varies with these further properties but that it is metaphysically dependent in some way on those properties; and second, that which property determines truth can *vary*. That is, not only:

Necessarily, if x is F, then it is T

but

It is possible that x is T without being F.

This limited pluralism about the base properties for truth says nothing about the property of truth itself *other* than it is a single higher-level property that is *asymmetrically dependent* on other properties. Intuitively, these other properties are those that *make propositions or judgments true*. Using these terms, we could reformulate Wright’s point as:

(SA) Moral judgments are made by true by being superassertible.

And of course this is consistent with taking some other property to make other sorts of judgments true.

In our eyes, the importance of construing a property like superassertibility as a property that makes moral judgments true as opposed to being a “truth-property” has been underappreciated, both by those who have advocated epistemic theories of truth for morality, and those who have been skeptical of such theories. By formulating the position in this way, we avoid any semblance of the view that “true” is ambiguous. And as we’ll see, there are other benefits as well.

(SA) by itself does not imply any form of relativism; indeed, it is not much of a theory of anything until we say more about what it means. As we noted, superassertibility is a type of superwarrant. So it would seem that at a minimum, the advocate of (SA) must say what warrant or justification amounts to in the moral case. It is here that our own suggestion kicks in. The most entrenched theory of moral justification, when married with an epistemic theory of the property that makes moral judgments true, underwrites relativism about moral truth—a relativism that is grounded in our actual epistemic practices with regard to moral judgment.

4 Moral warrant: the short form

In this section we briefly outline what we take to be the most entrenched theory of moral warrant. In explaining his theory of justice, John Rawls influentially suggested that:

Here the test is that of general and wide reflective equilibrium, that is, how well the view as a whole meshes with and articulates our more firm considered convictions, at all levels of generality, after due examination, once all adjustments and revisions that seem compelling have been made. A doctrine that meets this criterion is the doctrine that, so far as we can now ascertain, is the most reasonable for us.¹⁴

Rawls' concern was theory-acceptance, but subsequent thinkers have broadened his insight and cast it as a theory of justification in ethics generally.¹⁵ The basic thought is that a moral judgment is warranted to the degree that it meshes or *coheres* with our considered moral judgments and relevant non-moral convictions. Rawls' suggestion, in other words, is often taken to underwrite a broadly coherentist approach to moral epistemology.

The basic approach has won wide support amongst realists and antirealist alike. Thus, we find David Brink—an arch-realist and stout defender of objective moral facts—opting for moral coherentism over foundationalism:

We all have or entertain moral beliefs of various levels of generality...many of these moral beliefs depend on other moral beliefs. For instance, beliefs about the value of a particular activity depend, among other things, on ideals of the person (i.e., moral beliefs about what kind of persons we ought to be). Moral beliefs also depend on nonmoral beliefs. For instance, beliefs about the moral or political legitimacy of a welfare state depend on nonmoral beliefs about such things as human nature, social theory, and economics. A coherence theory of justification in ethics demands that these and other beliefs be made into a maximally coherent system of beliefs.¹⁶

Coherentism's principle rival is foundationalism. According to foundationalism broadly construed, judgments come in two kinds: (a) those warranted by other judgments; and (b) those basic or foundational judgments warranted in some other way. Thus for empirical judgments, a foundationalist typically takes it that there are some judgments that are warranted just in virtue of being the product of reliable perceptual mechanisms. Coherentism can be minimally defined as the rejection of (b), and hence an endorsement of the claim that all judgments must be warranted by other judgments. In this sense, all warrant is, for the coherentist, "inferential".¹⁷

¹⁴ Rawls (1980), p. 534.

¹⁵ The tip of the iceberg would be: Daniels (1979), Scheffler (1954), Sayre-McCord (1996) and Brink (1989).

¹⁶ Brink (1989), p. 102.

¹⁷ Defenses of coherentism as a general theory of justification can be found in BonJour (1985), Harman (1986) and Lycan (1996).

The contrast with empirical judgment suggests why realists and antirealists about morality alike take coherentism as a plausible moral epistemology. A moral foundationalist must maintain that some judgments are warranted by something other than another judgment. Thus either some moral judgments are simply self-evident or some moral judgments are justified by something analogous to perception—moral “intuition”. Given the seemingly inherent “contestability”—to use Wright’s phrase—of many of our moral commitments, neither approach has garnered many followers.¹⁸

So coherentism is a reasonable and entrenched moral epistemology. According to the theory, a moral judgment is warranted to the degree that the system of moral and nonmoral judgments to which it belongs is coherent. Coherence theorists frequently apologize for the fact that coherence is notoriously resistant to precise characterization. In our view, no apology is necessary, since we take its indefinability to be the unsurprising result of the fact that “coherence” names a family of epistemic desiderata. That is, a framework of system of judgments is coherent insofar as, and to the degree to which, it exemplifies the following virtues:

- Mutual explanatory support: A system’s judgments are mutually explanatory when
 - (a) they are explanatorily compatible, none acts as a defeater for another; and
 - (b) they are explanatorily connected: each judgment within the system is positively supported, either inductively, abductively or deductively by the others in the system.
- Predictive power: the system is a reliable predictor of future experience and judgment.
- Simplicity: the system’s explanations are neither ad-hoc or needlessly complex.
- Completeness: the system contains, for every proposition of the relevant kind, either a judgment in that proposition, or a judgment in its negation.
- Consistency: judgments within the system are not logically inconsistent.

Call these *coherence-making features*. Such features themselves come in degrees: members of a system can be more or less consistent, more or less mutually explanatory, etc. A system of judgments increases in coherence to the degree to which it exemplifies these features. It would be *maximally coherent*, presumably, when it exemplifies as many of these features as possible to the greatest degree possible, where the limit of possibility here is determined by, among other things, the nature of judgments in question.¹⁹ Thus it may be that for some types of judgments, full explanatory connectedness is not possible. If so, then some system may qualify as maximally coherent even if they are not positively supported by other judgments in the system (although no other judgment acts as a defeater for them either). Likewise, in the moral realm, predictive power may have less weight, and (depending on how one treats moral dilemmas) completeness may be impossible. We won’t essay any conclusions along these lines here; our point is simply that maximal coherence is not necessarily perfect coherence.

¹⁸ A notable recent exception is Schaffer-Landau (2003).

¹⁹ Thus none of the desiderata are strictly speaking necessary. The present account is therefore open to the possibility that some maximally coherent systems of judgments might contain some contradictions. See Priest (2006), pp. 49–51.

Given coherentism's plausibility as an account of the structure of justification in morality, it seems natural for anyone attracted to an epistemic account of the property that makes moral judgments true—a position like (SA), in other words—to appeal to it. Moreover, a marriage between coherentism about warrant and coherentism about truth is happy for another reason as well: it would answer one of the most pressing objections to coherentism in epistemology. It is a platitude that judgments are warranted only if they are likely to be true. Why should the fact that a judgment is a member of a coherent system of judgments make it likely to be true? If we avail ourselves of a coherentist theory of what makes moral judgments true, we can answer: coherent moral judgments are likely to be true because what makes moral judgments true is itself a constructed out of coherence.

5 Moral truth as coherence

In the last section we entertained the thought that a moral judgment is warranted to the degree that the system of moral and nonmoral judgments to which it belongs is coherent. How might we use this notion or warrant in the moral realm to construct a theory of truth?

The obvious suggestion is that true judgments belong to *maximally* coherent systems. Clearly, we can't simply say that a moral judgment is true if and only if it is a member of a maximally coherent system of moral and nonmoral judgments. Even putting aside the question of whose judgments we are talking about, this suggestion holds truth hostage to the existence of a maximally coherent system of judgments. Assuming at the very least that the system of judgments in question must belong to some human being(s) it seems unlikely that any human's system of judgments is maximally coherent. This would mean no judgments are true.

A more plausible suggestion would be to say that

(CT): A moral judgment is true if and only if it *would* be a member of a maximally coherent system of moral and nonmoral judgments.

Above we said that a maximally coherent system of judgments is a system that exemplifies as many of the "coherence-making" features as possible to the greatest degree possible. Thus (CT) says that a moral judgment is true when it would be a member of such a system of moral and nonmoral judgments. Recall that (CT) does not define *truth*. It should be read, instead, as telling us what property makes a moral judgment true.

The attraction of such a theory for the moral relativist quickly becomes apparent. Nothing in (CT) rules out the possibility that some moral judgment would be a member of one maximally coherent system of judgments while its negation would be a member of another maximally coherent system of judgments. If so, then the natural suggestion would be that moral judgments are true or false relative to the maximally coherent systems that do or do not include them. That is:

(CTR): The moral judgment that *p* is true relative to *S* if and only if it would be a member of *S* where *S* is a maximally coherent system of moral and nonmoral judgments.

To its credit, (CTR) is pleasingly modest. A more radical relativism would allow, implausibly, that any moral judgment would be true just so long as it was a member of some judgment system. A slightly less crazy relativism would allow that a moral judgment is true just so long as it would be a member of some coherent system. Neither of these proposals sufficiently accommodates the intuition that people can make moral mistakes. Put another way, both threaten to imply *the moral triviality thesis*: that is, the thought that every moral judgment is true relative to some system. Arguably, (CTR) goes some distance toward accommodating the intuition that the moral triviality thesis should be avoided. According to (CTR) a moral judgment is relatively true, but only relative to maximally coherent systems that include it as a member. Maximally coherent systems are presumably not easy to come by. Hence (CTR) is consistent with (a) there being some judgments that would not be included in any maximally coherent system of moral and non-moral judgments, and (b) that all of my moral judgments, in particular, might be such judgments.

Unfortunately, (CTR) has significant drawbacks. First, the view threatens to founder on the so-called conditional fallacy.²⁰ This is a problem that can plague attempts to define a categorical statement in terms of a subjunctive conditional. The problem might be thought to apply to (CTR) because it applies to (CT). Thus, if we take the proposition in question in (CT) to be

(not-C): Maximally coherent systems don't exist.

Substituting (not-C) in for “p” in (CT), we arrive at the conclusion (to put it intuitively) that maximally coherent systems don't exist just when some maximally coherent system would say they don't. And that makes little sense.

Our coherence theory is local, so the advocate of (CT) might object, reasonably, that (not-C) is not a moral judgment, and hence not open to inclusion into (CT). Fair enough. But note: we can only be confident this is so if we are sure of what it is for something to be a maximally coherent system in the first place. Consequently, this response only serves to highlight a less formal, but one might think, more formidable problem. Let us grant that the view does not require us to admit that maximally coherent systems actually exist. Nonetheless, it does require us to understand *what they would be like if they were to exist*. And one might question the account on this basis alone. That is, one might wonder whether we do have a sufficient grasp of the very concept of a maximally coherent system. This misgiving emerges when we compare our use of maximal coherence in understanding warrant with our use of it in (CT). In the case of warrant, one might reply to our misgiving by noting in that case, “maximal coherence” merely names a vanishing point on the horizon towards which a system moves as it becomes more coherent. But vanishing points are illusions; they have no features. As such, we needn't need to have a clear grasp on what a maximally coherent system is like in order to understand what it would mean for a system of judgments to become *more coherent*. To become more coherent is simply to have more of the coherence-making features to a greater degree. But in (CT) we no longer are simply

²⁰ As an objection to epistemic accounts of truth, this point was first made by Plantinga (1982), who used it to slightly different ends; Wright (2001), p. 767 and Wright (2003), pp. 120–122 generalize it; and it is his account we draw on here.

talking about approaching an ideal limit. We are saying that what is true is so because it would be believed at that limit. So the question of what that limit is like is clearly legitimate. Thus to appeal to our earlier questions, we would presumably want to know whether, a supercoherent system of moral judgments can be complete, or whether it will contain judgments not positively supported by other judgments and so on. But it is not clear how we are to answer such questions in advance of reaching the vanishing point.

For these reasons, we take it that our relativist should not be satisfied with (CT).²¹ However, we believe that the relativist can retain the benefits of (CT) but avoid its problems by appealing to a type of superwarrant, where “warrant” is understood in terms of coherence.

6 Moral truth as supercoherence

As an initial rough characterization, let’s say that a moral judgment is *supercoherent* when it has the property of surviving arbitrarily close examination of the very type we typically try to give our moral judgments during reflective, responsible moral thought. On a coherence theory of warrant like the one we’ve canvassed above, such examinations consist in seeing how coherent the moral judgment in question happens to be with the rest of our moral and nonmoral judgments.

We can sharpen this by adding two additional principles. First,

WITH: A judgment J coheres with some system of judgments B if and only if the result of including J in B is a system of judgments that is more coherent than B itself.

And second,

MORE: S is more coherent than S* when S has either more of the coherence-making features or some of those features to a greater degree.

Consequently, we can say that, e.g. my judgment that torture is pro tanto wrong is supercoherent with the rest of my judgments just when this judgment *is* coherent with my moral judgments and the relevant non-moral judgments, and it would continue to be so, without defeat, under all sustained increases of moral and non-moral information. Employing our two principles above, we are in a position to formulate what it is for a moral judgment to be supercoherent.

(Sup) The moral judgment that p is supercoherent for J if, and only if, it coheres with J’s other moral and nonmoral judgments at some stage of moral inquiry and would remain coherent with J’s moral and nonmoral judgments at every successive stage of moral inquiry.

Here a “stage of inquiry”, as the name suggests, is constituted by a state of warranted information or evidence available in principle in the actual world to some open-minded,

²¹ Wright has indicated that parallel reasoning led him to pose superassertibility—in essence what we are calling superwarrant—as an alternative epistemically constrained truth property. See Wright (2001), p. 70ff.

receptive inquirer engaging in reflective moral thought. Stages are understood as being extensible (additional information might always come in) and inclusive (the additional information is just that—additional; all successive stages of inquiry include the information warranted at prior stages).²²

So understood (Sup) supplies us with a suitably relativized notion of coherence. Should such a property be admitted, then we can say that our proposal on behalf of moral relativists comes to the suggestion that they endorse:

(SC): The moral judgment that *p* is true for *J* if and only if it is supercoherent for *J*.²³

The advantage of (SC) over (CTR) should be clear; it requires us only to understand the mundane notion of coherence. We needn't have any grasp at all of what a maximally coherent system of moral judgments might be like.²⁴ But like (CTR), (SC) also goes some distance to avoiding moral triviality: not just any old moral judgment will be superwarranted.

Arguably, (SC) meets the three constraints we mentioned at the outset on plausible formulations of relativism. First, the view allows for shared content. What is relativized is the truth of moral judgments not the content of those judgments. A single judgment *J* can be true relative to one judge, *A*, but false relative to another judge, *B* in virtue of the fact that *J* is supercoherent relative to *A*'s judgments, and that it is not supercoherent relative to *B*'s judgments. Moreover, the account extends comfortably to moral propositions as well. Asked whether moral proposition *P* is true or false, we can respond that moral propositions, like judgments, are not simply true or false; they are true or false in virtue of being supercoherent for some *J*. We can proceed to define propositional truth in terms of judgment truth:

The proposition that *p* is true if and only if were *J* to judge that *p*, that judgment would be supercoherent for *J*. The proposition that *p* is false if and only if were *J* to judge that *p*, that judgment would not be supercoherent for *J*.

²² Compare the account of constructivism in [Beall and Restall \(2005\)](#).

²³ Notice that there are two ways in which *J*'s moral judgment that *P* might fail to be true that reflect the failure of supercoherence: either *J*'s judgment coheres with *J*'s other moral and nonmoral judgments at some stage of inquiry but fails to remain coherent with *J*'s moral and nonmoral judgments at every successive stage of inquiry, or *J*'s judgment never coheres with *J*'s other moral and nonmoral judgments.

²⁴ Of course, we can, if we wish, construct a conception of a maximally coherent system from (Sup) if we wish. For were all my moral judgments to have the property described by (Sup), they would arguably form a tightly coherent system, for all would be consistent, display mutual patterns of support etc. etc. Thus maximal coherence, while idealized, can itself be built out of familiar, non-idealized materials: we can say that a maximally coherent system is the type of system that our judgments would compose were each individual judgment to have the categorical property described by (Sup), that is:

(Max): *S* is maximally coherent system if and only if all of its members would be supercoherent at some stage of inquiry and would remain so in every successive stage of inquiry.

In the situation above, where A judges that p and A's judgment is supercoherent for A, the proposition that p is true for A. But were B to judge that p, then B's judgment that p would not be supercoherent, p is false for B.²⁵

A chief virtue of the account is that it clearly meets the second constraint, which is to explain both the nature and source of the relativity of moral judgment. It explains the *nature* of the relativity relation by reducing it to inclusion. That is, a judgment is true relative to J (for J) just when it would be durably coherent with J's moral and nonmoral judgments. According to WITH, a judgment coheres with a system of judgments by being such that were it included in that system, the resulting system would be more coherent. Consequently, whether a moral judgment is true relative to some J is a matter of its inclusion in J's system of judgments.

(Sup) also explains the *source* of the relativity. Whether a moral judgment is true is relative because the property that makes it true—supercoherence—is itself relative to systems of judgments. Moreover, the account of supercoherence is itself independently motivated. It is not ad hoc but emerges out of the most entrenched account of how moral reasoning is warranted.

Two other points should recommend (Sup) to the relativist. By locating the source of the relativity of moral judgments in the property that makes those judgments true, as opposed to a semantic feature, the account allows that we who employ moral concepts needn't be sensitive to subtle changes in context or parameter, or even be aware of the fact that our moral judgments are relatively true. In general, the account is therefore consistent with, but goes beyond a mere semantics for moral judgments. It provides a ground for such semantics.

Finally, it is worth stressing that the advocate of (Sup) needn't be seen as making any claim about truth itself. One should distinguish an account of the property F from an account of the condition(s) under which F is instantiated. Thus it is possible that truth as such is a non-relative (i.e. not relationally defined) property and it be the case that some class of things can only have that property if certain conditions obtain (that is, relative to some parameter). Thus we could say, e.g. that velocity is an absolute property but that most things (things moving at less than the speed of light) only have that property relative to a spatial framework. Likewise, nothing here rules out the position that *truth as such* is not a relative matter, but it is a relative matter whether a moral judgment is true because whether a moral judgment is true depends on whether it is supercoherent for J. Thus the relativist can consistently maintain both (a) that one and the same judgment can be true relative to one judge and not true relative to another and (b) that the property of being true is not the property of being true for some judge, and "is true" does not mean "is true for".

7 Objections and responses

We believe that taking supercoherence as the property that makes moral propositions true gives the moral relativist much of what they want. The view not only promises to

²⁵ And since these formulations are in the subjunctive mood there should be no worries about propositions being eternal and judgments being tensed.

make sense of intractable disagreement over shared content, it does so in a way that naturally emerges out of an entrenched and plausible theory of our epistemic practices with regard to moral judgments.

In concluding, we briefly discuss three important objections we take this view to face. We suggest there are ways for the relativist to respond to all three objections, but there is obviously much more to be said; not surprisingly, none of the objections, nor the relativist's responses, are decisive.

7.1 Shared content and semantic holism

According to the moral relativism that we've suggested, whether a moral judgment is true or false is a relative matter even if truth as such is not. This implies that, like Harman-style relativism, our version of moral relativism entails that the truth conditions of moral judgments are relative. A standard view about content determination is that the content of a judgment is determined by its truth conditions. So if the truth conditions are relative, one might argue, so is the content. If so, then one might wonder whether the position meets the shared content constraint after all.

The simplest response the relativist can make to this complaint is to reject the premise that content of a moral judgment is determined by its truth conditions. This is the sort of response to which one presumes the Harman-style relativist is committed. In our case, the relativist might hold that while the truth-value of a moral judgment is determined by its supercoherence conditions, its content is determined by something else. Perhaps how *M* functions in inferences involved in practical rationality fixes its content.²⁶

But suppose we were to grant, as many do, that content is determined by truth conditions across the board. If so, one might then press the above objection further. For if content is in some sense determined by truth conditions, one might worry that our view is committed to a radical form of semantic holism. This would be to reason as follows:

1. A coherence theory of truth conditions entails a coherence theory of content.
2. A coherence theory of content entails a radical holism, namely that the content of a judgment is determined by its relations to every other judgment within the relevant system.
3. So, a coherence theory of truth conditions entails radical holism.

If the conclusion is granted, then one might argue that two judges cannot share content, except on the absurd supposition that their respective sets of judgments are entirely identical. Moreover, since whether a moral judgment *M* supercoheres is a function of its coherence with moral and nonmoral judgments, it would seem to follow, if the objection is correct, that even very disparately related non-moral judgments bear on the content of *M*. But this can't be right. My judgment that it is wrong to torture the innocent for fun obviously does not depend for its content on my judgment that

²⁶ Wedgwood (2001) suggests how to work out such an account for 'thin' moral terms. Further applications of the general approach can be found in Harman (1982).

the earth is roundish. The objection might also be cast in terms of propositions. For disagreement to be possible, judgments of the disagreeing parties must express the same proposition. Since propositions are individuated by their truth conditions, for two judgments to express the same proposition is for them to have the same supercoherence conditions. But the objection seems to imply that the slightest difference between the sets of judgments of any two judges makes for a difference between the respective supercoherence conditions, thereby precluding that they are judging the same proposition.

Again, the relativist can always deny the first premise and hold a non truth-conditional theory of content. But there is another way to avoid the threatened conclusion. The relativist can maintain the first premise but deny the second, at least in its intended sense. According to this option, the content of M judged by a particular judge J at a time t is determined by its *supercoherence* conditions. Consequently, it does not follow that M's content at t depends on the rest of J's judgments *at t*. It is possible that *some* of J's other judgments at t are ones with which M supercoheres; but even that much is not required. Our account allows the possibility that *none* of J's other judgments at t are relevant to determining the content of M, since it may turn out that they are not included among the judgments with which M coheres (at some stage of inquiry, not necessarily t) and would continue to cohere to if M is true. Thus our view is compatible with a form externalism about content—a view according to which the content of my judgment at a time does not necessarily hinge on the content of my other judgments at that time.²⁷

Should this reply be adopted, the relativist can deny radical holism. Whether judges A and B have the same judgment does not turn on what goes on at the fringes of their respective networks of judgments. What determines the content of A's judgment M at t is its supercoherence conditions (with respect to A's judgments) and what determines the content of B's judgment that M at t is its supercoherence conditions (with respect to B's judgments). So long as there is enough overlap between the sets of judgments relevant to the supercoherence of their respective judgments that M, A and B mean the same thing by M. Just how much overlap between A and B's judgments there needs to be for them to express the same judgment is a good question, but not one of our immediate concern, which was to avoid the consequence that complete overlap of judgments is required.

²⁷ The fact that content can be “externalist” in the above sense on our view is to endorse it over a simpler kind of coherence theory of truth conditions, one according to which the content of M is just its coherence conditions at a time. Suppose one simply held the content of M is determined by its coherence conditions (perhaps along the dimensions we've defined for coherence), which is to say, the conditions under which M coheres with the $N_1 \dots N_n$, the rest of J's moral and nonmoral judgments at t; but that the content of M does not vary with just *any* change in $N_1 \dots N_n$. But it difficult to give a principled reason as to just why not. We can say that only a change in some subset of $N_1 \dots N_n$ would effect a change in content of M, and perhaps it is indeterminate which subset. This just pushes the question back. Why should content of M vary as the subsets of judgments within a certain range vary as opposed to those within some other range? One sensible answer would be that whichever subset in $N_1 \dots N_n$ is relevant to determining the content of M is resistant to further incoming information, other moral and nonmoral judgments that might be added to J's stock of judgments. As we see it, supercoherence avails us of this kind of response.

7.2 Relativism and moral commitments

One standard objection to moral relativism, sometimes even thought to be a *reductio* of the position, is that it forces us to give up our moral commitments. This is supposed to follow from the recognition that if moral relativism is true then there are other, equally legitimate frameworks of moral judgments other than our own. David Wong puts it this way:

If the standards we use to decide conflicts of basic values have no deep justification that makes them more correct to use than others' standards, are we not left without a reason to keep the standards we have been using?²⁸

In reply, we note that it does not immediately follow from mere recognition that these other standards are a possibility that we would abandon our own, or that doing so would even be psychologically possible given how deeply rooted they are to our way of life and the kind of beings that we are. Nor does it follow, at least on the coherence-driven account we have offered, that we would be *justified* in abandoning our entire moral outlook. Indeed, quite the opposite.

According to the view we've suggested on behalf of the relativist, a moral judgment is true when it is supercoherent. But a judgment's being supercoherent is a *significant achievement*. Not any old judgment can be supercoherent, so not any old moral judgment can be true. So the fact that it is possible that the negation of one of my judgments may also achieve this exalted status, will be, from my epistemic standpoint, a mere possibility only. And it is hard to see why this mere epistemic *possibility* should make me think that my own judgments lack supercoherence, and therefore undermine my commitment to them.

Now one might think this view only creates a new problem: If moral judgments are made true by being supercoherent, it may well be that far fewer of moral judgments than we might like are true. It may be that moral truth is too hard to come by. As a response, note first that this position has all the resources the moral realist has available: The moral realist seems to have to say that, while it may be possible that there are moral facts forever beyond our reach, the only acceptable response to this situation is to think hard and earnestly about morality and hope for the best.²⁹ Our position has the advantage of only having to say that it seems that some moral facts might be hard to us to get at right now. Moral truth, after all, is on this view epistemically constrained. It must be possible that someone could discover the moral facts. In additions, the position can claim that since moral truth is intimately connected to justification, the threat of practically unattainable moral facts is greatly lessened. We should also note morality isn't easy. And no view should make it so.

7.3 Relativism and unacceptable counterfactuals

An objection that seems to complement the previous one is that relativism is committed to bizarre or implausible counterfactuals. For example:

²⁸ Wong (2006), p. 105.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

- (1) ⟨What Calley did was right⟩ would be true if our moral standards were different.³⁰
 (2) ⟨What Hitler did was right⟩ would be true if our moral standards were different.

Given what our moral standards actually are, we are not committed to ⟨What Calley did was right⟩. But the objector wants to make the stronger claim, that no matter what the moral standards are, ⟨What Calley did was right⟩ is false. Now the objection risks begging the question if it just denies the relativist's point that the consequents of these troublesome conditionals are not true or false simpliciter. But it may not be that all moral relativisms would carry that implication anyway. On our account, the truth of a moral proposition supervenes on supercoherence. The fact that supercoherence is an improvement relation that, unlike fine wine, gets *epistemically* better over time, suggests—assuming standard semantics for counterfactuals—that one would have to find a world quite remote (perhaps more remote than psychologically possible worlds in which one might attempt to justify the actions of tyrants). One where for the claim to be true, there would have to exist moral standards bearing no resemblance to our own.

It is hard to see how those far-off standards, whatever they would be, could threaten the ones we normally use. So one might better say that moral relativism commits us to the logical possibility that if our moral standards and judgments had been *vastly* different then M would have been false. And that does not seem like such a tough commitment for the relativist to swallow.

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³⁰ This example is from Dorsey (2006).

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