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Minimal Truth, Moral Conflict and Metaethical Relativism

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Introduction

The past several decades have witnessed a revival of metaethical inquiry, marked by an increase both in the general interest in its philosophical implications and in the proliferation of novel positions within (and sometimes, challenging) the traditional metaethical categories.[1] This revival can be attributed in part to the shifting of traditional methodological priorities, which has in turn widened the scope of issues considered to be legitimate subjects for metaethical inquiry. Some have referred to this shift as marking the "Great Expansion" in ethics.[2] The metaethical theories I will address in this paper (which I introduce below) are indicative of this revival.

During the first part of the 20th century, the dominant methodology for addressing metaethical questions gave priority to semantic considerations over those of metaphysics and epistemology, as well as over the results of more generally empirical modes of inquiry. Metaethicists during this period thought that the nature and meaning of moral discourse would be most clearly revealed through the project of providing analytic definitions of moral terms that reduce those terms to their purported non-moral synonyms.[3] Mark Timmons notes[4] that this dominant methodology began to face serious

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[1] For "new" moral realist theories, see, e.g. David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Peter Railton, *Facts, Values, and Norms: Essays Toward a Morality of Consequence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Russ Shafer-Landau, *Moral Realism: A Defence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For "new" irrealist theories, see, e.g. Allan Gibbard, *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990) and *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003); Simon Blackburn, *Essays in Quasi-Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) and *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reason* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998). For a helpful (though now, slightly outdated) overview of the recent metaethical literature, see Steven Darwall, Allan Gibbard, and Peter Railton, "Toward Fin de Siecle Ethics: Some Trends," *Philosophical Review* 101 (1992): pp. 115-89.

[2] Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton (1992), p. 121.

[3] See, for instance, C.L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944); A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic* (New York: Dover, 1946); R.M. Hare, *The Language of Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952). One notable exception was G.E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903). Moore maintained that his "open question argument" demonstrated

challenges by mid-century, however, as Quine attacked the notion of analyticity that provided the conceptual foundation for reductive semantic analyses[5] and Rawls broached questions of ethical justification without giving priority to semantic considerations.[6] In the following decades, those interested in metaethical issues began to incorporate lessons from philosophy of language more generally, as well as from philosophy of mind, metaphysics, epistemology, cognitive science, and even anthropology. This focus on canvassing the results from various areas of philosophical and empirical inquiry in order to achieve a metaethical outlook that coheres with a wide range of intellectual commitments—following Rawls' recommendations in spirit, if not in letter—characterizes the current fertile state of metaethics that has given rise to the theories I will discuss in this paper.

The new variants of the standard metaethical positions seek, almost without exception, to do justice to two separate types of consideration. The first type concerns squaring one's metaethical account with commonsense assumptions regarding what we are doing when we engage in moral discourse. Timmons calls this project one of 'internal accommodation'.[7] This project involves explaining, taking account of, or leaving room for presumed features of moral discourse such as its objective purport (i.e. that moral discourse is primarily fact- and not simply opinion-stating), the notion that moral progress is possible, the notion that moral conclusions may be reached through processes of reasoning, and so on. The larger, unstated goal of the internal

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that attempts to reductively analyze moral terms are bound to fail because they commit what he called the "naturalistic fallacy."

[4] Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 25.

[5] W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empricism," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): pp. 20-43.

[6] John Rawls, "Outline of a Decision Procedure in Ethics," *Philosophical Review* 60 (1951): pp. 177-97.

[7] Timmons (1999), pp. 11-2.

accommodation project may be thought of as defending the important role morality plays in our lives; if it turns out that the commonsense features of moral discourse enumerated above do not obtain, then, one might worry, many people will see no reason to continue giving their moral commitments the special kind of authority thought to be distinctive of morality. The second project is one of 'external accommodation', which concerns squaring one's metaethical account with commitments in other areas of inquiry, such as anthropology, evolutionary biology, other philosophical fields, and so on. For instance, it is a virtue of a metaethical theory if it comports with a plausible, scientifically-informed worldview and that it does not posit entities which cannot be incorporated by correspondingly plausible metaphysical and epistemological accounts.

The challenge inherited by contemporary philosophers is that each of the two main metaethical categories—realism and irrealism[8]—does well at satisfying one of the accommodation projects but struggles (or, as some might complain, outright fails) to satisfy the other. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord defines realism about some discourse as involving two theses: "(1) The claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false, and (2) some are literally true."[9] Different versions of moral realism will cash out in different ways what is involved in a claim's being "literally true." Some, for instance, will point to the truth of a claim being in some sense objective or mind-independent. So construed, moral realism clearly possesses the features necessary to satisfy the internal accommodation project, as moral language operates in a way that seems to presume an existing world of moral facts which speakers are describing when

[8] Some authors include constructivism as an irrealist theory, while others maintain that it is an autonomous third option. I will not discuss constructivism in this paper, and so nothing hangs on where it fits vis-à-vis the primary distinction.
[9] Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "The Many Moral Realisms" in his *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 5.

engaging in moral discussion. Realism's prospects are less clear, however, with respect to satisfying the external accommodation project; it is famously difficult to explain how moral facts might exist and, even if they did exist, how we might have access to them.

Irrealism, as the name implies, claims that realism is false. Irrealists have traditionally drawn a distinction between descriptive and evaluative language and have claimed, contra realism, that moral discourse involves the latter. Moral claims have variably been explained as expressions of emotion or as projections of a speaker's values on an otherwise valueless world. In either case, moral sentences are not genuine assertions and so are not apt for truth or falsity. Irrealism satisfies the external accommodation project because it does not introduce "metaphysically queer"[10] entities into one's ontology, which can therefore remain wholly naturalistic. Irrealism struggles, however, to satisfy the internal accommodation project, since it claims that moral discourse is not fact-stating and it is unclear, for example, how to make inferences among moral claims if those claims are nothing but expressions of emotion or attitude.[11]

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[10] The term was made popular in the metaethical literature by J.L. Mackie in his "argument from queerness" against moral realism, in his *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

[11] This leads to the famous Frege-Geach problem for noncognitivists, a species of irrealist. While noncognitivists give us an account of moral expressions when used in simple predications, it is difficult to explain what those predications mean when embedded in more complex contexts. For instance, the following is a valid argument by modus ponens:

(1) If doing X is wrong, then getting one's friend to do X is wrong.
(2) Doing X is wrong.

Therefore,

(3) Getting one's friend to do X is wrong.

But if noncognitivists translate (2) as "Boo X," it makes no sense to translate (1) as "If boo X, then getting one's friend boo X," for one can use the predicate "is wrong" in (1) without concomitantly expressing the "boo" attitude. That is, even one who approves of doing X can agree to (1) since it involves the conditional form. Geach argued that noncognitivists owe us an account in which moral arguments of the kind offered above make sense and in which moral predications have the same meaning in both embedded and unembedded contexts, so as to avoid the fallacy of equivocation. See P.T. Geach, "Ascriptivism," in his *Logic Matters* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972): pp. 250-5; and "Assertion," *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): pp. 449-65.

The two closely-related metaethical theories I will examine in this paper—Crispin Wright's theory in Chapter One and Mark Timmons' theory in Chapter Two—attempt to demonstrate that irrealism can satisfy both internal and external accommodation projects. They think that a new form of irrealism can succeed where older ones failed because the new form includes a minimal conception of truth, which allows an agent to ascribe truth or falsity to a moral sentence just in case it meets certain minimal criteria (which, of course, they argue that many well-formed moral sentences do). I will argue that both Wright and Timmons fail to accomplish this task. After examining their theories in detail, I will demonstrate that the accounts they provide of moral discourse and practice have implications that preclude them from meeting the criteria of internal accommodation.

The pattern of my overall argument will be fairly simple. Both Wright and Timmons assume that if a metaethical theory entails relativism, then that theory fails to satisfy the project of internal accommodation. They reason that it is an integral part both of moral language and of our experience as moral agents that moral predicates—'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad'—are used categorically, not relativistically. I will demonstrate that both of their accounts entail a form of relativism, and so fail on their own terms. I will then, in Chapter Three, introduce a form of moderate metaethical relativism that I take to be most congenial to the views of Wright and Timmons, in order to explore whether their theories can be saved by admitting that they entail a species of relativism that is less radical than the ones they rightly reject. My attempt at offering a friendly amendment fails, however, as the distinction between moderate and extreme metaethical relativism collapses, leaving only extreme relativism.

Chapter One

Wright on Minimal Truth in Ethics

I. Introduction

Crispin Wright has developed a promising framework for situating debates regarding realism and irrealism in different domains of discourse by advancing a pluralistic notion of minimal truth.[12] He employs this notion in the domain of ethics to argue (1) that moral realism, conceived as involving a representational mode of cognition, is false, and (2) that one can be a moral irrealist, i.e. hold that ethics does not involve representational cognition, without thereby sacrificing the integrity of moral discourse.[13] This chapter will evaluate Wright's success in arguing for (2). Honoring the 'integrity of moral discourse' is an internal accommodation project that involves vindicating the ordinary use of moral language by licensing such expressions as "It is a fact that P" and "It is true that P," where P is some moral proposition. Thus, Wright intends for his view to stand in contradistinction to other irrealist theories such as emotivism, expressivism, and projectivism, which interpret moral sentences as involving expressions of emotion, attitude, or inclination, but not truth.

While there is a significant secondary literature on various aspects of Wright's framework, surprisingly little critical attention has been paid to whether that framework can successfully accommodate moral discourse. In this chapter, I will argue that without significant changes, it cannot. More specifically, I will argue that despite the numerous

[12] Cf. Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992). A collection of papers defending and expanding on his view is anthologized in *Saving the Differences* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003).

[13] Wright says he wants "a way of casting the anti-realist intuition which is consistent with the integrity of moral discourse and argument, and which allows us to take a moral point of view with a clean intellectual conscience." See his "Truth in Ethics," in Wright (2003), p. 188.

strengths of Wright's proposal, his conception of truth in ethics faces difficulties in properly accounting for an important form of moral conflict. 'Moral conflict', as I use the term, refers to an incompatibility between judgments about a moral issue at either the personal or interpersonal level.

First-order moral conflict arises at the personal level when an agent believes there is moral reason to endorse two or more mutually incompatible propositions, and there is some difficulty in choosing between them. First-order judgments are best conceived as judgments about the content of moral claims—which actions are permissible and which are forbidden—and first-order conflict is thus disagreement regarding those contents. **Second-order moral conflict**, by contrast, involves claims about the authority and importance of particular moral standards. It is just like first-order conflict except that the propositions concern, not particular first-order judgments, but rather the moral structure that underlies classes of first-order judgments. For instance, while a first-order judgment might say a certain act is morally wrong, a second-order judgment will say *why* that act is wrong according to a particular moral theory or outlook.

I will argue that the conceptual apparatus Wright deploys to account for first-order conflict is unable to account for second-order conflict without thereby undermining the integrity of moral discourse, and so Wright's proposal for irrealist minimal truth in ethics fails on the terms set out in (2). In §II below, I will discuss in greater detail the two forms of moral conflict. In §III, I will present Wright's conceptual framework and discuss how he introduces an epistemic conception of vagueness to account for conflict in irrealist discourses. I will demonstrate in §IV how this conception of vagueness accommodates much first-order moral conflict. In §§V and VI, I will explain why

Wright's conception of vagueness nevertheless fails to account for second-order moral conflict. It fails, I will argue, because Wright does not acknowledge the way in which second-order judgments arise from different moral *discourses,* rather than from within a single moral discourse. The only alternative avenue Wright provides for accommodating second-order conflict—namely, appealing to 'intransigent disputes of inclination'—forces him to endorse unwittingly a form of relativism, thereby undermining the ordinary use of moral language and failing to satisfy the project of internal accommodation.

II. A Typology of Moral Conflict

Disagreement about the significance of persistent moral disagreement is an important fault line in the realism/irrealism debate: the realist claims that at least one disputant in a moral disagreement must be mistaken, and the irrealist replies that the fact of persistent disagreement is itself a reason to doubt the credibility of the realist's agenda.[14] The irrealist can, however, grant that much *actual* moral disagreement *does* involve error on the part of one or another interlocutor—a subject may make a faulty inference, or suffer from a lack of imagination, or judge based upon unwarranted

[14] Broadly construed, the realist claims that moral facts exist independently of human subjects, and that a subject possesses moral knowledge by grasping a moral fact. Thus, the realist explains nearly every case of moral disagreement—except where options may be incommensurable—by attributing a mistake to at least one of the disputants in a debate. If there is a fact of the matter regarding a moral question and two subjects disagree on that fact, then one or both may be guilty of something worth describing as a cognitive shortcoming, whether it be caused by a logical or perceptual error, a lack of information, or the influence of bias. The irrealist (again, broadly construed) argues that persistent disagreement is itself a reason to be skeptical of the existence of independently existing moral facts. If there were independent moral facts, and if humans had reliable access to them (i.e. assuming a non-skeptical account of moral knowledge), then subjects' moral judgments would converge more often than they do. The irrealist argues that a more plausible lesson to take away from the observation of persistent disagreement is that moral judgments are inextricably linked to a given culture at a given time or are simply projections of inclination upon a world that otherwise contains no moral values. In either case, then, a moral mistake is attributable only from a particular moral viewpoint.

prejudices, such that the resulting belief is inconsistent with the subject's overall belief set. But it is not a priori, says the irrealist, that moral disagreement involves error.

The more important problem for the realism/irrealism debate arises when abstracting from actual disagreement and idealizing the disputants in order to consider hypothetical moral disagreement between two equally well-situated subjects. We might classify these subjects as *epistemic peers,* both of whom possess all the epistemic virtues and all the information relevant to making a judgment on the moral issue in question.[15] In the typology that follows, I will grant for Wright's irrealist position that the subjects involved in an interpersonal moral conflict are epistemic peers, and that their judgments are still incompatible in the light of full information.[16] The construction of this typology is a preliminary step to judging whether Wright's framework (addressed in the following section) can successfully account for the two forms of moral conflict.

As I noted above, first-order conflict arises when an agent believes there is moral reason to endorse two or more mutually incompatible propositions and there is some difficulty in choosing between them. Formally, the agent must decide whether to endorse P or Q, where P and Q are incompatible, and there seem to be good reasons in favor of each.[17] The incompatibility involved in first-order conflict becomes apparent often, though not always, because of the practical impossibility of concurrently performing the actions corresponding to each of the two propositions.

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[15] I borrow the term "epistemic peer" from Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement," in John Hawthorne and Tamar Gendler, ed., *Oxford Studies in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Kelly in turn borrows the term from Gary Gutting. Kelly writes, "Two individuals are epistemic peers with respect to some question if and only if they satisfy the following two conditions: (i) they are equals with respect to their familiarity with the evidence and arguments which bear on that question, and (ii) they are equals with respect to general epistemic virtues such as intelligence, thoughtfulness, and freedom from bias" (p. 10).

[16] Likewise, I will grant that the subject experiencing an intrapersonal conflict is in an epistemically ideal situation.

[17] In this paper, a "reason for endorsing P" is equivalent to a "consideration in favor of endorsing P."

Consider an example. I am trying to decide the best way to use an extra $100. I am deliberating between two options: I can either (p) donate the money to a charity organization that will use it to help provide for the basic health needs of far-away impoverished people or I can (q) invest the money for my child, who will need it to finance her education when she comes of age. There seem to be good reasons in favor of both actions, as p would benefit a large number of people and q would constitute a step toward fulfilling the special obligations I have to my child. But if p is formulated simply as "Donate $100" and q is formulated as "Invest $100," there is nothing in the formulations themselves to suggest that these actions are incompatible.

The incompatibility arises when I must include in my deliberation the fact that, because I have just $100 to spend, I can only choose one course of action. The propositions I must consider, then, might be formalized in the following way:

> P: For an agent A in circumstance C, where p and q are the morally relevant and mutually incompatible options, p is morally better than q, so A ought to (act on or endorse) p and not q.
>
> Q: For an agent A in circumstance C, where p and q are the morally relevant and mutually incompatible options, q is morally better than p, so A ought to (act on or endorse) q and not p.

Upon considering the above formulations, one may wonder why we should not simply characterize first-order conflict as involving the choice between "A ought to P" and "It is not the case that A ought to P." The reason is that first-order conflict may involve more than two options, and so formalizing the problem simply as a choice between a proposition and its negation will leave out important information, including whether A chose to act on one of the stated options at all. For example, imagine that I consider a

third option in addition to the two above: I can (r) donate $100 to a political party whose platform I support, which corresponds to

> R: For an agent A in circumstance C, where p and q and r are the morally relevant and mutually incompatible options, r is morally better than p or q, so A ought to (act on or endorse) r and not p and not q.

If we characterize the first-order conflict here as a choice between "A ought to R" and "It is not the case that A ought to R," there are three options included in the latter proposition (namely, P, Q, and abstaining from action), and it is not specified which has been selected.

I add the parenthetical "endorse" to the formulations above because, although moral judgments are generally thought to be action-guiding, they need not be action entailing. First-order moral judgments are often employed in simply working out where one stands on a particular issue—such as abortion or euthanasia—and not in preparing to take a particular course of action. The relevant propositions in these cases may be simpler than the ones discussed above. For example, the form of the proposition may be something like "x is morally wrong," where 'x' picks out a particular practice. In these sorts of first-order conflicts, one may simply be choosing between endorsing a proposition and endorsing its negation, where the conflict is a matter of logical contradiction as opposed to mere practical incompatibility. Nevertheless, for the reasons given above, I will continue to characterize first-order conflict using the slightly more complex notion of incompatibility.

First-order conflict can be instantiated in at least three distinct ways. The first way is *principle-conflict*, where an agent must choose to act in accordance with one of two moral principles, both of which seem to carry moral weight but which are mutually

exclusive in a given case. For instance, a doctor must decide whether to act from a duty of beneficence or a duty of respect for autonomy in a case where performing a beneficial medical procedure would contravene a patient's expressed wishes.

The second type of first-order conflict is *act-conflict,* where an agent must choose which act best satisfies a given principle or maxim in some circumstance. The oft-discussed scene in the novel *Sophie's Choice*[18] is a striking example of this type of conflict. A mother must decide which of her two children will be sent to a Nazi gas chamber, and a guard will kill both children if she makes no decision. In a forced choice of this kind, it is not clear which option is least morally repugnant and thus which is most in concert with a maxim of maternal love.[19]

The third type of first-order conflict is *description-conflict*, which arises when one is trying to decide how best to describe an act or character with reference to some particular set of features. Imagine that you are trying to decide whether some person—call her Jane—exemplifies the virtue of courage.[20] In order to do so, you must canvass a complex web of considerations, where each consideration may be conceived as a continuum along which Jane's set of actions falls. For instance, courage depends upon the danger of the circumstances in which Jane is operating, her knowledge of that danger, her degree of mental fortitude, and the value of the cause for which she is acting. The circumstances can be more or less dangerous, her knowledge of the danger can be more

[18] William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).
[19] This instance of act-conflict may be classified as a moral dilemma, where there is not simply moral *reason* to perform each of two (or more) mutually exclusive acts, but there is moral *obligation* to do so, such that the agent seems condemned to moral failure regardless of which act is chosen. A similar dilemma can be constructed for principle-conflict. Rarely is either type of conflict so serious, but the most difficult cases are the most important, for they test our pre-theoretic judgments regarding whether an agent is necessarily guilty of a mistake if she chooses, for instance, P as opposed to Q or R.
[20] Russ Shafer-Landau uses a similar example in a different context. See his "Ethical Disagreement, Ethical Objectivism, and Moral Indeterminacy," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 54, No. 2 (June 1994), p. 333.

or less complete, and so on. Where Jane falls along each of these rough metrics will determine whether you describe her as 'courageous', and you may have good reasons both for judging Jane courageous and for judging her to be lacking courage, depending on how much weight you assign to each category.[21]

All three types of intrapersonal first-order conflict have clear interpersonal analogues. Two agents can conflict in judgment regarding which moral principle should take precedence in a given case, which act best instantiates a particular principle in some circumstance, and which, if any, moral predicate ought to be ascribed to an act or character based upon which criteria are judged most important.

Second-order conflict is formalized just like first-order conflict, though it appears most often at the interpersonal level: an agent A endorses P, an agent B endorses Q, P and Q are incompatible in circumstance C, and A and B each seem to have good reasons for their respective endorsements. For second-order judgments, however, P is not a proposition about the content of a moral claim that determines whether a single act, principle, or assessment is right or wrong. Rather, P is a proposition about the moral structure that underlies claims about acts, principles, and assessments; it is a proposition

[21] I can foresee two complaints about description-conflict. First, it might be viewed simply as a variant of principle-conflict, as one's ascription of the predicate 'courageous' depends on which metric or 'principle' is judged most important in a given case. I think this is correct. Second, description-conflict fits less neatly into the formalization of first-order conflict than do principle- and act-conflicts, because in the former case you do not seem forced in every situation to choose one proposition to the exclusion of its negation. That is, you may not be required to describe Jane as courageous or not courageous, but perhaps she is 'fairly courageous'. Or if, for instance, the cause for which she is acting is not valuable but her actions satisfy the other relevant criteria, you could describe her as 'brave', 'fearless', or even 'foolhardy'.
But these responses would be changing the subject, for the original question was simply, "Is Jane courageous?" Modifying the original predicate or ascribing an alternative predicate is tantamount to answering "No." I think the temptation to believe that there is an option to modify the predicate is a reaction to the real difference between description-conflict and principle- and act-conflicts: the latter two types of first-order judgment involve practical reasoning about what to do, whereas the former type involves assessment of what has already been done. Thus, even though I grant the first point above concerning the similarity between principle- and description-conflict, the second point regarding the asymmetry between practical reasoning and subsequent assessment of action seems distinctive enough to warrant identifying description-conflict as a third type of first-order conflict.

about what *makes* them right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden. Thus, second-order conflicts are clashes between different points of view about what matters morally and about which moral outlook or standards we have most reason to endorse.

Second-order judgments correspond to what may be considered a restricted type of metaethical sentence—namely, the type that *contains normative commitments*—and therefore are not the type that offers an account of what we are doing when we moralize.[22] Hence, by second-order judgments I do not mean theories like emotivism, expressivism, or error theory. Rather, I mean theories like consequentialism, Kantianism, contractualism, constructivism, and virtue theory, all of which offer an account of basic moral terms. Second-order judgments correspond to the following schema:

$\Box\forall x\ (Mx \leftrightarrow Dx)$

where 'Mx' is a moral formula and 'Dx' is a descriptive formula.[23] For instance, this schema applied to a standard form of Kantian ethics would read

$\Box\forall x$ (x is permissible ↔ x passes the test of the Categorical Imperative as a suitably formulated maxim)

and a form of act-utilitarianism would read

$\Box\forall x$ (x is right ↔ x maximizes preference satisfaction).

Conflicts arise between different second-order judgments because the accounts they offer of basic moral terms are, *at the foundational level,* incompatible. That is to say, while proponents of any two theories may converge on a wide number of first-order judgments, the starting points and patterns of reasoning they use to reach those judgments differ, often in dramatic ways. For instance, a Kantian, a consequentialist, and a fundamentalist

[22] Cf. James Dreier, "Metaethics and Normative Commitment," *Philosophical Issues 12: A Supplement to Nous* (2002): pp. 241-63.
[23] I am indebted to Dreier's paper for this characterization. Ibid., pp. 244-5.

Christian may all agree that a certain social policy is morally good, but they will explain the features that make it good in very different ways—the Kantian would explain how it fosters the treatment of people as ends in themselves, the consequentialist would appeal to how it maximizes well-being, and the fundamentalist Christian would show how it is in concert with the demands of divine authority.

It is clear from this example, then, that people can agree at the first-order level while disagreeing at the second-order level. Likewise, people can agree at the second-order level while disagreeing at the first order level. Two liberals may, for instance, disagree over the extent to which liberal principles of justice ought to be exercised in the international domain and among illiberal peoples. This sort of variance in judgment within any shared moral outlook is ostensibly the cause of much first-order conflict.

The basic differences between second-order positions become apparent when certain first-order judgments hinge upon the definition of fundamental terms and when proponents of different second-order judgments discuss issues of casuistry. It is this type of moral conflict that Wright cannot accommodate without thereby jeopardizing the integrity of moral discourse he hopes to preserve. In the following section, I will reconstruct Wright's conceptual framework and then discuss how he handles moral conflict.

III. Minimal Truth and Evidential Constraint

Wright argues that realism does not have a monopoly on the concept of truth, and that by viewing ethics as a truth-apt irrealist discourse, we can avoid the metaphysical and epistemological commitments of moral realism while concurrently sidestepping the

flaws that plague alternative irrealist theories. Wright endorses a minimalist conception of truth, based upon the Disquotational Scheme (DS):

> '*p*' is true if and only if *p,*

whereby asserting a proposition is equivalent to presenting it as true.

In addition to being governed by the DS, a truth predicate must satisfy the 'platitudes of truth', several of which are as follows:

> To assert is to present as true;
> To every truth-apt content corresponds a truth-apt negation;
> A true proposition 'corresponds to the facts';
> Truth and justification are distinct;
> Truth is absolute, timeless, and stable.[24]

A truth predicate can be defined within any discourse that is *assertoric*, and a discourse that admits sentences meeting these simple criteria for truth is *truth-apt*. A discourse is assertoric if the sentences constitutive of the discourse are subject to both syntactical and disciplinary constraints. Relevant *rules of syntax* include: a truth predicate must be suitable for embedding within propositional attitudes, the conditional, negation, and so on. A discourse exhibits *discipline* when its sentences are governed by common standards of warrant or appropriateness internal to that discourse. These standards of warrant will in turn be determined by some minimal threshold of convergence on how predicates ought to be used, e.g. in what circumstances and in reference to what action the predicate 'is forbidden' applies (and not just in which contexts the predicate fits grammatically).[25]

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[24] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 454.

[25] From this brief summary, it is clear that Wright's approach is influenced by the later Wittgenstein's conception of "meaning as use," whereby the meaning of a sentence consists in the speaker's use of that sentence in the appropriate context, in concert with the accepted rules for constructing a sentence in a particular discourse. (See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* edited by G.E.M. Anscombe and R. Rhees. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1953, especially §43 and §304.) But, as indicated by the addition of the platitudes to the DS (especially the platitude that "truth and justification are distinct"),

The notion of discipline is crucial both to Wright's theory and to my objections against it, so it will be worthwhile to pause here and offer a few more textual clues to flesh out what the concept involves. Wright explains, "Moral discourse is *disciplined* to a very great degree. Acceptable moral opinion is not just a matter of what feels comfortable, but has to survive appraisal by quite refined and complicated standards."[26] Particular moral judgments are warranted, then, by virtue of their being in concert with or following from these refined moral standards. In another place, Wright relates the discipline governing discourse about moral judgments to the fact that "there is both an enormous degree of convergence about them within cultures and a very considerable degree across cultures."[27] And earlier, he offers this test for minimal truth-aptitude: "A class of statements is apt to be true only if there would be a tendency, in suitable circumstances, for competent subjects to agree on the truth, or falsity, of members in that class."[28] So, discipline involves norms or standards governing warranted assertibility that effectively ensure a high degree of agreement on truth-value judgments regarding the constitutive sentences of any particular discourse. Problems become apparent concerning the connection between minimal truth and agreement, I will argue in §V below, when we pay closer attention to the ways in which discipline operates within particular moral standards, and fails to operate between or among moral standards.

If truth is understood in the way sketched above, then all sorts of discourses are truth-apt, including those like judgments about comedy—Wright's favorite example—

Wright's account diverges from a species of Wittgenstein-inspired deflationism about truth. Wright argues that truth is a 'substantial' property, for the platitudes define truth in such a way that 'true' is potentially extensionally divergent from 'warrantedly assertible'.

[26] Wright (2003), "Truth in Ethics," p. 186.

[27] Wright (1992), p. 89.

[28] Ibid., p. 88.

which we often think of as trafficking in opinions or subjective tastes rather than truth. This result exemplifies Wright's recommendation that we should admit a plurality of ways in which a proposition can be thought of as true, for there is "no discourse invariant thing in which truth consists."[29] This point is a bit slippery, but its meaning is simply this: truth is not ambiguous in the sense that it means different things in different discourses, for the truth platitudes define what it means for a proposition to be true across all discourses. Rather, truth admits of variable realization in different domains; it is what *constitutes* truth in different discourses that varies.

A defining feature of minimally truth-apt irrealist discourses is *evidential constraint*, which holds that truth is knowable in principle. More formally, a discourse is evidentially constrained if, for any proposition P,

$$P \rightarrow \Diamond KP$$

where 'K' is the knowledge operator and the possibility operator is interpreted as practical possibility or feasibility. For example, according to the irrealist, the truth of a moral proposition does not outstrip humans' capacity to know it, for its truth depends, in an important sense, on humans and their dispositions, ways of using language, and so on.

While evidential constraint is a necessary condition for a discourse to count as minimally truth-apt, it is not necessary for truth-aptness in general. Realist discourses, for instance, are evidentially unconstrained and are thus open to robust interpretations of the correspondence platitude. Propositions in realist discourses, such as physics and chemistry, have truth values that often lie beyond our ability to know them; their truth or falsity, in most cases, does not even depend on the existence of humans or their epistemic

[29] Wright (2003), "Truth in Ethics, p. 190.

capacities. In this way, we can think of a true proposition in a realist discourse as representing the way the world is in itself.

If we think of truth as a matter of correct representation of the world as it is independent of humans, then we must attribute to realist discourses a constraint over and above the platitudes of truth—what Wright calls *cognitive command*. A discourse displays cognitive command if and only if

> It is a priori that differences of opinion formulated within [that] discourse, unless excusable as a result of vagueness in a disputed statement, or in the standards of acceptability, or variation in personal evidence thresholds, so to speak, will involve something which may properly be regarded as a cognitive shortcoming.[30]

Imagine a pair of devices—say, cameras—whose purpose it is to represent states of affairs independent of human cognition. If their outputs—in this case, pictures—are mutually incompatible, then we must attribute that incompatibility to some failure of either one or both of the devices. Likewise, says Wright, if two agents' beliefs are products of representational cognition and those beliefs are incompatible, at least one of the agents is guilty of a cognitive shortcoming. But this is a feature of realist discourses that, Wright contends, ethics does not share, for moral disagreement need not necessarily involve cognitive shortcoming.

It seems reasonable to challenge Wright at this point, for he leaves open the question of how truth-values ought to be assigned when moral propositions are incompatible. How can a discourse be minimally truth-apt and evidentially constrained, yet lack cognitive command?[31] If moral discourse is truth-apt and two agents disagree

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[30] Wright (1992), p. 144.

[31] This concern is also raised by Stewart Shapiro and William Taschek, "Intuitionism, Pluralism, and Cognitive Command," *Journal of Philosophy* 93 (1996): pp. 74-88. A similar concern is raised by Timothy Williamson, "A Critical Study of *Truth and Objectivity*," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 30, No. 1, (1994): pp. 130-144.

about a moral proposition, then it seems that at least one of the agents holds a moral belief that is false. Otherwise, we would have to admit the possibility that, where P and Q are incompatible, they can nevertheless both be true, which is absurd.[32] What is more, because moral discourse is evidentially constrained, the agent who is wrong holds a false moral belief while the correct belief is knowable. The fact that the potential solution to the disagreement is knowable, and yet the agent does not know it, suffices to demonstrate that the agent suffers from a cognitive shortcoming. And if it is a priori that disagreement involves a cognitive shortcoming, then cognitive command holds. Clearly, if this line of reasoning is sound, Wright's framework is undermined; if moral discourse involves cognitive command, then his brand of irrealism never gets off the ground.

Wright responds to this objection in "On Being in a Quandary,"[33] where he seeks to defend his view that, regarding moral discourse, "genuinely conflicting opinions about a truth-evaluable claim may each be unimprovable and may involve no misrepresentation of any further fact."[34] He takes the nub of the issue to be whether we can vindicate the pre-theoretic judgment that 'disputes of inclination', which are merely minimally truth-apt, differ from 'disputes of fact' where, if judgments are incompatible, at least one of the disputants holds a false belief. Disputes of inclination might involve the following sorts of claims:

> That snails are delicious
> That cockroaches are disgusting
> That marital infidelity is alright provided nobody gets hurt

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[32] This worry is motivated in part by the assumption that all propositions in minimally truth-apt discourses are either true or false; but the assumption of bivalence in such contexts, we will see, is one that Wright will reject in response to this problem.

[33] Crispin Wright, "On Being in a Quandary: Relativism, Vagueness, Logical Revisionism," *Mind* 110 (2001), pp. 45-98. Reprinted in Wright (2003): 443-509. Page references in this paper are to the latter citation.

[34] Ibid., p. 453.

That a Pacific sunset trumps any Impressionistic canvas.[35]

It is important to note that Wright classifies claims about moral permissibility among others that are generally thought to be matters of taste.

To preserve the possibility that a discourse may be minimally truth-apt and display evidential constraint without also exhibiting cognitive command, Wright proposes a 'quandary view', which employs an epistemic conception of vagueness to argue that in disputes of inclination it may be *indeterminate* whether P or Q is true. But indeterminacy is not, so to speak, a determinate status, whereby we may ascribe to P or Q a third value—namely, 'I', or indeterminate. Wright explains,

> Indeterminacy will be initially manifest not in (relatively confident) verdicts of indeterminacy but in (hesitant) differences of opinion (either between subjects at a given time or within a single subject's opinions at different times) about a polar verdict, which we have no idea how to settle—and which, therefore, we do not recognize as wrong.[36]

Epistemic conceptions of indeterminacy view vagueness as a type of ignorance, such that we know neither that a given borderline statement is true nor that it is false.[37] Epistemic indeterminacy can preclude the move from minimal truth-aptness and evidential constraint to cognitive command by placing a thinker in a quandary. Wright stipulates:

> A proposition P presents a quandary for a thinker T just when the following conditions are met:
> (i) T does not know whether or not P.
> (ii) T does not know any way of knowing whether or not P.
> (iii) T does not know that there is any way of knowing whether or not P.

[35] Ibid., p. 445.
[36] Ibid., p. 476.
[37] Some proponents of this view—called 'Epistemicists'—maintain that vague predicates have sharp boundaries, and that we are simply ignorant of their truth-value. They argue that there *is* an exact point at which, for instance, I grow from 'short' to 'tall', only we cannot identify it. The clearest defenses of this view are Timothy Williamson, *Vagueness* (London: Routledge, 1994) and Roy Sorensen, *Blindspots* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988). Williamson and Sorensen treat bivalence as a desideratum that counts in favor of treating vague predicates as sharply defined.

(iv) T does not know that it is (metaphysically) possible to know whether or not P.[38]

The joint satisfaction of these conditions would seem to entail a fifth condition—(v) T knows that it is impossible to know whether or not P—but Wright intends a quandary to be such a deep case of ignorance that T has no basis for claiming (v). Wright employs this characterization to argue that intuitionistic logic should supplant classical logic when a vague proposition places a thinker in a quandary. When conditions (i)-(iv) are met, a thinker is not warranted in affirming that the law of excluded middle (LEM) applies to evidentially constrained discourses. That is, since T does not know that there is any way of knowing whether P or Q, T can neither affirm nor deny that the discourse is evidentially constrained.[39] T cannot know the truth-value of the disjunction

$(\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P)$.

But if a compelling case can be made that the discourse is in fact evidentially constrained, and LEM implies that such a fact cannot be known, then, Wright argues, we have no warrant for accepting LEM.[40]

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[38] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 504.
[39] Cf. Ibid., p. 480.
[40] Notice that this conclusion differs from the one reached by the following line of reasoning (which I owe to John Nolt), which would categorically *rule out* LEM in the presence of quandary and evidential constraint:

(1) $\sim\Diamond K(\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P)$

from which by this instance of evidential constraint:

(2) $(\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P) \rightarrow \Diamond K(\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P)$

and modus tollens we obtain:

(3) $\sim(\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P)$

But LEM, i.e,

(4) $P \vee {\sim}P$

implies by evidential constraint:

(5) $\Diamond KP \vee \Diamond K{\sim}P$

For instance, it is clear that the discourse regarding the instantiation of color properties is evidentially constrained, for color is, by the nature of the concept, detectable by an adequately situated subject with normal visual capacities. The borderline case causes a quandary and LEM holds that either the color is, say, red and not purple or purple and not red, and evidential constraint holds that it is feasible to know which is true. But since T is in a quandary, T has no warrant for accepting the ramifications of LEM under evidential constraint. According to Wright, "There will always be a case for suspension of classical logic wherever locally forceful grounds for evidential constraint combine with the possibility of quandary."[41] Since quandaries arise in evidentially constrained discourses, they "enforce agnosticism about principles—like bivalence—which if they could be assumed to hold, would ensure that there was a 'fact of the matter', about which we would merely be ignorant. It is a matter, if you like, of lack of warrant to believe in a fact of the matter, rather than a reason to deny one."[42] When there is disagreement regarding a vague predicate, we cannot attribute error to one of the

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which contradicts 3.

[41] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 486. Notice that Wright's epistemic account of vagueness differs from the Epistemicist's account (see note 37), not by denying the Epistemicist's claim that vague predicates have determinate boundaries, but rather by denying that there are sufficient grounds to accept such a claim. Notice also, however, that Wright's inference from the perceived lack of warrant for LEM to the conclusion that the appropriate logic is intuitionistic is an odd one. Even if he is correct in arguing that the possibility of a quandary forces one to adopt a non-classical logic, there are non-classical alternatives that would arguably be more appropriate than intuitionistic logic in this context. One obvious alternative would be a three-valued logic in which a proposition could be T, F, or I. While intuitionistic logic may avoid some of the problems of classical logic with respect to the issues in question, it nevertheless fails to incorporate fully the original judgment that there is a significant role for the notion of indeterminacy to play. If Wright is intent on employing the concept of vagueness, then a fuzzy logic, not an intuitionistic logic, is the most natural alternative. Both a multi-valued logic and a fuzzy logic would invalidate LEM. (See John Nolt, *Logics*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1997, Part V: Non-classical Logics.) Despite Wright's curious decision to adopt intuitionistic logic over these two alternatives, since my purpose in this chapter is to examine the implications of Wright's view as it is, I will grant rather than challenge his choice of intuitionistic logic.

[42] Ibid., p. 498.

disputants, for to do so in the presence of evidential constraint would require that we identify the guilty party, and this is precisely what a quandary precludes us from doing.[43]

There are a number of objections one could raise regarding Wright's introduction of quandaries to explain vague predicates and disagreement.[44] My project, however, is to determine whether Wright's account is capable of satisfying the two criteria for success he established at the outset with regard to moral discourse: a framework of minimal truth should both (1) honor the irrealist intuition and (2) preserve the integrity of moral discourse. After delineating the two types of quandary, I will demonstrate that the notion of a quandary can be employed to explain several types of first-order conflict, but, when this notion is applied to second-order conflict, failure of (2) is the result.

IV. Quandary and First-Order Conflict

Wright discusses two types of quandary that are germane to discussions of moral conflict: (a) intransigent disputes of inclination, e.g. the dispute over whether cockroaches are disgusting, and (b) borderline cases of vague expressions, e.g. the dispute over whether a given swatch of color is red or purple.[45] It is not immediately obvious to what degree these two types of quandary are interrelated. Clearly, a dispute over whether cockroaches are disgusting is not motivated by vagueness in the predicate

[43] This is an instance in which a multi-valued logic might be superior to intuitionistic logic (see note 41). Since evidential constraint only applies when a proposition's truth-value is either T or F, it would not be operative in a situation where we could give it a determinate value, I. In that case, we could say that both P and Q are incorrect, thereby avoiding a quandary. This sort of approach might be thought preferable in cases regarding, say, abortion, where the various borderline considerations make the proposition, "Abortion is morally forbidden," generally indeterminate, and not true or false.

[44] For an Epistemicist argument against Wright's application of intuitionistic logic to vague predicates, see Sven Rosenkranz, "Wright on Vagueness and Agnosticism," *Mind,* 112 (July 2003): pp. 447-63. Wright's response, "Rosenkranz on Quandary, Vagueness, and Intuitionism," is contained in the same issue, pp. 465-74.

[45] Wright's terminology is a bit confusing here. Both types of quandary are included in the larger category of 'disputes of inclination', as contrasted with 'disputes of fact'.

‘is disgusting’; both disputants likely have the same understanding of what warrants a judgment of ‘disgusting’, just antipodal opinions about whether cockroaches fit the bill. On the other hand, it seems that diverging inclinations can sometimes influence on which side of a borderline case a disputant’s judgment falls, so that the distinction between the two types of quandary is less than absolute.[46]

With these interconnections between the two types of quandary in mind, let us examine how the notion of a quandary may be applied to the three categories of first-order conflict. There is reason to believe that certain instances of moral description-conflict may be interpreted as quandaries motivated by borderline disputes over vague predicates. Compare borderline-case predications of color to the discussion of description-conflict above, which examined the complex web of considerations that must be canvassed before deciding whether Jane should be described as ‘courageous’. With some borderline-case predications of ‘red’, for instance, it is permissible to judge a swatch of color either ‘red’ or ‘purple’. But there are some instantiations of red which are paradigmatic, such that nearly everyone converges in judging them ‘red’, and if a subject answers ‘purple’ we would respond that she is simply confused as to how the predicates ‘red’ and ‘purple’ are used. Likewise, there are paradigmatic cases of courage, where if a subject describes a given act as ‘not courageous’, we respond that she simply

[46] Take, for instance, a borderline case in which two subjects, A and B, must judge whether a given person, X, is tall. If A is five feet tall, B is six feet tall, and X is five-and-a-half feet tall, A and B may disagree about which predicate—‘is tall’ or ‘is short’—best describes X. A may be more inclined to describe X as tall because X is significantly taller than A, and B may be more inclined to describe X as short because X is significantly shorter than B. In this case it is not obvious that either A or B must be in error. If this is correct, individuals’ inclinations may play a role in how borderline cases are decided. The quandary-producing potential of disputes of inclination seems to be realized in those cases where (1) certain facts particular to each of two judges lead them to diverge in judgment and (2) those facts fall among some permissible range of variation. Those judgment-influencing facts about a person that fall outside the permissible range of facts may be biases, prejudices, and so on. Notice, though, how borderline predicates may be involved in determining disputes of inclination: one must decide whether some fact about a judge leads to an unwarranted judgment, and a fact near the outer range of permissible facts will either necessitate a judgment on a borderline case or lead to a quandary.

doesn't understand how the concept 'courage' is used. As my above discussion suggested, there are also borderline cases of courage where, if Jane's action satisfies with varying success the several constituents of 'courage'—the degree of danger of her circumstances, her knowledge of that danger, and so on—it may be indeterminate whether the predicate applies.[47]

Cases of act-conflict are likewise open to interpretation as quandaries motivated by borderline disputes over vague predicates. Act-conflict arises because practical principles themselves are indeterminate, or, perhaps, under-determinate.[48] Since practical principles are not algorithmic, judgment is always required to determine what act is most in the spirit of a given principle in a particular situation. When deliberation does not reveal one act to carry more moral weight than another, which act should be chosen (based on multiple criteria) is indeterminate and an agent may be forced into a quandary.

Principle-conflict can be interpreted in two ways, one of which is much like decision- and act-conflicts, the other of which is quite different and more difficult to accommodate. Call the easy type 'principle$_1$-conflict' and the difficult type 'principle$_2$-conflict'. Both types of principle-conflict arise when two or more moral principles are contingently incompatible with one another. When principle$_1$-conflict is interpreted as an

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[47] The multiple constituents of 'courage' exemplify a notable difference between moral predicates and commonly accepted vague predicates such as 'red' and 'tall'. As Russ Shafer-Landau notes (in "Vagueness, Borderline Cases, and Moral Realism." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 32, No. 1, January 1995, p. 84.), the instantiation of the latter type is "determined by a sufficiently large (or small) presence of discrete, addable units of some constitutive property"—gradations of color in the first case and variations in height in the second. Moral predicates, by contrast, are multi-dimensional because their instantiation depends on the satisfaction of a number of related but distinct constituent predicates, e.g. 'is dangerous', 'is aware of the danger', 'displays mental fortitude', and so on. Since moral predicates admit of degrees—an act may be more or less courageous—they are also instantiated by discrete, addable units, only these units differ with each constitutive metric.

[48] Cf. Onora O'Neill, "Principles, Practical Judgment, and Institutions," in *Bounds of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 50-64.

intrapersonal borderline case, the various considerations that lead an agent to endorse each principle are so evenly matched that it is indeterminate which principle should be operative in a particular situation. The agent may in this manner be forced into a quandary. Before examining principle$_2$-conflict, it is important to note how well description-conflict, act-conflict, and principle$_1$-conflict all fit in Wright's framework.

The multiple constitutive criteria of a moral[49] predicate can be interpreted as the standards of warranted assertibility for that predicate, so that only when those constituents are satisfied can the predicate be true of some act, description, or principle. Because many moral predicates are in this way governed by norms of assertibility, much first-order moral discourse exhibits *discipline*. We know from observation that first-order moral discourse is also constrained by simple syntactical rules. A discourse that is constrained by rules of syntax and discipline is *assertoric,* and thus is truth-apt. It appears that, if we grant Wright's argument regarding evidential constraint in irrealist discourses, the necessarily brief discussion above gives us reason to believe that some discourse regarding description-, act-, and principle$_1$-judgments is minimally truth-apt in just the way Wright intends. We can speak of a moral predicate being 'true' of something without also committing ourselves to holding that in a moral dispute, at least one of the disputants must be wrong. But this still leaves the question of whether discourse regarding principle$_2$-judgments and discourse regarding second-order judgments are also minimally truth-apt. Here, the case becomes more difficult.

Interpreted as a species of interpersonal case, principle-conflict can be unlike indeterminate borderline cases. Where agent A endorses P and agent B endorses Q,

[49] Here, I take 'moral' to refer only to the first-order description-, act-, and principle$_1$-judgments discussed above.

much depends on the *reasons* for each one's endorsement. The interpersonal case *can,* of course, be analogous to the personal case just outlined—both agents may see nearly equal moral reason for endorsing each contingently incompatible principle, so that it is indeterminate which is best. On this characterization, though, both agents may be value pluralists who, as it were, view as roughly on a par the relative weights of agent-neutral, agent-relative, and prudential reasons, along with deontic and consequentialist considerations.

Or, what is probably more often the case, neither agent endorses a determinate or readily identifiable second-order theory. This may be the case for many people outside of philosophy departments and organized religions. As T.M. Scanlon notes, "People's understanding of the moral standards they recognize is generally inchoate, and their conception of the basis of the authority of these principles may be even less clear."[50] Many people within a given society may accept some variant of "commonsense morality" and endorse various moral "rules of thumb," in which case we may think of them as sharing a roughly similar moral outlook. Nevertheless, their lack of understanding with respect to the details of that outlook serves as an obstacle to attributing clear second-order judgments to them, since it is much more likely that, upon reflection, they would find inconsistencies among the second-order judgments that undergird their moral view, or that their endorsement of a particular second-order judgment has first-order implications that they find unpalatable. I will say more about the problem of determining how first-order judgments work in §V below.

Returning to my larger point, the situation changes if each agent consciously subscribes to a specific theory of how moral values are derived and prioritized. This

[50] T.M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 350.

gives rise to principle$_2$-conflict. A and B may endorse different first-order principles *based upon* different second-order principles, whereby more weight is assigned to one first-order principle because it is held by a second-order principle to be more fundamentally constitutive of the good. Recall the example of the doctor who must decide whether to perform a beneficial operation at the cost of overriding a patient's autonomy. If the doctor endorses consequentialist practical reasoning, she may choose to proceed with the operation; it is already stipulated that the patient places a higher value on autonomy. This is the sort of principle$_2$-conflict that occasions the most difficult questions of moral disagreement.[51] Principle$_2$-conflict caused by second-order conflict most resembles an intransigent dispute of inclination, as one disputant places superior value on a principle "with which the other could not be brought to sympathize."[52] A third-party to this dispute faces a quandary if she sees reasons to endorse each principle based upon the weight of their corresponding second-order judgments, but cannot determine which of these judgments is morally better.

Discourses concerning act-, description-, and principle$_1$-judgments may be thought to be truth-apt because they exhibit discipline, as each supposes a common set of assumptions among interlocutors that effectively limits the range of acceptable answers to any moral question. This is most obvious in act-judgments, where the practical principle is already selected and the only problem lies in determining how best to instantiate it. Description-judgments are, to a large degree, conceptual matters, as the

[51] It may seem as though this is not a case of principle$_2$-conflict, because the patient may place a higher value on autonomy simply because the ramifications for placing a higher value on beneficence or utility would, in this case, turn out badly *for her*. To deal with this problem, we could stipulate that the patient consistently ranks autonomy higher than beneficence or utility in her lexical ordering of values, and that she does so *because* she thinks considerations of autonomy are simply more morally important.
[52] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 445.

concept ‘courage’, for instance, consists of several widely agreed-upon features; the potential for dispute lies in the varying weights one might assign to each of these constitutive features. Finally, principle$_1$-judgments assume a value pluralism (or a shared “commonsense” morality) which, although it admits a wider range of permissible answers than do either of the first two types of first-order judgment, nevertheless assumes that adherence to a particular conception of the good will not preclude some increase in a different category of value from altering one’s judgment. These limitations on the range of acceptable answers ensure convergence on a significant percentage of judgments (a prerequisite for discipline) and make it likely that cases of incompatible judgments can be attributed to vagueness, because acceptable answers are so close to one another that an agent may be unable to say which is true.

V. Quandary and Second-Order Conflict

Second-order judgments concern what matters morally and why; second-order conflict, therefore, represents a disagreement over the moral structure that underlies classes of first-order judgments. Unlike many first-order discourses, it is not obvious that discourses concerning second-order judgments (a category that includes both principle$_2$-judgments and second-order judgments) suppose a common set of assumptions, which might serve to limit the range of acceptable answers, for various definitions of fundamental moral terms—‘good’, ‘wrong’, ‘obligatory’, ‘permissible’—diverge widely in content. Certainly, there is a range of acceptable definitions of fundamental moral terms to the same extent that there is a range of theories that can legitimately be called “moral.” But in judging which theory is true, that choice is often marked, not by how

similar the theories are owing to the potential vagueness of their central claims, but rather by how different they are owing to the alternative accounts they provide of what moral standards we have most reason to endorse.

The incompatibility of these accounts becomes apparent in principle$_2$-conflicts. For example, a Kantian may find it morally reprehensible to lie for the sake of preventing some minor injury to a loved one, while a consequentialist may consider the Kantian morally blind to ignore the fact that the lie would (let's say) cause no harm but refraining from lying would lead to avoidable injury. Meanwhile, the proponent of a Bernard Williams-type view would charge both the Kantian and the consequentialist with corruption for failing to consider the moral significance of relationships with loved ones and their importance to one's identity.[53] All of the principle$_2$-judgments in this example are guided by different second-order judgments about what is morally most important. The diversity of second-order judgments becomes even more apparent when we consider a wider range of ethical theories—Buddhist ethics, Christian ethics, the ethics of Deep Ecology, Nietzschean ethics—where each theory displays the same ostensibly assertoric features that, when combined with evidential constraint, give rise to minimal truth-aptitude.

One of the primary reasons Wright characterizes ethics as a minimally truth-apt discourse is to allow agents to be warranted in making moral claims even in the face of disagreement. Treating ethics as a more or less unified discourse, however, conceals the plurality of ways in which ethical assertions may be warranted with respect to different theories. That is, considering ethics as a single discipline elides the most important

[53] Cf. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana, 1985), among his other works.

problem: how to adjudicate between claims of competing theories which take divergently-defined concepts as starting points. If 'moral discourse' should instead be interpreted as 'moral discourses', where each discourse is governed by its own local norms of assertibility, we should be concerned that a proposition might be warranted only with regard to the norms *internal* to a particular discourse. If we accept that some first-order discourse is minimally truth-apt, it should be uncontroversial to accept that some particular second-order discourses are also minimally truth-apt, for most moral theories operate by way of highly-refined standards of assertibility, and those standards all but ensure convergence on a wide range of judgments.

Nevertheless, if minimal truth-aptitude exists only internal to various moral discourses, then neither discourse about second-order judgments nor discourse containing principle$_2$-conflict is obviously minimally truth-apt. In fact, the very observation of persistent second-order conflict tells against the prospect for enunciating norms of assertibility that are sufficient to ensure the degree of agreement in judgment (and thus, the degree of discipline) necessary for a discourse about second-order judgments (and the principle$_2$-judgments that appeal to them) to qualify as minimally truth-apt. When we argue about second-order reasons, there are no accepted standards for labeling one set of reasons 'true' and the other 'false', except from the perspective of particular second-order judgments themselves. Regardless of how syntactically structured is the surface grammar of second-order conflict, if there is not enough agreement on standards of warrant to confer discipline, then second-order discourse is not minimally truth-apt.

To summarize and expand upon the previous paragraph: if discourse about second-order conflict is not truth-apt owing to lack of agreement on how to define the

terms of discussion—what is 'morally good', what is 'morally wrong'—then principle$_2$-judgments, each of which is based upon second-order reasons, can be true only relative to the second-order theories or outlooks to which they correspond. And if this is so, then we are forced to an irrealist, relativist metaethical position for moral claims that appeal to or presuppose particular moral standards. The only context in which a principle$_2$-judgment is sufficiently disciplined to count as 'true' is one in which that judgment refers to the second-order standards that entail it or to which it appeals. This result (trivially) satisfies the first of Wright's goals: (1) to honor the irrealist intuition. It fails, however, to satisfy the second: (2) to honor the integrity of moral discourse. To any principle$_2$-proposition, "P is true," must be appended the clause, "relative to theory X." And this relative truth is not at all the sort of truth Wright is aiming to secure, as evidenced by his emphasis that it is a necessary condition for any proposition to count as 'true' that it satisfy the platitude, "Truth is absolute, timeless, and stable."[54]

Ordinary moral language, Wright himself argues, traffics in imperatives and absolutes: if a speaker says "P is morally good," she does not mean "P is morally good according to my endorsement of theory X but false or of indeterminate value according to other theories." She means, "P is morally good, period." The acknowledgment of relativism undermines the categorical use of moral language.[55] Whereas many first-order conflicts may be plausibly explained by appeals to the vagueness of certain moral predicates, in Wright's scheme second-order conflicts and the principle$_2$-conflicts that correspond to them are better explained by reference to 'intransigent disputes of inclination'. Second-order predications of 'morally good' simply do not admit of

[54] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 454
[55] Wright himself makes this point in criticizing the moral relativism of Gilbert Harman. Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 451.

borderline cases in the way first-order predications of 'courageous' do, for what is called 'morally good' changes markedly from theory to theory.[56]

VI. Problems and Potential Solutions

It appears, however, that accepting this conclusion leaves us with an unusual hybrid view, in which those ostensibly first-order judgments that tacitly appeal to particular second-order standards (principle$_2$-judgments) are not truth-apt, while those first-order judgments that do not appeal to particular second-order standards (act-, description, and principle$_1$-judgments) *are* truth-apt. I noted above that first-order judgments of the latter kind are made either under the auspices of a sort of value pluralism or are made with an inchoate understanding of the reasons granting authority to the principles one accepts. Both act- and description-conflict, however, are apt, though not required, to be construed in a relativistic framework as sketched above, because they may occur within a particular second-order standard just as easily as they occur for the pluralist or commonsense moralist.

Act-conflict concerns which act best satisfies a given principle in some circumstance, and that principle may be what I've termed a principle$_2$, judgments about which, I have argued above, must be construed relativistically on Wright's framework. Likewise, description-conflict can occur within any particular second-order standard, as

[56] There may be a further problem with identifying second-order conflicts with intransigent disputes of inclination. If 'inclinations' guide a subject's choice of second-order moral judgments and these inclinations have their source in various facts about a subject—one's upbringing, education, gender, life experiences and the like—moral assertibility may be relativized, not only to a particular theory, but also perhaps to a particular person. This is a more radical, indexical relativist conclusion, however, and my objection is more likely to stand with the less controversial conclusion: identifying second-order conflicts with intransigent disputes of inclination—and thereby denying the discipline necessary for both second-order conflict truth-aptness and principle$_2$-judgment truth-aptness—effectively sacrifices the integrity of moral discourse, and so fails to satisfy the project of internal accommodation.

two Kantians can disagree over whether Jane is courageous just as easily as can two pluralists or two commonsense moralists. Principle$_1$-conflict, on the other hand, is more resistant to a relativistic reading, as it is defined in such a way as to preclude its disputant(s) from appealing to a specific second-order standard. But there are problems with leaving the issue at that.

Consider a more detailed version of the medical beneficence versus autonomy case. One agent, A, who is a proponent of consequentialism, makes the principle$_2$-judgment that states, "It is morally preferable to perform the beneficial procedure." Another agent, B, who somewhat unreflectively accepts commonsense morality, makes the principle$_1$-judgment with the same content—"It is morally preferable to perform the beneficial procedure"—but does so simply because the outcome with the highest utility seems better (for a reason that B cannot successfully articulate) in this case than does the outcome in which the patient's autonomy is respected. One might quickly reply that A's judgment should be reformulated in a way that includes A's commitment to consequentialism, so that it reads, "It is morally preferable to perform the beneficial procedure because doing so will result in the greatest utility of the available options." But reformulating the proposition does not change what seems strange about the example's implication—namely, it would be odd to say that B's judgment is truth-apt just because it does not appeal to a particular second-order standard, while A's judgment is not truth-apt because it does tacitly appeal to such a standard.

We might want to address this problem by arguing that the value pluralist and the commonsense moralist actually *are* appealing to second-order standards in this case, though those standards do not neatly fit into the "□∀x (Mx↔Dx)" schema introduced

above. We might say that the pluralist (perhaps tacitly) accepts a second-order standard such as

> p is morally forbidden ↔ the wrongness of p outweighs the wrongness of q and the wrongness of r, where p, q and r pick out the morally relevant and mutually incompatible options.

This formulation differs from the earlier schema, of course, in that both constituents of the biconditional contain moral content. One problem with this sort of formulation is that it does nothing to ensure that two pluralists will agree on the content of judgments in a sufficient number of cases to confer discipline upon a pluralistic ethical discourse. There is nothing in the ostensibly second-order standard that precludes two pluralists from wholeheartedly affirming the standard and yet, at the same time, coming to incompatible conclusions as to whether, for instance, p or q is the morally forbidden option, and for doing so in all like cases. The same problem would plague a similar formulation intended to capture the supposed second-order standard affirmed by the common sense moralist:

> p is morally forbidden ↔ the rules of thumb constituting commonsense morality say that p is morally forbidden.

Not only do both of these formulations threaten circularity, but also, because there is no purely descriptive formula in the second constituent of the biconditional, there is no pressure exerted by the standard for two proponents of that view to agree on particular first-order judgments that conform to it.

This is an unhappy result, for there seems to be a genuine sense in which some first-order discourse *is* truth-apt, even if the disputed judgments involved in a first-order conflict do not appeal to the same second-order standard. Consider the sorts of moral disagreements we may think of as reasonable, where two equally well-situated disputants

can come down on incompatible sides of an issue, yet neither disputant can be charged with a cognitive shortcoming. Disagreements over the permissibility of abortion, euthanasia, the unavoidable killing of non-combatants in war, the killing of animals for food and the death penalty all come to mind as possible instances of this general kind. In all of these debates, it seems that the considerations in favor of each mutually incompatible position (concerning permissibility) are so closely matched as to underdetermine which is correct, so that, in the right circumstances, either may faultlessly be held. Put another way, each question provides fertile ground for a quandary. But if it is not a particular second-order standard that ensures such an agreement over the relevant considerations, what is it?

The most promising answer is, I think, that the preponderance of agents accepts certain judgments or commitments as paradigmatic instances of moral relevance, in spite of the diversity of the second-order standards to which they appeal. All of the debates I listed in the preceding paragraph, for instance, concern the permissibility of killing in general, and the permissibility of murder in particular. Nearly every moral view includes central norms against the taking of life in various circumstances, so we have from the outset a force for a significant degree of convergence in judgments. In all of these debates, the question is not whether killing is, ceteris paribus, morally wrong; nearly everyone will agree to that. The questions are rather (a) whether in the cases under discussion the killing amounts to murder, and (b) whether, even if it does, certain other considerations outweigh the badness of the killing/murder. It is in addressing questions like (a) and (b) that intractable disagreements may arise. But if those disagreements are structured and constrained by central moral commitments that nearly everyone accepts

and which therefore ensure a large overlap of judgments in easier cases (e.g. "It is wrong to kill people for mere entertainment"), then discourse constituted by first-order judgments concerning those central commitments is likely disciplined enough to be truth-apt. This would constitute a far smaller range of truth-apt moral discourses than Wright intends, but it would not be an insignificant range. I will return to this issue of whether shared inter-standard moral judgments can avoid relativism in Chapter Three below. Unfortunately for Wright's theory, I will present arguments that suggest that these shared, central commitments do not provide as stable a foundation as is necessary to preclude relativism.

Even if the arguments I will present in Chapter Three do not prove decisive, the relativism to which I have already shown Wright's view is committed is sufficient to guarantee that his view does not honor the integrity of moral discourse, and so fails to satisfy the project of internal accommodation. I have argued that principle$_2$-judgments can be true only relativistically. Principle$_2$-judgments determine the content of first-order judgments based upon an agent's endorsement of second-order standards. In this way, principle$_2$-judgments reflect our ability to *give reasons* for the first-order views we hold. This activity of reason-giving is integral to moral discourse, and part of the internal accommodation project requires showing that making moral claims and deliberating about moral issues is, to a large extent, a rational enterprise. But if those reasons are true or warranted or appropriate only within the particular moral discourses from which they originate, then disputants in principle$_2$-conflict cannot offer reasons to one another.

One possible way for Wright to resist these damaging relativist conclusions is to revise the notion of discipline so that it does not rely on the agreement of actual

judgments. At one point, he proposes that for some irrealist discourses, "the consensus about which conditions warrant…assertion" ought to focus on the *permissibility* of assertibility, rather than on the *obligation* of assertibility.[57] If several mutually incompatible judgments are each permissible in a particular situation, then, of course, their incompatibility need not necessitate the attribution of error.

Wright takes comic discourse to be of this type, and maintains that it is "disciplined by the objective of irreproachability in the light of a community of comic sensibility. And warrant for comic claims is warrant to think that they can meet that objective."[58] It is immediately apparent, however, that in the "community of moral sensibility," the categorical nature of moral language will ensure that members who endorse particular second-order judgments will concomitantly find the judgments that are incompatible with their own reproachable, or, at least, morally misguided. Hence, according to this revised notion of discipline, contentious second-order judgments lack warrant, since there is no reason to think that they can meet the objective of irreproachability. This revision of 'discipline', then, clearly does not save Wright from the problems associated with second-order moral conflict.

Alternatively, Wright might accept the claim that there are many moral discourses and yet respond that second-order discourse is nevertheless truth-apt in the following way. If we move to a higher level of generality, we see that every predication of 'wrong' means something like "that which is forbidden by universal requirements," or more simply, "that which ought not be done." This observation is certainly true, and it is not as though a Kantian and a consequentialist are unable to understand the other's purpose in

[57] Wright (1992), p. 95.
[58] Ibid., p. 106.

making moral assertions. Both are engaged in the same moralizing activities—approving and disapproving, lauding and criticizing—and so the *function* of second-order judgments and principle$_2$-judgments appears to be the same in both theories, regardless of the reasons behind their deployment.

Even if we grant this response, however, the problem remains: when we attempt to determine who is correct and who is incorrect in a second-order moral disagreement, the lack of agreement on the criteria for correctness robs second-order discourse of discipline, and thus, of truth-aptitude. Furthermore, focus on the generalities of moral language can lead us to forget that second-order and principle$_2$-judgments not only display a formal structure, but also entail substantive content regarding *why and on what basis* a moral property is predicated of an act, principle, or character. T.M. Scanlon makes a similar point:

> There are many different ideas about the source of overriding objective requirements on action: God's law, the human telos, pure practical reason, and the value of justifiability to others or "unity with our fellow creatures." It seems clear that people can, without misusing the English language, use the terms 'moral', 'immoral' and 'morally wrong' with the sincere intention of invoking standards based on any one of these sources.[59]

If the standards of assertibility for second-order judgments are as diverse as the above paragraphs suggest, when those judgments come into conflict, as they are bound to do, Wright's account allows us to speak of truth only *within* a moral outlook, not among moral outlooks. In this way, Wright's framework falls short of vindicating the integrity of moral discourse, and so fails on its own terms.

[59] T.M. Scanlon, "Moral Theory: Understanding and Disagreement." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55, No. 2 (June 1995), p. 350.

Chapter Two

Timmons: Assertoric Non-descriptivism

I. Introduction

In developing his irrealist metaethical view, Mark Timmons shares both the methodological and the substantive philosophical commitments that motivate Wright's account.[60] I will discuss Timmons' theory in this chapter for three primary reasons. First, whereas the metaethical theory offered by Wright is part of a larger framework for situating debates regarding realism and irrealism across many domains of discourse, Timmons restricts his discussion solely to ethics. While this fact does not, in and of itself, guarantee a more plausible treatment of the issues, it does guarantee a more thorough treatment, which might help resolve the relativist problems that plague Wright's account. Second, despite all that the theories of Wright and Timmons share in common, Timmons goes about defending his view in a distinctive way. Thus, even if we cannot salvage Wright's theory, if Timmons' theory satisfies both internal and external accommodation projects, we will have evidence that the notion of minimal truth can be successfully applied in metaethics.

The conclusions of my arguments, however, will not be so sanguine about minimalism's metaethical prospects. In fact, I will argue that Timmons' metaethical theory also entails relativism, though my argumentative approach will be different (and simpler) than the one I employed in objecting to Wright's theory. This point relates to my third reason for discussing Timmons' theory: because he argues for a conclusion similar to Wright's but in a distinctive way, the problem of relativism arises for Timmons

[60] Cf. Mark Timmons, *Morality Without Foundations: A Defense of Ethical Contextualism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

in a different light, and examining relativism in this light will add another dimension to our understanding of the threat that relativism may pose for the possibility of satisfying the project of internal accommodation.

While I addressed the problem of relativism for Wright by discussing the necessary and sufficient conditions under which discourses regarding second-order and principle$_2$-judgments could be minimally truth-apt, the problem I raise for Timmons' theory is largely one of moral psychology. This problem lies in determining whether, once we come to terms with the theoretical truth of relativism—that, metaphysically speaking, there are no objective moral truths, and hence, there is no principled way to favor one second-order standard over all others—we can then nevertheless act, from a practical point of view, as though relativism were not true. Timmons argues that we can; I will argue that the distinction Timmons draws between the theoretical and practical perspectives (or, as he calls them, the 'detached' and 'engaged' perspectives) is implausible, leaving him open to the threat of relativism, which he, like Wright, regards as a mark of metaethical failure.

In §II below, I will introduce Timmons' view, which he terms 'Assertoric Non-descriptivism'. In §III, I will describe how his view is vulnerable to a distinct variant of the relativist objection faced by Wright. I will consider, in §IV, a possible line of defense Timmons might take against this relativist objection. I will conclude that this line of defense fails, and that Timmons' metaethical theory, like Wright's before it, accordingly fails to satisfy the project of internal accommodation.

II. Assertoric Non-descriptivism & Contextual Moral Semantics

Timmons begins constructing his brand of irrealism by affirming the thesis of semantic contextualism, which he formulates in the following way:

> CT The truth value of (some, most, all) sentences that constitute some discourse D can vary from one context to another, owing to the semantic norms governing those sentences.[61]

The guiding idea is that the semantic norms are contextually sensitive, so that a sentence can count as true in one context but false (or just unacceptable) in another context, depending on the parameters of the conversation. Conversational parameters are dictated by features such as the purposes and presuppositions speakers bring to a conversation. Timmons approvingly relates an example given by David Lewis:

> If you say 'Italy is boot-shaped' and get away with it, low standards are required and the standards fall if need be; thereafter 'France is hexagonal' is true enough. But if you deny that Italy is boot-shaped, pointing out the differences, what you have said requires high standards under which 'France is hexagonal' is far from true enough.[62]

Across contexts, however, the concept of truth is constant: truth is a matter of *correct assertibility.* It is what constitutes correct assertibility that varies according to context, and it changes in response to the interaction of two factors: (a) the norms governing a particular discourse and (b) the (discourse-independent) world. Reminiscent of Wright's formulation of truth-aptness, (a) includes both syntactic and semantic norms, with the former involving the grammatical and logical rules that govern the formation of sentences, and the latter, discipline-like norm governing the correct usage of the terms in a given domain of discourse. While correct assertibility in certain realist discourses

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[61] Ibid., p. 111.
[62] David Lewis, "Scorekeeping in a Language Game." Reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 245. Originally published in *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1979): 339-59. Quoted in Timmons (1999), p. 112.

depends on a rather direct interaction between (a) and (b), in other domains a statement may be true simply by virtue of the norms in (a) themselves. Timmons identifies discourses involving analytic statements or statements in pure mathematics as potential instances of the latter sort, with moral discourse a close relative of these two.

Timmons next sets out to argue that moral sentences are genuine assertions, citing as evidence that fact that they are governed by the same syntactic and logical constraints as are descriptive sentences. There is a real distinction to be had here, however, and that is between an assertion's being descriptive and its being evaluative, with neither category being reducible to the other. Timmons claims that evaluative assertions, of which moral assertions are the paradigm, do not seek to describe the world, but rather seek to guide action. Emphasizing this difference, he writes, "Descriptive beliefs are maps by which we steer; evaluative beliefs do not map the world, but instead typically serve to regulate our choice of routes."[63]

Timmons now has the tools to sketch a minimalism about moral truth: since moral sentences are evaluative assertions, they need not correspond directly to any features or properties of the (discourse-independent) world, and so can be true solely by virtue of the semantic norms governing the discourse of which they are a part. Furthermore, since evaluative assertions are not reducible to descriptive assertions, there can be no insightful translation of a moral sentence. Accordingly, like Wright, Timmons accepts Tarski's T-schema, so that if asked "What is the content of P?" where 'P' is a moral proposition, the appropriate answer to give is simply: P.

We may rightly wonder, since Timmons' theory is so similar to Wright's, whether it entails the same sort of relativism. Timmons is adamant that it should not entail

[63] Timmons (1999), p. 143.

relativism, for he acknowledges that a relativist metaethical position does not satisfy the project of internal accommodation. He writes,

> An insuperable problem for any version of relativism is that it simply does violence to a deeply embedded feature of ordinary moral discourse, namely, the fact that from an engaged moral stance, we assert moral statements and make truth ascriptions to moral statements *categorically* […] If we ascend to the metalinguistic level and say that the statement 'apartheid is morally wrong' is true, we do not mean that it is true relative to some moral stance—we mean that that the statement is simply true.[64]

But Timmons explains the process of forming a moral judgment as bringing one's moral outlook to bear on a question, so that it is 'semantically appropriate' to judge in accordance with that outlook. Thus, it seems, a moral judgment is true relative to the outlook one is employing just in case the judgment is entailed by or is compatible with that outlook. Timmons draws a distinction, however, between an assertion being semantically appropriate and it being correctly assertible, where only the latter concept is equivalent to truth. It is only the conflation of these two notions, he claims, that leads an objector to charge him with relativism.

This distinction is tied to the fact that, as Timmons puts it,

> Just as first-order moral statements make moral-evaluative assertions, the corresponding truth ascriptions make them, too. […] Semantic and moral assessment become *fused* when one attributes truth to moral statements: one's semantic evaluations are made from within one's moral outlook and thus express metalinguistically the specific moral stances that accompany the outlook.[65]

So, the difference between semantic appropriateness and correct assertibility lies in the fact that, in ascribing the second notion to an assertion, the agent is a proponent of the moral outlook to which that assertion appeals. We see here a major difference between Timmons' and Wright's account. While Wright identified truth-aptness with syntactic

[64] Ibid., p. 126.
[65] Ibid., p. 149.

and disciplinary (semantic) constraints, Timmons includes an additional semantic constraint, which holds that, with regard to moral assertions, truth ascriptions are made only in a morally-committed way. Timmons calls the failure to see this distinction the 'relativist's fallacy', and warns that "from the fact that people can and do judge that opposing moral statements can be semantically appropriate relative to different moral outlooks, one should not infer that truth as predicated of moral statements is relative."[66]

Finally, returning to the issue of contextually variable parameters governing truth-ascriptions in moral discourse, Timmons identifies two main, truth-relevant perspectives one may take towards moral assertions: the detached perspective and the engaged perspective. From the detached perspective, one asks whether (a) and (b) (i.e. semantic norms of the discourse and the discourse-independent world) conspire to make any moral statement correctly assertible. Since one is here appealing to features of the world not addressed by evaluative assertions (which, remember, are not in the business of describing the world), she must say that moral statements are neither correctly nor incorrectly assertible, neither true nor false. This is the irrealist's theoretical perspective, from which she judges that there are no moral facts or moral properties "out there" in the world. In the morally engaged perspective, by contrast, one only appeals to (a). It is from the morally engaged perspective, then, that one may ascribe truth to moral sentences by way of fusing semantic and moral evaluation, as discussed above.

So, the same sentence uttered in different contexts may be granted different degrees of 'semantic slack'. For example, the sentence "The movie, 'Lost in Translation,' stars Bill Murray" may be correctly assertible in an everyday, non-philosophical context, but the same sentence may not be correctly assertible when uttered

[66] Ibid., p. 150.

in a context that assumes a naturalistic philosophical perspective that denies the existence of the ontological category, 'movie'. Likewise, a moral sentence such as "It is wrong to cheat on one's taxes" may be correctly assertible from a morally engaged perspective, but not correctly assertible from the detached perspective, which denies that the property 'wrongness' exists in a naturalistic ontology. In this way, Timmons hopes to secure the best of both worlds by employing the perspectival distinction to satisfy both internal and external accommodation projects.

III. The Spectre of Relativism

As the passages I quote above demonstrate, Timmons takes pains to argue that the application of contextual semantics to moral discourse does not entail a form of relativism. I will argue throughout the rest of this chapter that we have reasons to find his defense against relativism implausible. Timmons claims that a relativist interpretation of contextual moral semantics results in 'relativized semantic tightness,' whereby "the semantic norms governing moral discourse conspire with the world to yield outlook-relative correct assertibility and correct deniability status (i.e., outlook-relative truth or falsity) for moral statements."[67] This feature of relativism, he says, does not comport with our experience of ordinary moral discourse and practice, in which we assert (and thereby ascribe truth to) moral statements categorically, because we are operating from within an engaged moral stance. This description of moral discourse and practice seems, at first glance, to comport with the phenomenology of making first-order judgments.

But what are we to make of a higher-order assessment from the detached perspective of one's own acceptance of moral norms? Say that one accepts Timmons'

[67] Ibid., p. 126.

account of moral discourse and realizes that moral truth can only be ascribed within an engaged perspective. What justification would the person then have for holding any particular moral outlook? As Russ Shafer-Landau notes,

> The absence of any moral facts outside particular outlooks makes it the case that judgments rendered within one outlook are no more justified or true than those of a competing outlook. The views of each outlook are equally (un)justified, equally (un)true. This is relativism.[68]

While Timmons is focused on the way in which the use of moral language shapes the phenomenology of moral practice, the current worry is that the higher-order understanding (corresponding to the acceptance of Timmons' theory) of what moral practice actually consists of may likewise have a dramatic, and perhaps countervailing, effect on moral phenomenology. More specifically, while Timmons is focused on moral semantics, there remains a live question of moral epistemology, as whether one can legitimately consider herself justified in adopting a particular second-order standard will likely have as much effect on moral phenomenology as does one's experiential understanding that moral language as categorical. And in attempting to satisfy the project of internal accommodation, Timmons would agree, matters of moral phenomenology are central.

What ought a reflective person's attitude be toward her own second-order standard when presented with another standard that is equally coherent, yet leads to a different conclusion on some moral question? Is one justified in holding steadfastly to one moral outlook just because she happens to have a particular moral sensibility and not another? The concern is, roughly, that judgments issuing from one coherent moral outlook are no more justified than are incompatible judgments issuing from a different

[68] Russ Shafer-Landau, "Review of *Morality Without Foundations.*" *Ethics* 111, No. 4 (July 2001), pp. 826-30.

coherent moral outlook, for semantic norms do not conspire with the world to make moral sentences semantically correct. Thus, there seems to be no principled reason to ascribe truth to a particular moral outlook beyond the fact that one already views the terrain of plausible moral outlooks from a particular, already-engaged moral perspective. And it seems a stretch to call that a 'principled' reason. Assessing the situation from a detached perspective, it seems that if one moral judgment is no more justified than an incompatible judgment, then one lacks justification for ascribing 'truth' to either one, even if it is constitutive of the phenomenology of engaged moral experience that we treat most of our own moral views categorically.

Luckily for the objector, Timmons maintains an interest in moral epistemology, and his writing on the subject[69] is a natural place to search for the potential answer to the problem. Timmons' theory of epistemological contextualism holds that doxastic justification involves conformity to a set of epistemic norms which are determined by describing an idealized, but realistic, epistemic agent. The operative notion for this agent is "epistemic responsibility," where the criteria for responsible epistemic agency involve reference to reasonable minimal thresholds with respect to memory and intelligence, as well as a social dimension that involves the canvassing of "obvious counterpossibilities," the obviousness of which is determined by knowledge held as "common" by one's community of interlocutors. These epistemic norms are not algorithmic, however, as they must leave room for epistemic judgment as a second crucial aspect within the larger category of proper epistemic sensibility.

Timmons claims that one can be epistemically responsible in holding some belief without also being epistemically justified in holding it. Such contextually basic beliefs—

[69] Ch. 5: "Moral Justification in Context," in Timmons (1999).

which constitute the core of an agent's moral outlook—are acquired and endorsed responsibly if there are no obvious reasons to suppose that they are false. Positive evidence for their truth is not necessary.[70] Timmons adds a proviso which holds that, in addition to there being no obvious defeaters for a contextually basic belief, the agent must also have confidence in that belief's being epistemically sound,[71] though this confidence does not arise in response to the belief's being self-evident.[72] Contextually basic moral beliefs, for instance, must strike the agent as being both intuitively obvious and non-arbitrary. This proviso exemplifies what Timmons calls "second-order conservatism," where "one must at least be disposed to believe that one's first-order beliefs are epistemically sound if those beliefs are to be responsibly held."[73] Again, this notion of a belief's being "epistemically sound" seems to amount to a vague sense of confidence in that belief's being true.

Disappointingly, Timmons' account of moral epistemology does not add any substantive features that would save his account from the potentially damaging relativist objection. Moral knowledge, just like moral truth, is only ascribed from an engaged perspective and there are no objective criteria one must meet in coming to some moral belief or judgment. Under a contextually-informed reliabilist account of moral knowledge, for instance, we assess an agent's belief according to whether the agent displays a "moral sensibility that generates, as it were, a high proportion of true to false moral beliefs,"[74] where, of course, what counts as true or false is judged from a particular

[70] It seems possible that one could also be responsible, though not justified, in holding a non-basic belief, though Timmons does not address this issue.
[71] Cf. Timmons (1999)., p. 212.
[72] Cf. Ibid., p. 232.
[73] Ibid., p. 240.
[74] Ibid., p. 245.

moral stance. Thus, the worry about the justification for holding a particular second-order view remains unanswered.

This is the kernel of my objection: The fact that there are two distinct perspectives—morally engaged and morally detached—from which one can appropriately speak of truth does not guarantee that the judgments one makes from one perspective will not affect the judgments in the other. Irrealists have been able to embrace notions of minimalist truth via the Disquotational Scheme in order to legitimize the ordinary uses of moral language, so that they can make the same assertions as can moral realists. Where 'P' is a moral proposition, irrealists can join realists in licensing expressions such as "It is true that P," "P corresponds to the facts," and so on. But while the semantic differences between the two metaethical approaches have nearly collapsed, what remains are metaphysical, or more specifically, explanatory differences. As James Dreier notes, "The divide between realism and irrealism, at least in metaethics, rests on the substance of questions about metaphysical explanation."[75]

Realists may then have *more confidence* in making their moral assertions because they explain truth by pointing to a certain relationship between an assertion and an objective state of affairs or sort of property. Irrealists, on the other hand, realize by virtue of the detached perspective that there exist multiple equally consistent but incompatible moral outlooks or sets of principles, and that there is no "moral high ground"[76] from which to choose between them. When irrealists shift to the morally engaged perspective, it would be unrealistic to think that this realization is completely left behind. To maintain

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[75] James Dreier, "Metaethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism." *Philosophical Perspectives* 18: Ethics (2004), p. 42.
[76] See Paul Bloomfield, "Is There a Moral High Ground?" *Southern Journal of Philosophy,* Vol. 41, No. 4 (Winter 2003), pp. 511-26.

such a position would be to posit tacitly a rather odd moral psychology in which there are strict, practically impenetrable boundaries between the various perspectives one may take.

In trying to balance the understandings from each perspective, a serious tension emerges. While judging from a morally engaged perspective, one must believe, either implicitly or explicitly, that their second-order reasons for endorsing particular first-order moral judgments are superior to alternative reasons for endorsing different, incompatible judgments. Nevertheless, the irrealist must concurrently admit—if she is intellectually honest and sufficiently reflective—that there is no objective standard to which one may appeal to justify one's choice of principles. An irrealist understanding from the detached perspective has the potential to undermine, or at least weaken, one's morally engaged confidence in the legitimacy of awarding special moral weight to a particular set of second-order reasons. This threat exists because the two primary perspectives, and thus the content of the judgments made therein, are not wholly separable.

IV. The Relevance of Moral Phenomenology

One obvious way for Timmons to defend his account against the present objection would be to appeal to data from the study of moral phenomenology in order to offer evidence that the engaged and detached perspectives are wholly separable in practice. If they are in fact as distinct as he assumes, then Timmons' account may stand. Though he does not appear to be aware of my type of objection, Timmons does explore issues of

moral phenomenology in a series of recent papers,[77] so I will briefly address his discussion to see if it contains any material suitable for a defense.

Timmons characterizes the phenomenology of occurrent belief as involving a psychological process in which one involuntarily "comes down on" some issue by classifying a particular token as falling under a specific type, where one takes oneself to have a rational basis for making this particular categorization and warrant or ability to express the categorization in the declarative mood.[78] Thus, an agent will classify some action that presents itself as "to be done" as 'good', and will classify it as such involuntarily, in the sense that it seems to the agent that it is not a matter of her *choosing* to place the action in this category, but rather that there are reasons independent of her preferences that ground her doing so. By linking the involuntariness of moral beliefs to the experience of such beliefs "as possessing a kind of rational authority,"[79] Timmons draws an analogy to the way we form beliefs about nonmoral perceptual matters. For instance, when I walk into a room and see a chair in the corner, it does not occur to me that I have a much of a choice in the matter of believing whether I see a chair in the corner—the belief is involuntary. Another way of putting the point is that the normativity of moral beliefs seems to issue from one's experiences or circumstances themselves. What Timmons calls "direct ought-beliefs," following Maurice Mandelbaum,[80] are those experienced from a first-person perspective where one

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[77] Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons, "Cognitivist Expressivism," in *Metaethics After Moore,* ed. by Horgan and Timmons. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 255-98; Horgan and Timmons, "Moral Phenomenology and Moral Theory," in *Philosophical Issues,* Vol. 15 (2005); Horgan and Timmons, "Moorean Moral Phenomenology," forthcoming. Horgan and Timmons make largely the same points in each of these papers, so I will restrict my discussion to the first one. Also, I will refer to the authors simply as 'Timmons' rather than 'Horgan and Timmons', just for the sake of simplicity.
[78] Horgan and Timmons (2006), p. 263.
[79] Ibid., p. 264.
[80] Maurice Mandelbaum, *The Phenomenology of Moral Experience* (Glenco, Ill: The Free Press, 1955).

experiences a 'felt demand' on her actions.[81] Direct ought-beliefs play a "motivationally hot functional role,"[82] which is simply to say that they are, ceteris paribus, accompanied by a motivational force that is aimed at action.

Timmons' discussion of moral phenomenology seems more or less on target, but is, for the purpose of mounting a defense, insufficient. He never explicitly relates phenomenological concerns to the engaged/detached distinction, so I will now explore several considerations that may be relevant. First, let me offer a crude distinction that may nevertheless add some needed subtlety to the discussion. Call those people 'reflective' moral agents who possess a disposition to think carefully and critically about their first-order judgments and the second-order reasons supporting them. Call those people 'unreflective' moral agents who lack such a disposition. There will, of course, be many people who fall along the spectrum between these two antipodes; let us assume for ease of discussion, though, that there are only these two groups.

It is not clear whether Timmons' discussion of phenomenological matters is meant to capture the moral experience of the reflective, the unreflective, or both, but we should perhaps assume it is 'both', since he does not see fit to make a distinction. While it may be true that, in either case, moral beliefs are experienced as involuntary and dictated by justifying reasons originating outside oneself, there is still the matter of what one is to do with those beliefs as they occur (either spontaneously or after a period of reflection). That is, it is nearly always an open possibility to submit one's beliefs to

[81] Cf. Horgan and Timmons (2006)., p. 268.
[82] Ibid., p. 269.

further scrutiny and reflection.[83] Why shouldn't nonmoral, metaethical considerations affect the character of one's first-order deliberative processes?

Timmons makes a similar point that unwittingly supports my contention, though he uses it in addressing the question of whether moral phenomenology includes some descriptive aspect. He writes,

> Moral phenomenology may very well be susceptible to influence by higher-order beliefs about the nature of morality itself. Certainly many people believe that there are objective moral facts—a belief that can easily be instilled, for instance, through the persistent intertwining of religious instruction with moral education.[84]

Here, Timmons is admitting that metaethical beliefs can influence one's experience of what she is doing in making first-order moral claims. The upshot of this fact is that the moral irrealist may very well take herself, at least in some instances of moral deliberation, as arriving at a belief that is true relative to her lights, though her moral outlook is no more objectively warranted than are several other equally consistent outlooks.

We might use an analogy with games to shed light on the ways in which the engaged and detached perspectives interact in different agents' lives, noting especially the difference between the 'reflective' and the 'unreflective'. Take, for instance, a game like basketball. Basketball is a normative activity, as the play is structured according to a set of rules that each player must follow. But even during the game (say, between plays), most people can step back to a detached perspective and realize that it is just a game and that its rules could have been different than what they are, and these realizations may

[83] Except, perhaps, in cases of emergency or general time-sensitivity where a direct ought-belief is compelled by the circumstances to issue immediately in some course of action.
[84] Ibid., pp. 274-5.

affect how seriously they take the outcome.[85] Let us assume this is analogous to what the reflective irrealist does in forming moral beliefs. The unreflective or naïve player may not be cognizant of the fact, while playing, that basketball is just a game (say, because she is so engrossed in the playing of it), and she would therefore take every rule as absolute. Timmons seems to assume that every agent is like the naïve player, so engrossed in the activity of forming moral beliefs and so attached to their own outlook that they cannot, while making those judgments, "look up" from the process to consider the activity in which they are engaged. Surely, this is a caricature, at least of the experience of the reflective agent.

If, as I have been arguing in this chapter, the sharp distinction between the engaged and detached perspectives is unstable, then one who accepts Timmons' irrealist metaethical view faces a serious tension. She accepts the judgment that, from a detached perspective, there are no objective moral truths, and thus no objective reasons to guide the choice between one of several internally consistent but mutually incompatible second-order standards. On the other hand, if she also wants to remain wholeheartedly committed to a particular second-order standard, she must act as though she does have reason to prefer it over the alternatives. The agent faces the problem of justifying her acceptance of a particular standard when she realizes that each standard is equally (un)justified. If the agent is ambivalent about whether the moral standard she accepts legitimately deserves the conferral of overriding importance her endorsement of it

[85] It need not, of course, cause them to take it less seriously; they may play more effectively with this newfound perspective. Run the analogy back to morality. A philosophy professor who accepts an irrealist metaethical position need not take morality less seriously. If morality is just a set of evolved conventions, one can understand both that fact and the good reasons for which those conventions evolved. Understanding clearly some aspects of the nature of morality might lead one to be a better "player" or, in this case, a better moral agent. It is not clear, though, whether this agent's reformed conception of morality would still be in the bounds necessary to satisfy the project of internal accommodation, which concerns commonsense assumptions about the nature of morality.

requires, then she is unlikely to assert categorically many of the claims entailed by that standard. And if, as a result of accepting a metaethical view, agents are no longer willing to assert the majority of their moral claims categorically, then that metaethical view fails to satisfy the project of internal accommodation.

Chapter Three

Accommodating Relativism: Prospects and Limitations

I. Introduction

If my arguments above are successful in demonstrating that both Wright's and Timmons' application of a minimal conception of truth to an irrealist metaethical framework leads to relativism, then their accounts fail on their own terms; both authors claim that if a metaethical account entails relativism, then it fails to satisfy the internal accommodation project of doing justice to the integrity of moral discourse, because a relativistic analysis fails comport with commonsense understandings of moral practice. We ought not accept Wright's and Timmons' claim, however, without briefly examining whether the sort of relativism to which their accounts lead is necessarily a harmful one. That examination is the purpose of the present chapter.

The sort of moral relativism in which I am interested in this paper is often called *metaethical relativism*. This view holds, roughly, that there is no universally true standard or set of criteria guiding moral assessment. Rather, there are many such standards and sets of criteria. Scanlon writes,

> [It is] a "necessary condition for an account of judgments of a certain kind to be relativistic that the cardinal virtue for judgments of that kind…cannot be assigned absolutely, but only relative to certain conditions or parameters."[86]

The cardinal virtue we have been considering is that of being true, and so we should interpret metaethical relativism as holding that a moral judgment may only be spoken of as true for a particular agent or true within a particular community of agents, so that

[86] T.M. Scanlon, "Fear of Relativism," in Rosalind Hursthouse, Gavin Lawrence, and Warren Quinn (eds.), *Virtues and Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 219-45. Reprinted in Thomas L. Carson and Paul K. Moser (eds.), *Moral Relativism: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 142.

moral truth does not aspire to an objective status that would make a moral judgment true for all agents across all communities. This position revises, and perhaps undermines, the common conception of truth, which holds that if a proposition is true, it is true for everyone.[87]

Metaethical relativism should be distinguished from two other types of relativism: *descriptive relativism* and *normative relativism.*[88] Descriptive relativism simply explicates the common sociological observation that different moral standards are accepted by different individuals and/or by different communities. The central claim of descriptive relativism—that moral beliefs vary in relation to different persons or societies—can be made with reference to just first-order moral judgments or to both first- and second-order moral judgments. It is uncontroversial that descriptive relativism is true of first-order moral judgments, as conflict regarding those judgments is a seemingly constant feature of moral discourse and practice. Some argue, however, that first-order moral conflict can be attributed solely to disagreement (and thus, on this view, error) with regard to the factual features involved in a given case, so that there would be no second-order disagreement if all the facts were known by both disputants.[89] Both the position I have been sketching—that second-order conflict is a genuine occurrence—and the positions defended by Wright and Timmons, deny this claim. Our positions maintain that

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[87] Cf. Richard Brandt, "Ethical Relativism" in Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Vol. 3 (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 75-8. Reprinted in Carson and Moser (2001), p. 26-7.

[88] This way of characterizing the distinctions is employed in Thomas L. Carson and Paul K. Moser, "Moral Relativism: Species, Rationales, and Problems," in Carson and Moser (2001), pp. 1-4. Carson and Moser call normative relativism 'moral-requirement relativism'. The term 'normative relativism' is used in Brandt (2001), pp. 27-8, and Gilbert Harman, "What is Moral Relativism?" in Alvin Goldman and Jaekwon Kim (eds.), *Values and Morals* (Dordrecht: Reidel Press, 1978).

[89] Such a view is discussed in a positive light, though not wholly endorsed, in Michelle Moody-Adams, "The Empirical Underdetermination of Descriptive Cultural Relativism," in her *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), pp. 28-43. Reprinted in Carson and Moser (2001), pp. 93-106.

epistemic peers can hold incompatible second-order judgments. The truth of second-order descriptive relativism provides a prima facie reason for considering metaethical relativism, though it does not entail it. One could accept the former view and still claim that there is always a single correct moral judgment in a particular circumstance. Obviously, metaethical relativism denies this claim.

Metaethical relativism is also conceptually independent from normative relativism, which holds that "the moral requirements binding on a person depend on…her intentions, desires or beliefs (or the intentions, desires, or beliefs of people in her society)."[90] Normative relativism is an unattractive metaethical view because it holds that, as they say, "anything goes." For instance, forms of normative relativism with varying scopes will approve of the propositions, "If I believe that p is good for me, then p is good for me," or "If society S says that q is forbidden for every agent A, then q is forbidden for every A in S." Metaethical relativists need not commit themselves to the normative relativist claim that the dispositions a person *actually* has (or those that are actually dominant in a person's community) determine what counts as morally right for that person.

Rather, metaethical relativism has the flexibility to provide a more attractive view. For instance, Richard Brandt develops an 'ideal self' view, according to which an action "A would be prohibited by that moral code which I, *if I were fully rational,* would support for the society of the agent of A, if I expected to live there."[91] This sort of view is still genuinely relativist because it depends on facts about the speaker under ideal conditions and, by making the idealizing clause indexical, it leaves room for the

[90] Carson and Moser (2001), p. 2.
[91] Richard Brandt, "Relativism Refuted?" *The Monist* 67 (1984): pp. 297-307. Reprinted in Carson and Moser (2001), p. 280.

possibility that even under those conditions a second-order judgment endorsed by one speaker will not necessarily be compatible with a one endorsed by another.

Brandt's appeal to our ideally rational selves is motivated by the assumption that the employment of such a heuristic device is likely to result in the selection of second-order judgments that are most in concert with one's moral sensibilities, which may, in actual circumstances, be skewed due to lack of information or reflection or a fault in reasoning. The best way to determine "whether relativism about moral principles at the philosophical level is a correct theory"[92] is to abstract away such potential faults in order to discover the extent to which our second-order judgments are actually (in)compatible. Brandt contends that, once doing so, we will find a significant degree of compatibility among the features that all ideally rational agents would prefer be included in the moral code governing the society in which they live. For instance, all rational persons would want "a system fostering self-restraints, mutual trust, openness, the absence of need to be on one's guard against malicious attacks."[93] The articulation of this sort of view marks an attempt to distinguish a plausible, *moderate* form of metaethical relativism both from the unattractive normative relativist position and from the extreme form of metaethical relativism that often serves as the object of attacks by relativism's opponents. I will consider other attempts to articulate a moderate form of metaethical relativism in §III below.

Extreme metaethical relativism holds that no moral judgments or standards are objectively true or false, while the aforementioned moderate metaethical relativism holds

[92] Brandt (2001), p. 278.
[93] Ibid., p. 283.

that some, though not all, moral judgments are objectively true or false.[94] If extreme metaethical relativism is considered malignant because of its negative implications for the project of internal accommodation, we may consider the work of Brandt and several other like-minded philosophers as attempts to develop a moderate, potentially benign form of metaethical relativism. Before turning to these accounts, however, I will first, in §II, take a closer look at why Wright and Timmons consider metaethical relativism such a threat. After examining, in §III, the potential for formulating a benign metaethical relativism that comports with several central features of Wright's and Timmons' accounts, I will argue, in §IV, that the concept of benign relativism is itself unstable. I will argue that moderate metaethical relativism collapses into extreme metaethical relativism, and so there is no genuinely 'benign' form of relativism with which to salvage the theories of Wright and Timmons.

II. Revisiting Wright's Worry

In trying to determine the best way to deal with moral conflict in minimally truth-apt discourses like ethics, Wright considers and rejects *indexical relativism,* which is equivalent to the indexical version of normative relativism I introduced above. This is the view that concepts such as 'good', 'morally forbidden', and 'moral truth' are relativized to an individual, and so would license a proposition such as "If I think P is true, then P is true for me." Wright complains that on this sort of view, "truth-conditional contents are indeed involved in 'disputes' of inclination, but actually there are no *real*

[94] Cf. Carson and Moser (2001), p. 3.

disputes involved,"[95] since the relevant propositions make implicit appeals to different second-order standards.

So, on the indexical normative relativist view, a disagreement over, for instance, whether it is morally permissible to eat meat will involve the claim by agent A, "Eating meat is morally permissible" to which is appended the clause, "for A." A will in turn interpret his disputant, B's, claim as "Eating meat is morally forbidden for B." Wright objects that this way of interpreting disputes of inclination

> Seems destined to misrepresent the manner in which, at least ordinarily understood, the contents in question embed under operations like the conditional and negation. If it were right, there would be an analogy between disputes of inclination and the "dispute" between one who says "I am tired" and her companion who replies, "Well, I am not"…It is not clear that we should expect that indexical relativism can save enough of the standard practice of discourses within which disputes of inclination may arise to avoid the charge that it has simply missed their subject matter.[96]

So, Wright's worry here is that relativism robs moral discourse of the crucial role played by disagreement, since disputants are supposedly doomed to talk past rather than engage one another regarding the moral issue in question.

Three points are salient here. First, one should immediately notice that Wright has chosen the most extreme form of indexical normative relativism to voice his worry about metaethical relativism's prospects for satisfying the project of internal accommodation. As my brief introduction to Brandt's view demonstrated, however, there are more charitable interpretations of metaethical relativism available. For instance, the problem becomes much less serious if we interpret the two claims under discussion as a metaethical relativist would: "Eating meat is morally permissible according to standard X" and "Eating meat is morally forbidden according to standard Y."

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[95] Wright (2003), "On Being in a Quandary," p. 450.
[96] Ibid., p. 451.

Second, and relatedly, when the claims are understood in this way, it is easy to locate a genuine dispute at the second-order level. That is, the real dispute concerns, not simply the content of the first-order judgment regarding what is permissible or forbidden, but more deeply, which second-order standard of moral conduct we have most reason to accept as authoritative—X or Y. This is principle$_2$-conflict. Furthermore, we can also locate a simple *practical* dispute over *what to do*. Thus, even though they are appealing to distinct moral standards, the disputants are engaging each other on the practical subject of which actions one ought to perform and which attitudes one ought to foster.

Third, despite Wright's contention, the most pressing worry about normative relativism lies not simply in the problem of accounting for disputes of inclination in minimally truth-apt discourses. Rather, what is most troublesome about indexical normative relativism is the fact that, as Scanlon notes, "certain moral judgments seem to us clearly true and important…[and] relativism is a threat in so far as it would force us to withdraw those judgments, or would undermine their claim to importance."[97] This worry is precisely the one to which my objection to Timmons' view appealed—the lack of justification for selecting a particular second-order standard threatens to undermine the importance attributed to those standards in general.

Furthermore, if we hold that an agent is only subject to the demands she thinks she is subject to, as indexical normative relativism would have it, then we may feel unjustified in making demands on her that she does not recognize. But there are certain obvious demands that we think every plausible moral theory must include, such as those forbidding the torturing of children for fun. In so far as indexical normative relativism would force us to keep mum with respect to those central and obvious moral

[97] Scanlon (2001), p. 148.

requirements,[98] it prevents the satisfaction of internal accommodation. But it is the project of those advocating benign relativism—"relativism that can be accepted without undermining the judgments to which it applies"[99]—to demonstrate that there is indeed a successful alternative to indexical normative relativism.

III. Benign Relativism[100]

Philippa Foot defends a version of moderate metaethical relativism that she takes to be benign. Foot begins by establishing an analogy between morality on the one hand, and judgments of beauty and other matters of taste on the other. Key aesthetic concepts, she notes, work normally, i.e. attain a sort of objectivity and are truth-apt, only in a community "where there are shared reactions."[101] But when this shared foundation is left behind—say, in discussing matters of taste with one from another culture with different aesthetic sensibilities—employing terms like 'right' and 'wrong'[102] seems to make little sense. Of course, one can still use these terms in ordinary discourse; but without the presupposition of some common standards, terms like 'right' and 'wrong', 'true' and 'false', are not used *substantially,*[103] since there is not enough agreement or, as Wright would have it, 'discipline', to make those terms sufficiently meaningful for discussing

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[98] We would keep mum because indexical normative relativism would say that those requirements are binding on us only because we think they are binding on us, and so those requirements are not binding on others if those others do not think they are binding on them. We may protest, on the other hand, out of prudential concern for ourselves or our loved ones, by trying to persuade others to accept our moral outlook.

[99] Scanlon (2001), p. 150.

[100] My treatment of the issues in this section is influenced by Scanlon (2001) and Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), Chapter 8: Relativism.

[101] Philippa Foot, "Moral Relativism," The Lindley Lecture, University of Kansas, 1978. Reprinted in Carson and Moser (2001), p. 188.

[102] Perhaps this is more clearly stated by employing their aesthetic equivalents, such as 'beautiful' and 'ugly'.

[103] Cf. Bernard Williams, "The Truth in Relativism," in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 132-43. 'Substantially' is equivalent to 'objectively'.

aesthetic matters in an intercultural context. Local, i.e. relativized, truth is the only sort of truth available in these 'undisciplined' contexts.

In extending the analogy to morality for the purpose of defending a moderate metaethical relativism, the task then becomes to discover some sort of minimal standard shared across a number of moral theories in order to demonstrate that there is some non-local substantive truth—that is, to demonstrate that truth is not relativized only to particular second-order standards. This task can be accomplished, Foot argues, by examining both the purpose of morality and the related issues of basic human needs that exist across cultures and times. Foot writes,

> There is a great deal that all men have in common. All need affection, the cooperation of others, a place in a community, and help in trouble. It isn't true to suppose that human beings can flourish without these things—being isolated, despised or embattled, or without courage or hope.[104]

Hence, it is not the case that just any set of consistent and action-guiding principles can properly be called a morality; the principles must meet this minimal standard of coordinating behavior in a way that promotes human flourishing.[105] The sorts of considerations Foot lists above help constitute the "definitional criteria" that limit the content of anything that can properly be called a morality. The notion of definitional criteria connects nicely to our earlier observation that some first-order judgments are truth-apt because a number of different second-order judgments will converge in agreeing on how to evaluate some act, character, or state of affairs.

For example, a Kantian, a consequentialist, and a Buddhist will likely all agree that, ceteris paribus, murder is morally wrong. Although their second-order explanations

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[104] Foot (2001), pp. 195-6.
[105] Martha Nussbaum defends a similar position in "Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach," in Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (eds.), *The Quality of Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 242-69. Reprinted in Carson and Moser (2001), pp. 199-225.

for murder's wrongness are incompatible, their first-order judgments that it *is* wrong share identical content. If we can isolate several general considerations related to human well-being[106] that make up these definitional starting points, then we will have the basis for articulating a core set of moral principles or commitments whose truth is non-local because it is asserted by all moralities. And if we have a prima facie plausible case for benign relativism, then we can avoid the negative implications Wright fears from indexical normative relativism, which implies an "anything goes" understanding of morality. Even if we can successfully articulate certain core moral commitments, however, we will still have a genuine form of relativism, since, as Scanlon notes, "These definitional starting-points may underdetermine the content of morality. There may be 'contingent principles' on which different sets of standards could differ while still being fully entitled to be called moral standards."[107] Hence, once we have determined that several particular standards are genuinely *moral* standards because they satisfy the definitional criteria, there will be no more we can say about one standard being true and another false.

It is important to remind ourselves, however, that it is not only the entailment of different contingent principles that distinguishes different second-order judgments; it is also, and relatedly, the account each gives about what matters morally and why. The content of the contingent principles will, in turn, depend on the structure of and reasons provided by the second-order account. The contingent principles are clearly those that

[106] Saying that definitional starting points are constituted by considerations "related to human well-being" should not be interpreted as meaning that every morality must have human well-being as its ultimate focus, for many religious moralities do not strictly share that aim. Rather, it should be interpreted as a weaker, and somewhat vague, claim about how morality must recognize and give central (though not necessarily ultimate) weight to the satisfaction of various human needs. Problems arise, we will see, because different moralities include different scopes of individuals as morally considerable.
[107] Scanlon (2001), p. 152.

are most likely to be the subject of conflict and—to link the present discussion explicitly to Wright's account—we may think of them as most prone to vagueness and the experience of a quandary. Contingent principles are likely ones that concern contentious issues such as abortion, euthanasia, the moral status of non-human animals and of spatially and temporally distant humans, as well as certain perfectionist ideals. There is no wide agreement as to the permissibility of actions involved in these debates. While discussion of these difficult issues is sure to arouse passions in some whose second-order judgments lead them to view certain contingent principles as obvious because they follow directly from them,[108] it is just as likely to be met with ambivalence or cautious, limited endorsement by reflective agents whose second-order judgments do not lead to one determinate conclusion with respect to the issue in question. We may think those in the latter group are apt for experiencing quandaries.[109]

IV. Prospects for Accommodation

The benign relativist view has interesting parallels with Wright's view, though it also differs in several ways. Benign relativism would maintain that many first-order judgments are truth-apt because they meet the relevant syntactical and disciplinary constraints, where the discipline is provided by the agreement guaranteed by definitional criteria. Furthermore, benign relativism maintains that there is a large range of judgments—namely, those regarding contingent principles—with respect to which

[108] Some will perhaps have such a strong commitment to a contingent principle that they will not view it as contingent, despite the degree of disagreement surrounding it, and will instead lobby for its inclusion as a core principle. These people would view their disputants as exhibiting a sort of moral blindness for failing to endorse a moral proposition that seems, to them, obviously central.

[109] Quandaries, remember, are relativized to individual thinkers, so what may cause a quandary for one thinker need not cause a quandary for another thinker whose second-order judgments entail a definite answer to the moral question in dispute.

disagreement can be blameless. These two features would count in favor of Wright accepting the view. If Wright and Timmons were to concede that their accounts lead to relativism and then agree to endorse a benign version of relativism, however, they would then have to admit that contingent principles are not truth-apt because they do not exhibit sufficient discipline.[110] This admission would constitute a heavy blow for Timmons' theory in particular, since his framework does not provide the tools for distinguishing between the truth and untruth (a category including both falsity and indeterminacy) of assertions made from the engaged perspective.

The concession would also prevent Timmons' theory from benefiting from accepting benign relativism in the following way. Along the lines I pursued in Chapter Two, we must now consider whether benign relativism has the effect of undermining the importance one takes one's moral commitments to have. We have established that the definitional criteria that are the hallmark of benign relativism underdetermine an extensive part of the content of the various standards that qualify as 'moral.' Hence, both endorsing a particular second-order standard and accepting benign relativism "would require us to accept the idea that other, opposing judgments are equally correct and that there is no question of truth between our standards and the ones reflected in these judgments."[111]

While much of Wright's and Timmons' concerns revolve around how we understand the semantic import of moral discourse, the present point has more to do with the global threat relativism poses to how we understand the justification we have for embracing and attributing value to the standards we employ in coming to our moral

[110] More specifically, contingent principles are not truth apt in a non-local, substantive way. They are, of course, truth-apt relative to the moral standard to which they implicitly appeal.
[111] Scanlon (2001), p. 154.

judgments, when no set of standards can be shown to be objectively better than all others. These issues are separable conceptually but, as I have argued in Chapter Two with respect to Timmons' theory, are not wholly divorced from one another practically; one's understanding of whether relativism undermines the importance she can legitimately attach to her own standards will affect how she understands the meaning and weight of the moral claims she asserts.

In making a second-order judgment, one is deciding what matters most morally and why, and hence is deciding which considerations to award the unique weight that marks moral authority. But benign relativism concomitantly asks that one realize that the moral standard to which one awards this authority is not objectively privileged over other moral standards. So, in a problem analogous to the one I sketched for Timmons in the previous chapter, the agent is again placed in a situation where she must take certain contingent moral principles (entailed by her standard) as overriding and at the same time admit that there is no objective reason to award special weight to these particular contingent principles.

This worry may present itself either as a skepticism that those who make different second-order judgments could really have as good a reason for them as one does for her own second-order judgments (owing to one's confidence that her own moral standard is most reasonable), or, as I have been characterizing it, as a skepticism about one's own justification for taking her particular second-order judgments and the contingent principles they entail as overriding. Scanlon suggests that the former type of skepticism can be avoided if, when faced with an interpersonal second-order conflict, "we accept the substantive evaluative judgment that both ways of life are worthy of respect and

adherence."[112] But this suggestion is apt to prove unconvincing in many cases, for there is nothing in the definitional criteria to guarantee this sort of tolerance towards other moral standards, and it seems especially unlikely if one is faced with a disputant whose standard entails a number of contingent principles that are incompatible with one's own. Thus, accepting benign relativism does not substantially benefit Timmons' theory, since it merely moves the problem of justifying one's acceptance of a moral standard into a different conceptual framework, leaving the project of internal accommodation unsatisfied.

What, then, are Wright's prospects for success in accepting benign relativism? There are two main problems for Wright, the second of which may prove fatal to his prospects for salvaging his theory by incorporating benign relativism. The first problem is this. It is not entirely clear where the boundaries lie between core and contingent principles. Put another way, it is not clear how inclusive are the definitional starting points.[113] A purported benefit of employing definitional criteria is that one is not forced to accept the unattractive extreme metaethical relativist position, which would prevent one from saying that even those actions which seem most obviously wrong are *truly* morally wrong. Definitional criteria limit what counts as a morality by granting non-local, substantive truth to certain standards that give central weight to human flourishing and well-being.

One of the difficulties with this concept is that there are a number of ways to understand "human flourishing" and to explain what sorts of actions, policies and attitudes support it, and all of these ways appear to be based upon arguments that already

[112] Ibid., p. 160.
[113] Scanlon puts the point by noting that it is unclear "how much is determined by the criteria internal to the concept of morality, and how much room is left for relativism." Scanlon (2001), p. 153.

presuppose some substantive moral commitments. One matter we must settle in order to determine what human flourishing consists in requires us to specify whether we ought to award the greatest weight to promoting the interests of humans (and perhaps other species) as individuals, as groups, or as a whole. This question is a variant of the question whether morality ought to focus on the well-being of individuals, of particular communities, or of everyone considered impartially.

Consider fundamentalist religious groups that suppress the freedoms of women. This practice is clearly antithetical to the flourishing of the women (both as individuals and as a group) in these communities, but it may nevertheless promote the preservation of that religious community as a whole. Though most people in the West take it as fundamental that the locus of moral value is the individual, this assumption is not shared universally. Even in the West, some communitarians think the preservation of their particular way of life trumps the interests of particular individuals in their communities.[114]

So, should the freedom to choose how one lives and the community of which one is a member be considered a core moral principle? Some people would accept this claim as true and others would either deny it outright or argue that it is a contingent matter. The proponent of benign relativism will have to do a good deal more work in either specifying the concept of flourishing or in explaining how we ought to deal with the ostensibly large degree of vagueness in determining which principles are constitutive of definitional criteria, and hence, which moral assumptions we can take as shared in order to posit certain moral claims as non-locally, substantially true. Until this matter is dealt

[114] Or perhaps, they think that the way of life is in the interests of every group member, though not every member recognizes it.

with successfully, benign relativism cannot be considered to have satisfied the project of internal accommodation, for it does not provide a useful framework unless one can determine which principles are core, and thus 'true', and which are just contingent.

The second, likely fatal objection claims that benign relativism cannot deal with the first problem of further specifying the content of the definitional criteria. Benign relativism cannot complete this task, this second objection runs, because there *are no* definitional criteria. That is, there is no set of moral judgments or core moral truths upon which every system legitimately called a morality would agree. Instead, morality must be understood minimalistically. On this view, moralities are simply sets of practical principles intended to govern the actions and attitudes of people and the interactions between people. This minimal definition of 'morality' provides no guarantee that any of the diverse types of normative injunctions that a morality might include—even if one grants that all moralities employ a variant of the concept, "flourishing"—will be compatible with those of all other moralities.

Nietzschean morality, for instance, shows an eagerness to sacrifice countless "flies in the marketplace" to make possible the Übermensch, the realization of whom would justify any number of perceived "harms" or "injustices." Or, consider a morality in a feudal society, which could provide a sophisticated account of why peasants have no moral worth, so that a member of the ruling class could endorse the proposition, "It is permissible to kill people for mere entertainment," a proposition which, at first glance, it seemed no morality could license.

Objectors will be quick to argue that there must be a distinction between Nietzschean and feudal systems of practical principles on the one hand, and genuine

moralities on the other, because the former do not exhibit feature F, where F is a definitional criterion that appeals to the fundamental equality of people, or to the inherent wrongness of causing pain intentionally and needlessly, or to any other of a number of possibilities. But we should be careful to examine the structure of this objector's claim and to situate it in the preceding discussion.

If first-order moral judgments concern the content of moral claims—which acts are right or wrong, obligatory or forbidden—and second-order judgments concern which moral standards we have most reason to endorse, then this objector is making a third-order judgment about which sorts of commitments must be included in a set of practical principles in order for it to count as a morality. The structure of a third-order judgment is something like the following:

> The set of practical principles, S, is a morality ↔ S contains a central commitment to feature F.

But notice that there will be just as much potential for third-order conflict as there is for first- and second-order conflict. There will be disagreements over what features are necessary for a morality, and those disagreements will stem from substantive disagreements about what features are most morally important.

Thus, though it first appeared that moderate metaethical (benign) relativism could salvage Wright's and Timmons' theories by admitting some objective moral truths while maintaining a commitment to irrealism, if the preceding line of reasoning is on target, then it has now been demonstrated that moderate metaethical relativism collapses into extreme metaethical relativism. If there are no judgments or commitments on which all systems of practical principles deserving of the title 'morality' agree—because there is third-order conflict over what systems of practical principles are in fact deserving of the

title—then there are no definitional criteria. And if there are no definitional criteria, then there is no distinction between moderate and extreme metaethical relativism. This means that Wright and Timmons are left with a dilemma: either they must accept extreme metaethical relativism and thereby fail to satisfy the project of internal accommodation, or they must substantially revise their theories so that they avoid relativism. If they choose the latter horn of the dilemma, I hope the preceding discussion has provided a strong case that minimal truth may in fact be too minimal to play a part in accomplishing this task.