

Replies to Commentators

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As is predictable, several comments raise issues about our characterization of relativism. We will focus on these first before discussing Paul Boghossian's comments, which focus on one particular argument of the book concerning Gilbert Harman's version of moral relativism.

Max Kölbel maintains that it is 'an old story' that anti-relativists define relativism in such a way that its features cannot consistently be held together, while it is unclear whether any relativist ever claimed that all those features must be held together. In response, it is important to stress that, as we say in Ch. 1, we do try to give a unified account of relativism by outlining a cluster of core features that we think are central to the characterization of all instances of relativism. To achieve this end, in researching the book, we first went through an extensive survey of positions that, throughout the history of Western philosophy, have been presented as or considered to be relativist. The six features that we identify as central to the notion of relativism stem from this survey of the philosophical literature. The results of the survey have been presented in Ch. 2 as well as in discussions of the specific varieties of relativism Chs. 3–9. Our choices are not ad hoc or arbitrary, nor are they the result of a preconceived notion of relativism. Most importantly, they are not selected to make sure that they cohere with one another. Indeed, as is apparent from the last chapter of the book, we do not think that, as things stand, a coherent formulation of these features has been provided. Of course, we may be wrong about these features, but then we should be shown to be factually wrong in our understanding of a significant number of views in the history of Western philosophy.

Two of our critics focus on Equal Validity (EV) and Non-neutrality (NN).

(EV) Different values of x , determined on the basis of different values of a parameter y , though incompatible, are equally valid – that is, admissible, or true.

(NN) There is non-neutral criterion of evaluation available for adjudicating between the plurality of different values of the parameter y , that determine different and incompatible values of x .

Eduardo Perez-Navarro, for instance, thinks that EV is not a necessary feature of relativism. In his view, relativism does not require saying that all points of view are on par, but only that everyone is right 'from their own point of view'. John MacFarlane, moreover, thinks that not many theorists have embraced it, at least in the form we present it.

It is understandable that people vested in defending relativism may opt for ditching one problematic feature like EV, or seriously revising it.¹ Yet, we are not vested in defending relativism. Our book – and general outlook – is aimed at *understanding* this notion and at analysing prominent instances of it, *as dispassionately and even-handedly as possible*. That is, to the extent possible, by neither presupposing the truth of relativism nor of any opposite view. Moreover, it is a fact that many prominent commentators on relativism, including Boghossian, Kölbel and Crispin Wright, have considered EV to be a key feature of relativism and part and parcel of its overall philosophical motivations. Thus, dropping EV or changing its definition will not be in line with the methodology of attempting to capture the key features and variations of relativism as they appear in the most relevant and influential literature on the topic.

In line with the above methodology of the book and our approach to the topic of relativism, we think that even if were ditching EV, as Perez-Navarro proposes, or weakening it, as MacFarlane suggests, it would be worth trying to see if we can provide a model that accommodates all six conditions. Maybe that will require revising the underlying logic, or some other interesting philosophical move. Doing that would also move the debate at the meta-philosophical level and would at least make for a new avenue for research.

But let us look at the individual arguments by the panel of reviewers in greater detail.

Here is a reconstruction of Perez-Navarro's proposed relativist scenario to demonstrate that EV and NN are incompatible.

- (1) Alice: Abortion is morally wrong.
- (2) Beth: No, abortion is not morally wrong.
- (3) The relativist: Alice and Beth are both right, each according to their distinctive moral standard. (Principle of EV).

Perez-Navarro's objection: The relativist is making a non-neutral claim about truth or rightness. Therefore (3) violates NN.

Perez-Navarro thinks that the relativist should take her own standard into account when deciding whether Alice and Beth have said something true or false. This is clearly right. But the relativist's claim is also that truth is relative to each disputant's framework or standard and, given that, both Alice and Beth are right. Whether such position is sustainable should not decide the issue at this stage.

1 Notice that we do not take disagreement to be a necessary condition for relativism, contrary to what McFarlane seems to suggest in his comments. We rather talk of incompatibility and distinguish between weak and strong forms of it. We take relativism of distance to involve incompatibility in a weak sense, that does not entail disagreement.

Let us spell this out in more detail. Perez-Navarro objects to the claim that EV follows from NN (together with the other four conditions). Let us go over our argument for that claim. Our argument is that being right from one's own point of view can sustain relativism only if it is agreed that all diverse and incompatible points of view are on par. If there were only one point of view, or only one correct point of view, or if there were merely contextual dependence – one (set of) standard(s) holds in one context while a different (set of) standard(s) holds in a different one – it would be difficult to see why a position would count as relativist.²

NN holds that any verdict, in the relevant areas of discourse, is always 'committed' to a standard, to a perspective, to a moral/epistemic system/framework etc. For instance, when we pass judgement on sushi being tasty as well as on the standards that licence such judgement, we do not do that 'from nowhere', but always from a specific perspective. Yet, if we are relativists, we should also *thereby* recognize that since there is no neutral standpoint from which a standard/perspective can be deemed correct/incorrect, all these standpoints are on par (with the first-order judgements they command), at least in principle. Hence, as we state in the book, EV *follows* from NN. In short, it is inherent in relativism a form of *even-handedness*: each judgement is issued from a perspective and there are multiple and incompatible ones, which are all on par, at least in principle. Of course, each of us will occupy one such perspective and will go from there, but it is part of the relativist credo that – if reflective – one will have to acknowledge the parity of other perspectives, even though incompatible with one's own. This is also the beauty of relativism: if correct, it would teach us that no matter how committed or vested we are, in the relevant areas of discourse, we are not thereby right or wrong absolutely, or necessarily righter than those who think otherwise. Thus, it teaches us a form of modesty; as well as of dispassionate outlook onto the origins of some of our deep-seated attitudes. Of course, it remains a contested issue, which areas of discourse – if any – are amenable to a relativist treatment. If it is plausible to accept this view when we are dealing with taste and etiquette, it is much more difficult if not pernicious when we are dealing with morality and empirical knowledge.

Perez-Navarro, contrary to us, thinks that even without EV one can still be a relativist, as long as one remains committed to the other core features of relativism, including 'Non-absolutism, Dependence, and Multiplicity, which help us become aware that there are points of view different from

2 In passing, and in response to MacFarlane, this is also why we consider Harman's position not just a case of contextualism but of relativism. Also note that, contrary to what McFarlane suggests in his comments, a contextualist like Michael Williams will not hold that epistemic standards are all on par. When we do science one standard is privileged. A contextualist like DeRose will likewise consider a high-stake context privileged when doing philosophy. Thus, contexts, with their respective standards, are insulated from one another.

our own, and that there is a point of contingency to the views that we hold. If relativism is characterized by a tolerant stance, these commitments are all we need to obtain it'. Our worry is that this watered-down position makes relativism indistinguishable from other positions in the neighborhood, for instance perspectivism and pluralism. The difference between relativism and these other views is not trivial nor simply a matter of semantics. A great many philosophers (see Ch. 2 of our book) have endorsed one of these weaker views, or both, while rejecting the label 'relativist'. We need some demarcating lines separating these philosophical positions and the debates that go with them. EV is that demarcation line. So, an important question for Perez-Navarro is whether he would feel more comfortable in locating himself in the pluralist camp.

Perez-Navarro also claims that we can have faultless disagreement without EV. For faultlessness does not require holding that *other views* are right/correct/true, but only *not at fault with respect to the context from which they are issued*. (Kölbel talks of their being 'flawless' at some point; some other philosophers, like Wright, may call them 'blameless' or even 'warrantedly assertible'). If put this way, it becomes easy to see that faultlessness here need not imply truth but may well depend on a weaker and somewhat epistemically constrained notion. Thus, faultless disagreement would not be a case where people holding opposite views are both right – i.e., they both judge/assert truly opposite/incompatible contents. They are just both blameless: each of them is operating correctly given their informational state or attitude. Yet, nothing seems to prevent defeasibility in that case and therefore arriving at the view that at least one of the parties at the disagreement is, after all, not judging truly. If so, at most one party would be right or correct, even though we may not presently know which one is right/wrong, while knowing that neither is at fault (in this attenuated, epistemically constrained sense). No relativistic view would follow from such an understanding of faultless disagreement. It would just follow that, given our present state of information, we may yet not know which of these opposite views is correct.

To preserve a stronger notion of faultless disagreement and therefore something more readily recognizable as relativism, then, something like MacFarlane's machinery needs to be in place with the distinction between context of use and of assessment. For that machinery does not make play with notions weaker than truth. Yet, as we know, when the context of assessment kicks in, then contents turn out to be true (or false) absolutely. That is, judged from A's point of view, for whom sushi is not tasty, B is judging falsely that sushi is tasty, say. In which case, the promised even-handedness is once more lost. Or so it seems to us.

MacFarlane too is sceptical of our characterization of relativism, which he thinks tries to capture too many strands in the big tent of relativism and

delineate it with a set of essential conditions (Non-absolutism, Dependence, Multiplicity, Incompatibility and Equal Validity) which necessarily have to be formulated extremely vaguely. ‘Relativism’, in the sense, used in our book, ‘might better be thought of as a family resemblance term’, which would comprise contextualism. MacFarlane offers a narrower characterization of relativism, where EV is replaced with a weaker notion with the central features: (a) that parties genuinely disagree and (b) they are both correct. On this conception of relativism even Protagoras, the widely acknowledged progenitor of relativism in Western philosophy turns out to be a contextualist and not a relativist. MacFarlane’s attempt at a narrow definition of relativism may capture some specific view of relativism, namely that of John MacFarlane, but in our view renders discussions of the topic far less interesting or fruitful than it has been in its long history. He also accuses of us of inconsistency, because we spend ten pages in Ch. 9 of the book, ‘discussing Gilbert Harman’s moral relativism, which is explicitly cashed out as a form of contextualism (229–38)’. But as our debate with Boghossian below shows, there is little doubt, on the part of most defenders and critics, that Harman is a moral relativist; and the key point, for us, is whether his version of relativism is tenable.

Interestingly, MacFarlane writes, ‘I have preferred to use the term “relativism” more narrowly, for views that allow two judgments to disagree while both being correct, in some objective sense (and not just in the epistemic sense of being justified or warranted). This characterization excludes contextualism, because contextualism is a way of denying that apparently conflicting judgments really disagree. But it also excludes views that posit fundamental conceptual incommensurability, making both agreement and disagreement impossible’.

Now notice that this formulation comes very close to the conditions we label ‘strong incompatibility’ and ‘Equal Validity’. Moreover, in a side discussion of Kölbel’s position, MacFarlane remarks that dependence on a standard – which is a way of fulfilling dependence – should be further specified, for we may assess an utterance based on the standards operative at the context of use or of assessment. Thus, we are left wondering where exactly we disagree: maybe over NN?

That would be surprising, though, for it seems part of MacFarlane’s view that different taste standards, for instance, are admissible and operative at different contexts of assessment, with no possibility of determining from a neutral perspective which one is correct. In contrast, if such a determination were possible, or if one standard were made to prevail on different ones, it is no longer clear that we would have anything like a relativist position. Rather, we would have a form of quasi-realism about taste, say, where there is one correct verdict determined by the prevailing standard.

Or perhaps we disagree about how to interpret EV – that is, while different standards are on par; and, based on them, parties are within their rights in re-

turning opposite verdicts over whether sushi is tasty, say, there is no context in which it would be correct – i.e. true – to judge *both* that sushi is tasty and that it is not. Yet this is *not* how we present EV. We simply say that it is both right to affirm that sushi is tasty and to deny it, where this is entirely compatible with, and it indeed demands in a sense that the correctness of both these claims depends on the fact that they are made with different gustatory standards in place.³ Then, gloss ‘correct’ as ‘true’ and you will have MacFarlane’s position. What we do add is that it is part of the relativist credo to insist that such parity should be appreciated by both committed and neutral parties alike if *they reflected on the matter*. Thus, suppose you love sushi: you will be committed to ‘sushi is tasty’, but you should also acknowledge that given different gustatory standards sushi may well not be tasty.

Turning now to some more detailed points. MacFarlane says that his account of disagreement in terms of preclusion of joint accuracy trivially respects the aboutness condition – i.e. the condition according to which the acceptance of incompatible contents should concern the same circumstances – because ‘taste assertions do not concern any *specific* taste’. True, according to MacFarlane, there are multiple and incompatible taste standards. Yet, any truth-verdict is issued from a specific standard. That is, the standard of taste, whichever it is, must be fixed to say that a given taste assertion is true (or false) and that the opposite one is not (given that standard), so that not both can be accurately held. Thus, opposite taste assertions not only do *not* all concern the same circumstances in the trivial sense but must ‘straddle standards’ and be incorporated within one’s own standards, as it were, to turn out not to be jointly accurate thus giving rise to disagreement.

Connectedly, MacFarlane also claims that we are not keeping in mind the distinction between disagreement in the activity and in the state sense when we claim that his view does not make the right predictions. For we claim that once opposite taste verdicts come to light, a relativist should predict that parties could go on disputing, but their dispute would not be *rationally* sustainable, since their opposite verdicts are issued from *different* and irreconcilable standards of taste. To put it in terms of the aboutness condition: those opposite contents are held at different circumstances – i.e. relative to different taste standards. It is only by insisting on preclusion of joint accuracy, which, as we just saw, relies on the problematic move of straddling standards, that MacFarlane can say that there is still a disagreement in the state sense. By our lights, in contrast, since that move is suspect *particularly from a relativist point of view*, since the verdicts are issued at

3 Since we formulate EV to encompass several ways of cashing it out, we do not hold that it necessarily demands that these opposite verdicts are based on different standards. If multimundialism were correct, they could be issued from different moral ‘worlds’.

different circumstances, it is not at all clear that there is still a disagreement in the state sense.

MacFarlane also charges against us that we underestimate ‘the degree to which one can change another’s tastes through discussion, by calling attention to features, drawing analogies, and so on’. This is primarily an empirical question and not one to be resolved based on contrasting intuitions or life-experiences. What at least some empirical studies show, however, is that people can influence the taste preferences of others not through rational reasoning as outlined by MacFarlane but as an empathic reaction in the context of shared meals (Inaba et al. 2018). But the main criticism of MacFarlane here is that we do not pay enough attention to the distinction between disagreeing and disputing. MacFarlane argues, we think correctly, that disputing, as an act of engagement in argumentation, may come to an end while disagreement continues. But disputations are not always active. The fact that, like MacFarlane, we may no longer engage in active *disputations* with creationists does not show that we do not *dispute* (in the dictionary sense of disagree) with them.

Kölbel too is critical of the aboutness condition. His view, however, is that the resulting account of disagreement that we utilize to criticize his position thereby turns out to be a technical notion. By contrast, we do not think it is technical, but rather quite intuitive and commonsensical. Similar considerations are relevant to Kölbel’s injunction ‘to avoid the false impression that truth-relativism involves the view that the ordinary truth-predicate is not monadic’. Relativism, in our view, would lose much of its interest if it was relegated to formal semantics only and became irrelevant to the application of ordinary truth predicates.

Bearing this fundamental disagreement about the scope of relativism about truth in mind, consider the following case: what may look like an easy side of a mountain to climb given your excellent climbing abilities may look like a very difficult climb for a novice. That is, while the mountain is the same, the conversation is about the same side of the mountain, and we are thinking about the same possible world (paradigmatically, the actual one), subjects’ climbing abilities may differ, and thus may give rise to the following exchange:

A: ‘That side of the mountain is not easy to climb’.

B: ‘No, that side of the mountain is easy to climb’.

Do the parties disagree? Surely one affirms what the other denies. In that sense, there is an *appearance* of disagreement. Yet, their verdicts are issued from different perspectives/climbing abilities and there is an obvious sense in which A and B do *not* disagree with one another. Indeed, once engaged in a conversation, they may easily rephrase their apparent disagreement as follows:

A: ‘Of course, given your expertise, that side of the mountain is easy to climb. Alas, I am not as good as you’.

B: ‘I understand. You are right, if you don’t think you can do it, and that it would be too difficult for you to climb it, it’s better for you not to try’.

Kölbel is aware, at least implicitly, that his ‘intuitive’ notion of disagreement is not that intuitive after all. For he then goes on repeatedly to phrase the alleged disagreement between Clara and Mimi regarding Jaffa cakes in terms of *seeming*. He writes (emphasis added):

Clara *seems* to believe something, and Mimi *seems* to reject what Clara believes. There *seems* to be a [proposition] *p* such that Clara believes that *p* and Mimi believes that not-*p*. Nevertheless, none of them is committing any mistake: their beliefs are correct. The simple theory can accept that things are as they *seem*.

Yet, the simple theory is too simple: it considers the assertion of opposite contents sufficient for disagreement. The example of the expert and the novice regarding climbing teaches us that the circumstances – that is, the standards or perspectives determined by one’s climbing abilities from which those opposite contents are asserted – are relevant to whether we are facing a disagreement, after all.

Finally, let us turn to Boghossian. Boghossian’s target is a key argument in Ch. 9 of our book against Gilbert Harman’s version of moral conventionalism and relativism. Here is Boghossian’s reconstruction of the core of our argument:

Premiss: To establish a moral convention you need prior access to moral concepts and knowledge of how to apply them.

Bridging Claim: If Premiss is true, then ethical value could not be the result of pure agreement between parties.

Boghossian casts doubt on the truth of Premiss, but argues that even if we granted it, it would remain unclear how the anti-Harman conclusion follows.

We will not challenge Boghossian’s reconstruction but try to respond to this dual criticism.

Boghossian’s point against Premiss hinges on the understanding of moral convention. He believes, with Harman, that having societal norms as a convention involves establishing ‘a certain kind of *practice*, rather than a matter of belief or acceptance’. Moral conventions, more specifically, do not require holding some moral propositions as true.

To begin with, this seems like a rather unusual take on what a convention is. Conventions, or at least the social ones, which are the relevant kind here, involve agreements in certain practices. So, to this extent Boghossian, and Harman, are right, but it is strange to think that agreement in action does

not presuppose agreement in belief and the acceptance of some propositions as true. Let us take the most famous of social conventions, driving on the left or right side of the road (Lewis 1969: 6). Some arbitrary, conscious or unconscious, decision by some of our ancestors has resulted in the practice of driving on one, rather than the other, the side of the road, but even this clearly non-moral convention presupposes true belief about what counts as the left or right side of the road and a knowledge of roads, travel, directions etc. Without such prior jointly held beliefs, the practice of this convention will not get started and if it haphazardly did, it will break down very quickly. What goes for driving conventions also goes for the more complex cases of moral conventions.

Boghossian argues that moral beliefs do not need to come in as explicit conventions, because they can be instilled wordlessly, e.g. by sanctioning those who violate a norm, by showing negative emotions towards the transgressors etc.

However, the regularities that bring about a convention depend on the existence of a common knowledge and set of beliefs, some antecedent to the establishment of the convention and some subsequent to them. That knowledge involves beliefs about what the subject of the regularities that make a convention are, what counts as instances of conformity to or violation of them and what makes such conformity possible. Such common knowledge includes knowledge of the content of our practices and such content is not part of the practices but informs them and in that sense is a precondition of them. The more interesting question is what type of knowledge is required for establishing and perpetuating the practices that are core to any moral convention. This central point is at the heart of Boghossian's second, more substantial, criticism of our argument, the argument against what he calls the Bridging Claim.

Boghossian provides the following reconstruction of our claim

- (a) Having access to the moral concepts, and knowledge of how to apply them, involves having some beliefs about what is in the extension of 'right' and 'wrong',
- (b) So, believing some moral claims is *antecedent* to establishing moral norms.
- (c) So, not *all* moral claims could have been established by convention. Some moral claims would be presupposed by the very process of establishing others.

While we are not sure if this is exactly how we would have expanded on our rather truncated argument, we think the reconstruction is close enough to our position for us to use it as the starting point to this dialogue with Boghossian.

Boghossian questions (a) in his reconstruction and asks, 'why would having the concept of 'wrong' involve having some beliefs about how to apply it?'. In responding to his own question Boghossian seems to accept that, at

least on some meta-semantic views, having moral concepts would involve having moral beliefs and these beliefs will have to come prior to the establishment of moral conventions. One such possible scenario, he agrees, is that these concepts and beliefs are hard wired into our brain. He then argues that

if they were acquired by being hard-wired into us by evolutionary processes, for example, that would not by itself imply that anti-realism about morality was false. To say that we are so hard-wired that we can't help but believe certain moral claims is not the same as saying that there are objective moral values, still less ones that are universally binding.

Boghossian here seems to change the subject as the main point of our argument against Harmanian moral relativism is not to establish that there are objective moral values or that all forms of moral anti-realism are wrong, but that moral conventions cannot be the sole basis of moral thinking. It is, for instance, possible that human beings have shared core moral values because this is the best way to facilitate social life, with its clear evolutionary advantages, without committing to the objective truth of these values. One can reject conventionalism and social constructionism, as we have done, without committing to the idea that there are 'objective values out there'. Moreover, the ineluctable diversity of moral values, there being many different moral frameworks none of which is more correct than the other (Harman 1996: 5) is the starting point and the key motivation for Harman's relativism. Accepting that some core values are shared by all would not allow for the required diversity of moral *frameworks*, even if it allows for different interpretations of the core common elements of these frameworks.

But Boghossian has a stronger argument against us. According to him, 'it's importantly *not* true that it is a condition of establishing a system of moral norms by convention that we need to presuppose any particular moral belief, even if we admit that constructionists must have prior access to the central moral concepts in order to any constructing of norms.'

This is in part because,

moral concepts, at their core, are mere devices for a certain distinctive kind of praise or blame and do not incorporate substantive views about what, if anything, falls under their extensions. Thus, even if we conceded that conventionalists about morality need to have access to moral concepts to set up their conventions, that would leave room for *maximal* disagreement about which moral claims to establish and which to reject, at least as far as the limits imposed by our understanding of the relevant concepts is concerned. Thus, it would leave a social constructionist view of morality intact.

On our view, in contrast, we need to know the meaning of *morally right* / wrong to conventionally determine what actions count as such, unless a con-

vention were merely arbitrary. But this is not simply a matter of agreement in definitions of ‘morally right/wrong’ in the abstract, as it were, but also a matter of agreement about core applications or judgements. In fact, typically definitions codify the features that paradigmatic cases of being morally right/wrong are thought to share. Indeed, to explain the meaning, we often give examples of actions that paradigmatically count as morally right/wrong. For instance, if, upon reflection, while lucid and cognizant of all the relevant facts, you think that it is morally right/permissible to inflict torture on harmless creatures, and I do not, that shows that we do not agree about what counts as morally right/wrong to the point that we may not be agreeing about what those words mean, or about what concepts they express. For, we take it, distinctively moral blame is constitutively connected to the idea of harming others gratuitously.

Boghossian’s response to this line of thinking is to advocate a minimalist condition for the possession of central moral concepts. The non-negotiable minimal core of a moral concept, he argues ‘is its *normative role*—in the case of a positive concept, like “morally right,” its constitutive ties to praise, motivation and positive emotions; in the case of a negative concept, its constitutive ties to criticism, blame and resentment’.

Our concern with Boghossian’s minimalism is that it is not sufficient for picking up or characterizing *moral* concepts in comparisons with other normative concepts involving praise, blame etc. For instance, Boghossian’s minimalism cannot distinguish between moral norms and norms of etiquette or aesthetics, say. We equally criticize, blame and even resent people for making noise while sipping broth, or (at least in Italy) for wearing short socks, if male adults. By the same token, good manners and etiquette and a refined sense of taste come for praise and positive emotions.

Thus, the distinctiveness of the reactive attitude is moot: praise/blame, criticism and resentment as such do not seem enough to characterize reactive attitudes that are *distinctively moral*. More should be said about those attitudes, if they are ever to be enough to mark the contrast between right/wrong in the moral sense as opposed to any other evaluative sense. A minimalist approach is not sufficient even for those who agree with Wittgenstein’s (1961) view in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, that ‘morality and aesthetics are one’ and that, at bottom, they are identified by the same reactive attitudes of praise and blame and are such that if something is blameworthy for aesthetic reasons it would also reveal a lack in character and vice versa. The problem with this controversial view is that it involves not just identity in reactive attitudes but mutual entailment between offending the eye, say and displaying a lack in character. Thus, it does not do away with some more substantive account of where distinctively moral and aesthetic reactive attitudes and norms come from.

So, it seems that Boghossian, in defending Harman, may achieve a bare bones minimalism required for moral constructivism and conventionalism by blurring the distinction between moral and other types of norms and evaluations and we do not think this is the position he wishes to defend.

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