

Rorty and Moral Relativism

Christian B. Miller
Wake Forest University
millerc@wfu.edu

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Critics of Rorty's views on truth, objectivity, and value often take them to imply some form of untenable relativism.¹ While it would be worthwhile to investigate whether Rorty is in fact committed to what might be called *global relativism*, or relativism in most if not all domains of investigation, for our purposes in this paper we must proceed more selectively. By focusing on Rorty's view of moral objectivity, we can hopefully shed some new light on the now stale charge of Rortian relativism. In the process, we can also go quite a long way towards articulating what a Rortian approach to meta-ethics might look like.

I. Moral Relativism

Naturally there is not just one view which goes by the name of moral relativism (hereafter MR), but rather a whole family of widely divergent positions. Yet what they all typically share is a commitment to the following thesis:

- (1) Morality is relative to one or more moral frameworks.²

For our purposes, talk of moral frameworks can be understood loosely as follows:

- (2) For any set F, F is a *moral framework* just in case F is some set of moral standards or beliefs held by an individual, group, society, culture, religion, or tradition.³

Of course, even given this account of frameworks, thesis (1) remains uninformative. For what exactly does it mean for something to be relative to something else? And how can morality itself be relative to a moral framework?

The standard approach to addressing these questions has involved distinguishing between three forms of moral relativism: descriptive, normative, and meta-ethical.⁴ While the focus of this paper is on

the meta-ethical version of MR, a brief word should be said about the other two. As its name implies, descriptive MR purports to be making an empirical claim about the existence and extent of moral diversity and disagreement between moral agents. A particularly mild form of the view is the following:

(3) *Weak Descriptive Moral Relativism* =_{df.} There currently exist some moral agents A and B and moral frameworks M_1 and M_2 such that:

- (a) A accepts M_1 .
- (b) B accepts M_2 .
- (c) M_1 and M_2 are not logically equivalent.
- (d) A and B enter into moral disagreement(s) as a result of the divergent moral beliefs they have which arise from their particular moral frameworks.⁵

(3) is certainly a plausible view; one does not need to do extensive empirical investigation to recognize that some of our contemporary moral disagreements arise from divergent moral frameworks.⁶ Perhaps the only real controversy about descriptive MR arises when an attempt is made to gauge the *extent* of moral diversity.⁷

The existence of moral disagreement and divergent moral frameworks often serves as the basis for motivating serious consideration of both normative and meta-ethical forms of moral relativism. In contrast to the previous view, normative MR is formulated as an ethical position *within* first-order normative theory. More specifically, it seeks to address the question of what moral obligations, if any, an individual has towards those who do not share his or her particular moral framework.⁸ Thus normative MR typically presupposes the existence of genuine moral diversity, and hence the truth of at least some form of descriptive MR.

Like descriptive MR, normative MR encompasses an entire spectrum of views. One such position is the following:

(4) *Strong Normative Moral Relativism* =_{df.} For any moral agents A and B and moral frameworks M_1 and M_2 , if the following conditions obtain:

- (a) A accepts M_1 .

- (b) B accepts M_2 .
- (c) M_1 and M_2 are substantially different moral frameworks.

then it ought to be the case for A relative to M_1 that:

- (i) A never judges the moral behavior of B in light of M_1 , except in cases where M_1 and M_2 overlap.
- (ii) A never acts toward B in such a way as to bring B into conformity with M_1 .

Similarly for B relative to M_2 .⁹

So according to this view, individuals should exhibit a strong degree of tolerance towards any kind of behavior which arises as a result of the possession of divergent moral frameworks.¹⁰ And in general, what distinguishes normative MR is the adoption of a restrained attitude towards judging and interfering with those who do not share a particular moral outlook.

What bearing does the plausibility of this view have on the fate of *descriptive* MR? Very little, since clearly:

- (5) $\sim(\text{Descriptive MR} \Rightarrow \text{Normative MR})$.¹¹

The descriptive fact of moral divergence alone is not sufficient to determine what the best ethical response should be to that divergence. What about the opposite direction? In other words, is it the case that:

- (6) $(\text{Normative MR} \Rightarrow \text{Descriptive MR})$.

Here the entailment seems to go through. For suppose that even the weakest forms of descriptive MR were false. Then it would be the case that every individual accepts logically equivalent moral frameworks, and there would be no need for a principle of tolerance to handle divergent views.¹²

Let us now turn to what many take to be the most controversial and interesting form of moral relativism. Unlike its normative cousin, meta-ethical MR is not a first-order view within ethical theory, but rather a second-order view *about* ethical theory. Thus meta-ethical MR typically makes claims about

the nature of morality according to which, for example, there is no objective morality, every moral framework is no better or worse than any other, and the truth of moral statements is framework relative.¹³

In order to better situate the view, it is helpful to note what meta-ethical MR is supposed to stand against. Roughly, the opponent under attack is a certain kind of moral realist who thinks that there is a set of objective moral facts or properties which can serve as truth-makers for our moral claims. Thus on this view, ethical statements are true or false independently of what human beings happen to think about their truth values.¹⁴

It turns out to be incredibly difficult to formulate a version of meta-ethical MR that is both a substantive, controversial view in contemporary meta-ethics and that does not fall prey to certain intuitively compelling objections.¹⁵ Fortunately such a task need not occupy us here.¹⁶ For our purposes, it is sufficient to note that most any form of the view will have to accept something like the following theses:

(ME) *Framework Relativity Thesis*: For any moral agent A and moral statement S, if A accepts S then the truth value of S is fixed only by A's moral framework and any descriptive facts relevant to S.¹⁷

Objectivity Thesis: There are no objective moral facts or properties.¹⁸

The two theses in (ME) should be taken merely as rough formulations of the core commitments of meta-ethical moral relativism. Notice that each by itself would be insufficient in distinguishing the resulting view from other traditional meta-ethical positions. Thus the objectivity thesis is also compatible with various forms of error theory, constructivism, and non-cognitivism. Similarly, the framework relativity thesis is consistent both with moral facts being identical to descriptive facts, and with framework M being the objectively correct moral framework. So it is a thesis that moral realists could endorse as well.¹⁹

We can situate the meta-ethical form of MR in relation to the descriptive and normative views presented above. Fortunately the entailments are rather straightforward. For example, it is clearly false that:

(7) (Descriptive MR \Rightarrow Meta-ethical MR).

A realist could for instance argue that while there is an objective moral order, many human beings allow other considerations such as their desires and cultural beliefs to influence their capacities for recognizing that order.²⁰ Nor does it follow that:

(8) (Normative MR \Rightarrow Meta-ethical MR).

Again, moral realism might be true but as a contingent matter of fact human beings have poor epistemic access to the moral facts. In light of this, some might claim that the best ethical policy to adopt is one of tolerance and non-interference towards opposing moral frameworks.²¹ Similarly, the converse entailment,

(9) (Meta-ethical MR \Rightarrow Normative MR).²²

clearly does not hold either, although there might be a strong inclination to adopt normative MR if one thought that moral frameworks are mere individual or social constructions. Finally and perhaps most interestingly, it is a mistake to think that:

(10) (Meta-ethical MR \Rightarrow Descriptive MR).

For there might not be an objective moral order and yet as a contingent matter of fact there is universal endorsement of logically equivalent moral frameworks.

II. Rorty and (ME)

Given this admittedly brief account of the standard taxonomy for dividing up various positions which fall under the heading of moral relativism, let us now consider whether Rorty is a meta-ethical moral relativist. Here it is rather easy to see why one might think that he is. For in general he repeatedly insists that:

(R1) There are no objective facts or truths of any kind.²³

which straightforwardly entails:

(R2) There are no objective moral facts or truths.

For example, we are told that, '[t]ruth cannot be out there – cannot exist independently of the human mind.'²⁴ And again that, 'there is nothing beyond vocabularies which serves as a criterion of choice between them.'²⁵

Rorty's reasons for endorsing (R1) are part of a long and complex story about the history of modern philosophy and its commitment to certain ultimately misleading metaphysical and epistemological theses. While we shall not take the time to reconstruct Rorty's line of reasoning here, it is important to briefly mention three of the primary views responsible for this allegedly unfortunately trend - metaphysical realism, epistemic representationalism, and the correspondence theory of truth. According to the first view, there is an in principle difference between the way the world is, and the way human beings represent that world in our minds. The world is constituted by facts about objects and their properties, and has an intrinsic nature which is unaffected by whether or not we enter into cognitive relations with it.²⁶ Closely bound up with such a form of realism is an epistemological view according to which human being are never in immediate epistemic rapport with the world, but are instead such that their experiences of objects are necessarily mediated by their mental representations of them.²⁷ So for Rorty it follows from these views that our minds will accurately reflect the way things really are, only in the event that our representations faithfully mirror the structure of the mind-independent world of facts.²⁸

Rorty himself thoroughly rejects such a way of thinking. For him, talk of non-conceptual or non-linguistic facts which exist in a world set apart from human social practices and descriptions, is entirely empty and useless.²⁹ In saying this, of course, Rorty needs to be careful. For in his less reflective moments, he makes claims like (R1) which at least seem to be claims about how the world is in itself. Thus he appears at times to be employing a realist framework in the very process of rejecting it. Fortunately, he has self-consciously corrected this mistake, and should be charitably read as instead endorsing the more consistent view that:

- (R3) It is of no practical benefit to continue to talk in realist terms about objective facts of any kind.³⁰

Rorty seems to also endorse the negative epistemological thesis that:

- (R4) It is of no practical benefit to continue to talk in representationalist terms about whether our representations of a mind-independent world are accurate or not.³¹

So on Rorty's view the criterion for theory choice should no longer be the degree of correspondence to an objective world of non-linguistic facts, but rather the comparative usefulness to human beings of talking in various ways.³² Given all the trouble that both realism and representationalism have gotten philosophers into over the past few centuries, Rorty thinks that perhaps it is time to seriously consider adopting a new approach.³³

Not surprisingly, Rorty also thinks that a commitment to both metaphysical realism and epistemological representationalism lends itself naturally to accepting a correspondence theory of truth as well.³⁴ Beliefs will be true or false in virtue of their standing in a relation of correspondence to that part of the mind-independent world which they are about. Yet once the metaphysical and epistemological framework undergirding it is discarded, the correspondence theory will itself become untenable as well. So we get Rorty's *alethic* thesis:

(R5) It is of no practical benefit to continue to employ a correspondence theory of truth.³⁵

Together, these three theses form what I take to be the core of Rorty's negative project.

We can now see quite easily how Rorty at least appears to be a meta-ethical moral relativist. As we have already noted, Rorty dismisses talk of objective moral facts, thereby satisfying the objectivity thesis. Additionally, there are numerous passages in which Rorty writes as if the truth of statements in general, and that of moral claims in particular, is fixed solely by human frameworks and practices.³⁶ Thus we are told that pragmatists adopt an 'attitude toward truth in which the consensus of a community rather than a relation to a nonhuman reality is taken as central.'³⁷ And concerning the wrongness of cruelty, Rorty thinks that, '[w]e cannot look back behind the processes of socialization which convinced us twentieth-century liberals of the validity of this claim and appeal to something which is more "real" or less ephemeral than the historical contingencies which brought those processes into existence. *We* have to start from where *we* are.'³⁸ So he seems to clearly endorse the framework relativity thesis as well.

As if confirming his acceptance of (ME), Rorty even takes up the challenge of providing a worked-out error theory. In order to defend some form of meta-ethical moral relativism, an explanation

has to be given for why so many people have mistakenly adopted a broadly realist outlook.³⁹ Here Rorty responds in a creative and interesting fashion:

The picture of a common human nature oriented towards correspondence to reality as it is in itself comforts us with the thought that even if our civilization is destroyed, even if all memory of our political or intellectual or artistic community is erased, the race is fated to recapture the virtues and the insights and the achievements which were the glory of that community . . . The comfort of the realist picture is the comfort of saying not simply that there is a place prepared for our race in our advance, but also that we now know quite a bit about what that place looks like.⁴⁰

So even though Rorty wants to undercut the philosophical foundations which support a broadly realist view, he still recognizes that many will have a difficult time abstaining from its tangible comforts. Yet he thinks that, ‘the long-run good done by getting rid of outdated needs would outweigh the temporary disturbance caused by attempts to change our philosophical intuitions.’⁴¹

Thus Rorty’s remarks on the objectivity of ethical values and the role of social practices and communities are not only perfectly compatible with, but may even come close to *entailing* something like the account of meta-ethical moral relativism given in (ME).⁴² Yet the irony is that Rorty himself has vehemently denied being a relativist of any kind. In fact, one of the most interesting autobiographical features of Rorty’s work is his persistent need to show that his views do not properly warrant the term ‘relativism.’ While from his tone he seems to think that it should be clear why he is not a relativist, one nonetheless wonders why he needs to repeatedly argue against those who so characterize his form of pragmatism. After all, if his responses were good enough the first time around, wouldn’t they have settled the matter?

The problem is that his responses have not been very good. Part of the reason for this is that despite the frequency with which he addresses the relativism charge, Rorty has never bothered to first clearly define what the view is supposed to be.⁴³ Given that there are a myriad of different positions which fall under that heading even in the case of *moral* relativism, it is by no means clear what particular claims he takes himself to be responding to.

We can see how inattention to definitional concerns conflates various important issues by considering Rorty's standard construal of the relativism charge. According to Rorty, pragmatists are 'said to be "relativistic." We must, people say, believe that every coherent view is as good as every other, since we have no "outside" touchstone for choice among such views.'⁴⁴ But if *that* is all that relativism amounts to, then Rorty has simply bypassed the meta-ethical issues altogether. 'Good' is being used in this passage as a first order term about the ethical goodness of rival moral frameworks, and hence the form of relativism which Rorty takes to be at issue is a form of *normative* moral relativism.⁴⁵ Thus he could still be a meta-ethical moral relativist since, as we noted above, such a view certainly does not imply that one has to tolerate just any coherent moral framework. As Rorty rightly maintains, pragmatists 'can be just as morally indignant as the next philosopher.'⁴⁶

Lack of clarity about definitional issues also leads Rorty to conflate properly metaphysical questions about relativism with quite different *epistemic* concerns about justification.⁴⁷ After all, one can be skeptical of the ability of human beings to gain extended epistemic access to moral facts, while at the same time thinking that there really are such facts.⁴⁸ Thus Rorty only confuses the matter when he at times fails to distinguish relativism about moral justification from what is strictly speaking meta-ethical moral relativism.⁴⁹

The upshot is that some of Rorty's most frequent responses to the charge of relativism have little bearing on the question of whether he is a meta-ethical moral relativist. Fortunately, though, Rorty does have other arguments which come closer to addressing this view. Consider for example what might be called Rorty's *Negative Argument*. After first describing his own position as committed to the claim that, 'there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry,'⁵⁰ Rorty goes on to argue that:

. . . it is not clear why "relativist" should be thought an appropriate term for the ethnocentric third view, the one which the pragmatist *does* hold. For the pragmatist is not holding a positive theory which says that something is relative to something else. He is, instead, making the purely *negative*

point that we should drop the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion, construed as the distinction between truth as correspondence to reality and truth as a commendatory term for well-justified beliefs . . . Not having *any* epistemology, *a fortiori* he does not have a relativistic one.⁵¹

Unfortunately, it is hard to see how Rorty's view is *merely* negative. For while he rejects epistemological theories which presuppose outdated views about representation and correspondence, certainly he cannot avoid epistemology as such. In fact, in the very statement of his view quoted above, Rorty makes positive claims about the relationship between truth and rationality on the one hand, and the role of societal procedures of justification on the other.

But even if we grant Rorty this idiosyncratic understanding of the nature of his project, it is still not at all clear what implications his remarks have on the fate of meta-ethical moral relativism. For while 'something is relative to something else' according to the framework relativity thesis of (ME), the relativity in question is meant to be understood in the same innocuous sense as Rorty understands the contribution of contingent social practices to the justification and truth of moral judgements. Nor is (ME) as stated committed to 'the traditional distinction between knowledge and opinion;' in fact it is not even clear that it is necessarily committed to *any* such distinction. So the Negative Argument by itself does little by way of deflecting the charge of meta-ethical MR.

Perhaps a similar argument would be effective if it could show that the following entailment holds:

(COR) ((ME) \Rightarrow Correspondence Theory of Truth).

Given that pragmatists reject the correspondence theory, by *modus tollens* they could also reject (ME). Unfortunately it is hard to see how (COR) is even remotely plausible. The entailment would have to be derived from the framework relativity thesis:

For any moral agent A and moral statement S, if A accepts S then the truth value of S is fixed only by A's moral framework and any descriptive facts relevant to S.

But this thesis as stated is not committed to any particular theory of truth. Furthermore, if a moral

relativist was inclined towards any view of truth, one might think that she would most naturally gravitate towards a *coherence* theory.

Another strategy that Rorty has occasionally employed involves showing that the following holds:

(EPIS) ((ME) \Rightarrow Epistemological Representationalism).

Given that pragmatists disavow representationalism, they could try to employ *modus tollens* again in order to reject (ME). In defense of (EPIS), Rorty appeals to what Davidson has called the ‘scheme-content’ distinction:

if we once adopt the “scheme-content” distinction – the distinction between determinate realities and a set of words or concepts which may or may not be “adequate” to them – we shall, needlessly, find ourselves worried about relativism-vs.-absolutism – about whether our knowledge is merely “relative” to what Williams calls “our perspective and its peculiarities” or whether it is in touch with what Lewis calls “objective sameness and difference in nature.”⁵²

So for Rorty the distinction amounts to the claim that we have on the one hand the non-conceptual world of ‘determinate realities,’ and on the other hand human conceptual schemes or systems of concepts which are necessary in order to intelligibly represent that world in our minds. In the moral case, the analogue would be a view according to which our ordinary interaction with other human beings is somehow structured by the particular moral frameworks we happen to hold at the time. In both cases, the argument is supposed to be that a scheme-content distinction entails epistemological representationalism, since invoking conceptual and moral frameworks presupposes a sharp divide between how the world is in itself, and how we represent that world in our minds. Notice that no mention has yet been made of whether these schemes and frameworks are objective or merely relative. Instead the claim is that the scheme-content distinction and its ensuing representationalism will arise for both realists *and* relativists. But we already know that Rortian pragmatists are committed to rejecting representationalism. Thus it follows that pragmatists must reject both realism and relativism. Let us call this the *Scheme-Content Argument*.⁵³

Here we clearly have a more substantive response to the relativism charge, and so it will be worth examining whether (ME) must rely on such a scheme-content distinction in order to even be formulated. But before we do, it is first important to note that Rorty himself relies on such a distinction all throughout his writings. Take for example the general case of human interaction with the world. We are told that there really is a world ‘out there,’ but that it is up to us human beings to describe it in various ways using the human creation of language.⁵⁴ In particular, human beings enter into various causal relationships with the world, and yet ‘alternative descriptions of the *same* causal process are useful for different purposes.’⁵⁵ And we find Rorty making similar remarks in the moral case as well. Thus despite what the world itself is like, according to Rorty his philosophical heroes recognized that, ‘anything could be made to look good or bad, important or unimportant, useful or useless, by being redescribed.’⁵⁶

There is an important response to this *tu quoque* argument. For perhaps Rorty is rejecting the use of scheme-content distinctions as employed by representationalist accounts of the mind/world relation, while at the same time still acknowledging that they play an important role in providing merely *causal* accounts of that relationship.⁵⁷ But if this is Rorty’s view, then it seems that the meta-ethical moral relativist can escape the Scheme Content Argument. For just as, ‘our beliefs, our theories, our languages, our concepts are not to be seen as defenses against the hardness of data . . . but as ways of putting the causal forces of the universe to work for us,’⁵⁸ so too can the relativist understand moral frameworks as putting the behavioral forces of human action to work in satisfying our antecedent wants and desires.⁵⁹

Having considered epistemological representationalism, perhaps Rorty will also try to argue that (ME) depends on outdated metaphysical presuppositions as well. In the moral case, the argument would have to be that:

(MET) ((ME) \Rightarrow Moral Realism).

At first such a claim looks bizarre. After all, the objectivity thesis explicitly rejects the realist’s claim that there are objective moral facts. So how can (ME) entail a view which depends on there being such facts? But before we dismiss (MET), perhaps we should consider whether there is a deeper point lurking in the neighborhood. Suppose that any form of meta-ethical MR must appeal to distinctions which are only

meaningful in the context of certain parameters antecedently established by moral realism. Since pragmatists think it best to move beyond the framework instituted by realists, they will consistently avoid appealing to such distinctions.⁶⁰ Thus by rejecting those distinctions, Rortian pragmatists cannot accurately be described as meta-ethical moral relativists. Let us call this the *Distinction Argument*.⁶¹

What are the relevant distinctions supposed to be? Rorty explicitly mentions the following:

- (i) Making versus Finding.⁶²
- (ii) Invention versus Discovery.⁶³
- (iii) Subjective versus Objective.⁶⁴
- (iv) Appearance versus Reality.⁶⁵
- (v) Inside versus Outside.⁶⁶
- (vi) Context-dependence versus Content-independence.⁶⁷
- (vii) Extrinsic versus Intrinsic.⁶⁸

Moral relativists are drawn to the first term in each of these pairs, while realists naturally prefer the second. And, as Rorty rightly notes, it is hard to make sense of any one of these terms without the other. So subjectivity is often defined over and against that which is objective, while those who are not discovering moral values are said to be involved in their mere invention. Yet since realist terminology has lost its usefulness according to pragmatists, it will not do to fall back on another set of terms which are only meaningful given such a realist framework. Rorty prefers that we instead simply discard both sets of categories and replace them with:

- (viii) More Useful versus Less Useful.⁶⁹

Thus pragmatists 'hope to replace the reality-appearance distinction with the distinction between the more useful and the less useful. So we say that the vocabulary of Greek metaphysics and Christian theology was a useful one for our ancestors' purposes, but that *we* have different purposes, which will be better served by employing a different vocabulary.'⁷⁰

As far as meta-ethical moral relativism is concerned, the Distinction Argument will have special bearing on the objectivity thesis:

There are no objective moral facts or properties.

For if Rorty is correct, pragmatists can simply claim that their view eschews the terminology of ‘objective moral facts’ altogether.

Should we be persuaded by such an argument? It is not at all clear that we should. For in the first place, we noted above that Rorty often claims that:

(R1) There are no objective facts or truths of any kind.

So he seems to make ample use of the language of objectivity, even if it is only to reject various forms of realism in the process. And the same holds for many of the other distinctions listed above.⁷¹

Nor does being a pragmatist necessarily preclude one from temporarily adopting the terms of another philosophical position and employing them for some useful end. Thus even though pragmatists do not prefer the language of objectivity, they could still endorse the objectivity thesis in order to help undermine their realist opposition. Another way to put the point is to say that nothing in Rorty’s view prohibits reformulating the thesis to read:

Utilizing the standard distinctions employed by moral realists, it is the case that there are no objective moral facts or properties.

Pragmatists can therefore go along with Rorty when he at times slips into realist terminology and argues that, for example, ‘there is no one Way the World Is.’⁷²

So in general it looks as if the primary arguments Rorty has given for why he is not committed to some form of meta-ethical moral relativism, all fail. Of course, it does not follow that Rorty cannot revise these arguments or come up with some compelling new ones. What *does* seem to follow is that the burden of proof is now on him to show why his meta-ethical approach does not commit him to the framework relativity and objectivity theses for reasons which are consistent with his general pragmatist philosophy. Of course there is another alternative, namely for Rorty to accept that his meta-ethical approach *does* commit him to the theses in (ME), and then challenge his opponents to give compelling reasons for why (ME) is itself an untenable position. Rorty has been incredibly quick to reject the relativist label in the past, but perhaps he should rethink his position.

Before concluding this section, it is worthwhile to briefly consider Rorty's relationship to *normative* moral relativism. As we noted above, Rorty does not want to defend an extreme form of normative MR according to which just *any* coherent ethical view is as good as any other and thereby worthy of respect.⁷³ In his own words, such a position would be a form of 'mindless and stupid cultural relativism.'⁷⁴ Instead, he advocates what he calls 'philosophical pluralism,' whereby 'there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life, and . . . these ways cannot be ranked in terms of degrees of excellence, but only in terms of their contribution to the happiness of the persons who lead them and of the communities to which these persons belong.'⁷⁵

So on Rorty's view, there is a diversity of morally permissible ways of life, any one of which is such that we ought not judge and coercively interfere with its practitioners.⁷⁶ If we label this class of lives C, then another way to state the view is to say that Rorty is defending a version of what we earlier called Strong Normative MR for all those whose lives fall within C. What determines membership in C? Not some ahistorical criteria of tolerance, but simply the standards of permissibility that our communities and social practices currently employ.

Yet by those same standards, some cultures and ways of life may fall outside of C. Given that there are exclusionary principles for membership in C, it follows that, '[a]ccommodation and tolerance must stop short of a willingness to work within any vocabulary that one's interlocutor wishes to use, to take seriously any topic that he puts forward for discussion.'⁷⁷ So in our relations to this other class of lives C*, there will be no ethical standards of tolerance that we must respect in order to satisfy our moral obligations towards them. After all, for Rorty it is an 'obvious fact that there are lots of cultures we would be better off without, just as there are lots of people we would be better off without.'⁷⁸ Thus at least as far as C* is concerned, Rorty's view seems far removed from any form of normative moral relativism.

III. Quasi-Realism to the Rescue

Interestingly enough, there is rather different way of understanding Rorty's meta-ethical project, a way which neither Rorty himself nor anyone else has thus far realized is available, and one which may provide

him with the resources necessary for dismissing all charges of meta-ethical moral relativism. On this reading, Rorty is a quasi-realist.

Receiving its fullest expression in the writings of Simon Blackburn,⁷⁹ quasi-realism is a novel approach to certain traditional questions in the various realism debates. Here we need only consider the implications of the view for the semantics and metaphysics of ethical discourse. Roughly, the view starts from a form of non-cognitivism about value, but then develops the formal apparatus whereby moral statements can mimic most if not all the standard cognitive properties attributed to them by realists.⁸⁰

According to the quasi-realist, to think that something is good is to value it, where valuing involves being in a positive affective relation to the thing in question.⁸¹ Thus moral claims do not have truth values since, 'evaluative properties are projections of our own sentiments (emotions, reactions, attitudes, commendations).'⁸² Interpersonal moral deliberation simply involves the exchanging of assertions about what the participants in question involved value.

From here things get more interesting. Quasi-realism 'starts from a contrast between expressing belief and expressing an attitude, which it then undermines, by showing how the expression of attitude takes on all the trappings of belief.'⁸³ The details at this point are complex, but roughly the claim is that propositional attitudes towards moral claims can be constructed so as to reflect an agent's underlining affective states.⁸⁴ So, for example, on Blackburn's view 'believing that X is good or right is roughly having an appropriately favorable valuation of X.'⁸⁵ And in general, moral statements are a "propositional reflection" of states that are first understood in other terms . . . It is the isomorphism between propositional structures and necessary practical states that is the heart of things.'⁸⁶ The important feature of such a move for our purposes is that quasi-realism provides a way for expressions of non-cognitive attitudes to be truth-apt.⁸⁷ In particular, Blackburn adopts a deflationary theory of truth according to which moral claims can be true or false without having to correspond to the realist's world of objective moral facts.⁸⁸

Turning from Blackburn to Rorty, we can provide a rough outline of the argument one would need in order to maintain that Rorty's views are compatible with quasi-realism. The first task would

involve showing how for Rorty, ethical claims are not cognitive beliefs but expressions of affective states. Here the textual evidence is inconclusive but strongly suggestive. Admittedly, there are a few places where Rorty seems to construe moral statements as expressed cognitive states.⁸⁹ Yet on the whole, the majority of relevant passages indicate that he would be quite open to some version of non-cognitivism.⁹⁰ For example, he defends a view of moral progress that, ‘makes us resist Kant’s suggestion that morality is a matter of reason, and makes us sympathetic to Hume’s suggestion that it is a matter of sentiment.’⁹¹ Of course, as he is with most traditional distinctions, Rorty is skeptical of any attempt to divide up human psychology into discrete faculties of belief and desire.⁹² But if forced to play that game, there do seem to be strong indications about what side he would ultimately come down on.⁹³

The second stage of the argument involves Blackburn’s mimicry thesis. Here Rorty is largely silent on the issue of whether moral statements can be employed in cognitive contexts,⁹⁴ but he also does not say anything that would preclude such a possibility. Furthermore, since he often talks as if moral statements can be true or false,⁹⁵ he should be quite open to such an account given that traditional non-cognitivism alone denies the truth-aptness of moral expressions.

Finally we come to the question of truth. While Rorty repeatedly criticizes the correspondence theory, it is not always clear what he hopes to put in its place. At times we get snappy definitions according to which a true belief is one that, ‘surpasses the competition as a rule for successful future action’⁹⁶ or is, ‘the outcome of free discussion.’⁹⁷ Yet Rorty in general seems to be quite hostile to the project of providing a *theory* of truth, and he repeatedly takes some form of deflationism to be adequate to the task of saying all that needs to be said about truth.⁹⁸

How does quasi-realism avoid being just another form of meta-ethical moral relativism? Here is where deflationism about truth is meant to do some of the work. According to Blackburn, it turns out that one can claim both that:

- (i) X is good in virtue of the relevant objective ethical facts about goodness.
- (ii) X is good is merely my opinion.

and have both statements come out true.⁹⁹ For according to the deflationist, (i) and (ii) mean nothing more than

(iii) X is good.¹⁰⁰

Thus attempts to formulate robust forms of either realism or relativism cannot even get off the ground.¹⁰¹

Of course, critics may on independent grounds allege that Blackburn and other quasi-realists have not adequately addressed all the relevant concerns about relativism. But that would be a separate issue. For now, we need merely note that quasi-realism seems to provide everything Rorty wants in a meta-ethical position while at the same time purporting to have the resources available for eschewing worries about moral relativism. So if Rorty is not happy being labeled a meta-ethical moral relativist, then perhaps he should consider this alternative proposal.¹⁰²

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¹ Perhaps the most interesting series of charges have come from Hilary Putnam. See in particular his 1983 and 2000. According to Blackburn 1998a, Rorty is ‘a clear example of someone who assents to a relativistic theory about ethics (and indeed, about other discourse as well)’ (287).

² Thus Harman writes that, ‘[a]ccording to moral relativism whether something is morally good, right, or just is always relative to a set of moral coordinates, a set of values or moral standards, a certain moral point of view’ (1996: 17). See also Harré and Krausz 1996: 152, Harman 1996: 3, and Oddie 1999: 256.

³ There are certain technical difficulties with (2), some of which have been stated especially well by Thomson 1996: 194-196.

⁴ See Brandt 1967: 25, Wong 1991: 442, Blackburn 1998a: 280, and Carson and Moser 2001: 1.

⁵ Brandt 1967: 25-6, Wong 1991: 442, Moser and Carson 2001: 1.

⁶ Furthermore, (3) seems to be true if formulated in terms of the moral frameworks held by different groups, societies, cultures, religions, or traditions. For the remainder of the paper, we shall focus on the case of MR with respect to *individual* moral frameworks, while keeping in mind that similar issues can also arise for larger social bodies as well.

⁷ See Moody-Adams 1997. Notice that (3) is formulated as an existentially quantified claim which could be satisfied by only two individuals with divergent moral frameworks. A stronger descriptive view would instead hold that:

(3*) *Strong Descriptive Moral Relativism* =_{df.} There currently exist a *significant number* of moral agents such that any two of them satisfy conditions (a) through (d) of (3).

⁸ Wong 1991: 442, Blackburn 1998a: 283, Moser and Carson 2001: 2.

⁹ This formulation was influenced by Wong 1991: 447.

¹⁰ Many philosophers quickly dismiss various forms of normative MR. See for example, Wong 1991: 447 and Harré and Krausz 1996: 158.

¹¹ ‘ \Rightarrow ’ represents entailment. Thus (5) is equivalent to $\diamond ((\text{Descriptive MR}) \ \& \ \sim(\text{Normative MR}))$.

¹² This line of reasoning may be too quick for at least two reasons. First, in such a world of uniform moral standards, condition (c) in (4) concerning individuals possessing substantially different moral frameworks would not obtain, thereby rendering the antecedent of any conditional formulation of normative MR such as (4) false, and thus the

conditional itself true. And secondly, one could formulate (4) and other forms of normative MR in terms of counterfactual rather than indicative conditionals.

¹³ See Harman 1996: 5 and Moser and Carson 2001: 2.

¹⁴ See Harré and Krausz 1996: 165-6, Oddie 1999: 251-2, Timmons 1999: 35, and Moser and Carson 2001: 3. This way of stating the view, although common, is I think rather unfortunate in that it combines metaphysical claims with claims about language. For what I take to be a better formulation of moral realism, see my 2002a. And for more on the view in general, see Sayre-McCord 1988 and Brink 1989.

¹⁵ One standard objection is that the view cannot preserve the possibility of genuine moral disagreement. For more, see Lyons 1978: 222-3, Harman 1978: 29, 37, Hugly and Sayward 1990: 142-3, and Stroud 1998: 193.

¹⁶ I attempt to articulate one such formulation in my 2002b.

¹⁷ As in the case of moral realism (see fn. 14 above), this way of stating the framework relativity thesis is common but perhaps unfortunate in that it is a claim about moral language and not about moral facts. For more, see my 2002a.

¹⁸ Compare Harman 1996: 4-5.

¹⁹ See Harman 1996: 5 and Stroud 1998: 189.

²⁰ See Brandt 1967: 26, 29, Brink 1989: 197-209, Margolis 1991: 14, Wong 1991: 444-5, Harman 1996: 10, and Moser and Carson 2001: 4.

²¹ Moser and Carson 2001: 5.

²² Foot 1978: 161 seems to endorse such an entailment.

²³ See for example his 1985a: 32, 1989: xv, 5, 20, 48, 74, 80, 197, 1993b: 172, 1994d: 27, 33, 1994e: 48, 50, and 1998c: 276.

²⁴ 1989: 5.

²⁵ 1989: 80.

²⁶ 1985b: 86, 1989: 75, 1991b: 4.

²⁷ 1996a: xxiii.

²⁸ 1989: 76, 1991b: 1-2, 5, 11, 2000: 12.

²⁹ See his 1987a: 37, 1991b: 4, 10, 1991c: 98, and 1998b: 6.

³⁰ See his 1985a: 23, 33, 1986: 149, 1987a: 41, 1988c: 193, 1994e: 57-8, 1996b: 72, and 1998b: 1.

³¹ See his 1985a: 33 and 1993b: 176.

³² Thus ‘pragmatists think that the question to ask about our beliefs is not whether they are about reality or merely about appearance, but simply whether they are the best habits of action for gratifying our desires’ (1996a: xxiv). See also his 1985b: 86, 1994d: 33, 1994e: 54, 65, 1996b: 72, and 2000: 4.

³³ 1994c: 305.

³⁴ 1985a: 22 and 1994b: 226. How close is this relationship? In a passage Rorty quotes approvingly from Davidson, it seems that representationalism is supposed to entail a correspondence theory of truth (1991b: 9). And in another passage from Davidson, the correspondence theory itself entails metaphysical realism (1996b: 68). See also Rorty 1994d: 41-42 and 1998c: 269-270.

³⁵ See his 1985b: 79-80, 1989: 8, 1996a: xvii, and 1996b: 72.

³⁶ See for example, his 1983b: 198-200, 1985a: 23, 29, 1985b: 81, 1987a: 42, 1987b: 116, 121, 1988c: 177, 185, 188-191, 1989: 5, 7, 22, 30, 33, 47-8, 58-9, 67-8, 75, 84, 88, 190, 192, 195-6, 1991b: 4, 12, 1993a: 51, 53, 60, 1993b: 171, 1994c: 306, 1994f: 73, 83-5, 1995: 21, 1996a: xxxi, 1996b: 63, 66, 1998b: 6-8, and 1998c: 266, 268, 270, 276.

³⁷ 1985a: 23 fn. 1. Furthermore, ‘there is nothing to be said about either truth or rationality apart from descriptions of the familiar procedures of justification which a given society – *ours* – uses in one or another area of inquiry’ (Ibid., 23). Italics his.

³⁸ 1989: 198. Italics his. Another noteworthy claim is that according to Rorty, ‘moral obligation does not have a nature, or a source, different from tradition, habit and custom. Morality is simply a new and controversial custom’ (1994f: 76).

³⁹ As Rorty admits, ‘[i]f contemporary intuitions are to decide the matter, “realism” and representationalism will always win, and the pragmatists’ quietism will seem intellectually irresponsible. So pragmatists should not submit to their judgment. Instead, they should see themselves as . . . involved in a long-term attempt to change the rhetoric, the common sense, and the self-image of their community’ (1995: 41). See also his 1996b: 77-8.

Even more revealingly, Rorty writes elsewhere that, ‘I have urged that we continue to speak with the vulgar while offering a philosophical gloss on this speech which is different from that offered by the Realist tradition’ (1993a: 44). See also his 1996b: 79.

⁴⁰ 1985a: 31. See also his 1985a: 28 and 1987a: 41.

⁴¹ 1996b: 77. The passage is actually from Rorty’s discussion of Dewey’s view, which he seems to share as well.

⁴² As Rorty himself admits, his own ethical view seems to imply that, ‘what counts as being a decent human being is relative to historical circumstance, a matter of transient consensus about what attitudes are normal and what practices are just or unjust’ (1989: 189). See also his 1988c: 177, 1994c: 306, and 1998b: 2.

⁴³ With one not incredibly helpful exception in his 1985a: 23.

⁴⁴ 1987a: 42. See also his 1983b: 202, 1985a: 23, 1993b: 170, 1996a: xxix, and 1998c: 276. He does, however, seem to accept the weaker claim that, ‘there are many different, but equally valuable, sorts of human life’ (1998c: 266). And again that, ‘there is a potential infinity of equally valuable ways to lead a human life, and that these ways cannot be ranked in terms of degrees of excellence, but only in terms of their contribution to the happiness of the persons who lead them and of the communities to which these persons belong’ (1998c: 268).

⁴⁵ Suppose that, contrary to contextual appearances, Rorty actually intends to be using ‘good’ in a meta-ethical sense. Thus the claim would be that pragmatists are often accused of being meta-ethical moral relativists because they think that every moral statement or moral framework is as equally correct as any other.

If this is the accusation that Rorty is responding to, then he can quite plausibly reject this naïve form of meta-ethical MR *even* if he also endorses the framework relativity and objectivity theses. Simply because there are no objective moral facts, it does not follow that moral frameworks cannot be rank-ordered based on such standards of correctness as internal consistency, simplicity, feasibility, and so on. Wong (1991), 446 and Stroud (1998), 190 make a similar point.

Thus Rorty’s rejection of this naïve view would have little bearing on whether he is a meta-ethical MR in the sense captured by (ME).

⁴⁶ 1987a: 42. Wong 1991: 449 makes a similar point.

⁴⁷ For an exception, see his 1998b: 2. And for his response to the claim that pragmatists confuse truth and justification, see his 1994b.

⁴⁸ Thus Moser and Carson correctly maintain that, ‘a skeptic can still say that there is an objectively correct answer to . . . moral questions and thus that it is objectively true or false that it would be permissible for somebody to have an abortion. Skeptics deny only that anyone could or at least does ever know or justifiably believe whether it would be right for somebody to have an abortion. Meta-ethical relativism is ontologically bolder than moral skepticism’ (2001: 3). See also Lyons 1978: 218. Brandt 1967: 26-7 does not pay close enough attention to this distinction.

⁴⁹ To take one example from many, in his 1989 he thinks that he can dismiss the ‘relativist predicament’ by showing how, ‘[t]here will be no such activity as scrutinizing competing values in order to see which are morally privileged. For there will be no way to rise above the language, culture, institutions, and practices one has adopted and view all these as on a par with all the others’ (50). For further examples, see also his 1983a: 66, 1985b: 89, 1987a: 38, and 1989: 47-50.

There seems to be no question about whether Rorty is a relativist about justification. Clearly he is, as he himself explicitly acknowledges in his 1995: 22, and 1998b: 2-4. Thus there must be some other form of relativism distinct from this view which he is opposed to.

⁵⁰ 1985a: 23. Italics his.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 23-24. Italics his. See also his 1985a: 22.

⁵² 1991b: 9.

⁵³ Rorty employs a similar argument in his 1986: 138-9, 1988a: 60, 1994a: 87, and 1996a: xxvi-xxvii.

⁵⁴ Thus, ‘[t]o say that truth is not out there is simply to say that where there are no sentences there is no truth, that sentences are elements of human languages, and that human languages are human creations . . . The world is out there, but descriptions of the world are not. Only descriptions of the world can be true or false. The world on its own – unaided by the describing activities of human beings – cannot’ (1989: 5). See also his 1985b: 87, 1989: 9, 16, 39-40, 1994a: 88, 1994e: 54, 61, 1996a: xxvi, and 1996b: 83 fn. 23.

⁵⁵ 1988a: 60. Italics mine. Similarly, Rorty says that his is a view of, ‘language as a way of grabbing hold of causal forces and making them do what we want, altering ourselves and our environment to suit our aspirations’ (1985b: 81).

⁵⁶ 1989: 7. See also *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁷ For Rorty's use of such a causal understanding, see his 1985b: 81, 83, 1986: 128, 133-5, 139, 141, 1987b: 120-121, 1988b: 159, 1989: 5, 15, 1991c: 97, 101, 106, 1994a: 86, 1994d: 33, and 1996a: xxvii.

⁵⁸ 1985b: 82.

⁵⁹ Thus it is puzzling why Rorty writes that neither, "relative validity" nor the notion of a "relativist predicament" will seem in point if one grants Davidson's claim that new metaphors are causes, but not reasons, for changes of belief, and Hesse's claim that it is new metaphors which have made intellectual progress possible' (1989: 50). It is not clear why the meta-ethical moral relativist cannot simply grant both claims.

⁶⁰ 'We pragmatists shrug off charges that we are "relativists" or "irrationalists" by saying that these charges presuppose precisely the distinctions we reject. If we have to describe ourselves, perhaps it would be best for us to call ourselves anti-dualists' (1996a: xix).

⁶¹ For versions of this argument, see his 1988a: 50-1, 1988c: 193, 1991b: 5-6, 1994e: 47-8, 50-51, 1996a: xviii-xix, xxii, xxv, and 1998b: 1-2.

⁶² 1996a: xviii, xxi-xxii.

⁶³ 1996a: xviii.

⁶⁴ 1987a: 41, 1988c: 192, 1994e: 47, 51, 1996a: xviii.

⁶⁵ 1989: 39, 1994d: 27, 1994e: 47-8, 50, 1994f: 85, 1996a: xxii.

⁶⁶ 1996a: xxvii.

⁶⁷ 1991c: 98.

⁶⁸ 1991c: 98, 1994e: 50, 1996b: 83.

⁶⁹ See his 1985b: 86, 1987a: 41, 1991b: 5, 1994d: 27, 1994e: 48, 51, and 1999: xxii.

⁷⁰ 1996a: xxii. Italics his.

⁷¹ For his employment of the invention/discovery distinction, see his 1989: 12, 196, 1994b: 225, 1994f: 73, and 1998c: 276. For the making versus finding distinction, see 1988c: 189, 1989: 80, 1994b: 226, and 1994b: 226 fn. 42. And for talk of social constructions, see 1994e: 48, 1994f: 85, 1996b: 83, and 1998b: 8.

⁷² 1994d: 33.

⁷³ See his 1983b: 202, 1985a: 23, 1987a: 42, 1993b: 170, 1996a: xxix, and 1998c: 276.

⁷⁴ 1998c: 276.

⁷⁵ 1998c: 268. Similarly, ‘there are many different, but equally valuable, sorts of human life’ (1998c: 266).

⁷⁶ For Rorty’s brief remarks on what tolerance involves, see his 1983a: 67, 1987a: 41 and 1992: 186-7.

⁷⁷ 1988c: 190.

⁷⁸ 1998c: 276. Rorty tempers these sentiments elsewhere by acknowledging that, ‘these bad people are no less rational, no less clear-headed, no more prejudiced than we good people who respect Otherness. The bad people’s problem is, rather, that they were not as lucky in the circumstances of their upbringing as we were. Instead of treating all those people out there who are trying to find and kill Salman Rushdie as irrational, we should treat them as deprived’ (1993b: 180). Thus Rorty might defend a weaker claim than that attributed to him in the text, namely that there are requirements of tolerance which we should respect, but they are much less stringent than those we should exhibit towards members of C

⁷⁹ See especially his 1984, 1993, and 1998a.

⁸⁰ 1984: 171, 195-6, 211, 219, 221, 1988b: 185. Blackburn uses the language of mimicry in his 1980: 15 and 1993: 4.

⁸¹ 1980: 19, 1988a: 168 and 1998a: 50.

⁸² 1984: 180. See also 1988b: 184-5. More carefully, Blackburn labels this form of non-cognitivism ‘projectivism,’ and reserves the quasi-realist label for the separate project of explaining how our ethical discourse can genuinely be framed in cognitivist terms even if projectivism is true. For more, see *Ibid.*, 171, 180, 221, 224, 1980: 15, 19, and 1993: 4.

⁸³ 1998a: 79. See also his 1984: 171, 196 and 1993: 4.

⁸⁴ 1980: 19 and 1984: 195.

⁸⁵ 1998a: 70.

⁸⁶ 1998a: 77. See also 1984: 180, 211, 219.

⁸⁷ Thus Blackburn remarks that, ‘quasi-realism is trying to earn our right to talk of moral truth, while recognizing fully the subjective sources of our judgements, inside our own attitudes, needs, desires, and natures’ (1984: 197). See also *Ibid.*, 224.

⁸⁸ See his 1988a: 173, 175, 1993: 7, and 1998a: chapter three. Here Blackburn comes close to Rorty in rejecting the ‘blunt demand for a “theory” of truth’ (1993: 6). See also Harman 1996: 38.

⁸⁹ See for example Rorty 1994a: 92 fn. 16.

⁹⁰ See for example his 1989: xv, 61, 1991b: 8, 1991c: 96, 1993b: 172, 176-7, 179, 181, 1994d: 33, 1994e: 48-9, 1994f: 74, 79, 81, 87-8, 1996a: xxiv, xxvii, and 1996b: 80, 83.

⁹¹ 1994f: 87.

⁹² 1994f: 84-5, 87.

⁹³ See in particular his 1994f: 87.

⁹⁴ Paradigm examples of such cognitive contexts would include the attribution of truth or falsity to moral statements, as well as their being employed in sound arguments. For some vague hints, see his 1986: 128, 1988a: 59, 1989: 54, 1993a: 53, and 1994b: 226.

⁹⁵ See several of the passages cited in footnotes 36-38.

⁹⁶ 1998c: 270.

⁹⁷ 1989: 84. See also his 1985a: 22, 23, 1987a: 42, 1988b: 153, 1991c: 101, and 1996a: xxv.

⁹⁸ Which is just about nothing. See his 1985a: 23, 24, 31, 1988a: 50, 59, 1988b: 153, 1994d: 32, 41-42, 1995: 21, 1998b: 3, 2000: 4, and especially his 1986.

⁹⁹ Blackburn 1998a: 78-9, 305-6.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 79, 305.

¹⁰¹ For more on the quasi-realist response to relativism, see Blackburn 1984: 199-202, 1988a: 177, 1998a: chapters three and nine. Harman 1996: 32-44 attempts to transform quasi-realism into a form of moral relativism, but he has been met with strong opposition from Stroud 1998 and Blackburn 1998b.

¹⁰² An earlier version of this paper was read at the Ohio Philosophical Association Annual Meeting, where Frank Ryan gave helpful comments.