OBJECTIVITY AND MORAL RELATIVISM

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ABSTRACT
The relativity of morals has usually been taken as an argument against the objectivity of ethics. However, a more careful analysis can show that there are forms of moral objectivism which have relativistic implications, and that moral relativism can be compatible with the objectivity of ethics. Such an objectivity is not always in contrast to moral relativism and it is possible to be relativists without having to give up the claim of objectivity in ethics

KEYWORDS
Metaethics, relativism, objectivism, disagreement, validity, truth.

1. The relativity of morality has usually been taken as an argument against the objectivity of ethics. According to Mackie's well-known position, moral relativism represents one of the main arguments against moral objectivism:

> the argument from relativity has some force – Mackie writes – simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values[1].

However, a more careful analysis of the concepts involved can show that there are forms of moral objectivism which have relativistic implications, and that moral relativism can be compatible with the objectivity of ethics. Therefore,

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[1] Mackie 1978, p. 37.

such an objectivity is not always in contrast to moral relativism and it is possible to be relativists without having to give up the claim of objectivity in ethics.

OBJECTIVITY AND RELATIVITY

2. To start with, some clarification on what we should understand in ethics with objectivity and relativism. In considering a specific moral theory objective we can mean different things.

First, we need to distinguish whether it has to do with objectivity at a meta-ethical level or at a normative level. Normative objectivity refers to the problem of objectivity or relativity of evaluation in relation to the agent's position: the so-called 'positional objectivity', or 'positional relativity' problem for consequentialism, utilitarianism and so on[2].

But even at a meta-ethical level, the notion of objectivity is not unambiguous, for we can identify different versions. The more general version is a semantic version, according to which moral judgments are objective because they are apt to be true or false like empirical judgments, and they are true (objectivity as truth-aptness).

> I use the term 'objectivism' – Giuliano Pontara writes - to refer to any theory on the nature of ethical judgments which implies that such judgments have truth values [...]. Conversely, I use the term "non-objectivism" (where others often use the term "non-cognitivism") to refer to any ethical theory that implies that ethical judgments are neither true nor false[3].

Moreover, according to the specific theory of truth held implicitly, objectivity can be related to the presence of a rational method to solve ethical problems, and therefore we can assert that moral judgments are objective because they fulfil such a method (objectivity as rationality). Or objectivity can be related to the correspondence to an independent moral reality, and therefore we can assert that moral judgments are objective if they correspond to such a moral reality (objectivity as reality).

> We may distinguish - James Rachels writes - two senses in which ethics might be objective: 1) Ethics could be objective in the sense that moral problems can be solved by rational methods. These methods would show that some moral views are acceptable while others are not. [...] [Or] we may want a theory that makes morality out to be objective in a second, stronger sense: 2) Ethics could be objective in the sense that moral predicates – 'good', 'right' and so on – refer to

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[2] Sen 1983.

[3] Pontara 1986, p. 72 (my translation).

real property of things. Moral facts are parts of the fabric of the world. Moral realism is the view that ethics is objective in this sense[4].

The strongest form of meta-ethical objectivism maintains the claim of objectivity in all these three senses; a weaker version, less related to an ontological point of view, may limit itself to the first two senses.

3. The second question is what relativity of ethics means. Moral relativism is a philosophical view that states that moral judgments are relative to a particular moral code, but with the essential specification that there are more than one alternative moral codes, not reducible to others. This is a philosophical thesis, and not merely an empirical one: it is not limited to the observation of the diversity and variability of moral codes as a matter of fact (the issue of descriptive moral relativism) but aims to support diversity and variability as a matter of principle, since there are good arguments to support them.

However, philosophical moral relativism can be understood in two different ways depending on the level of ethical enquiry: it can be interpreted as if it implies practical conclusions on how we should act (this is the so-called 'first-level moral relativism', or 'normative relativism'); or as if it involves considerations on how moral judgments can be justified and argued for, without direct implications on how we should act (this is the so-called 'second-level moral relativism', or 'meta-ethical relativism').

Both forms of moral relativism can take different interpretations: in the case of first-level relativism it depends on what practical conclusions we make (isolation, conformism, nihilism, etc.)[5]; in the case of second-level relativism, it depends on how we understand the concepts that appear in its formulation. In what follows, we will focus on the meta-ethical version of relativism.

META-ETHICAL RELATIVISM

4. As for normative moral relativism, for meta-ethical relativism too there are different formulations, and indeed different ways to understand the same formulations. As a general definition we can take the one proposed by David Wong, «no one system of morality is universally valid»[6], or the definition proposed by Richard Brandt (and Frankena, Harman, Scanlon and so on):

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[4] Rachels 1998, pp. 9 f.

[5] See Magni 2015, ch. 3.

[6] Wong 1998, p .13.

«there are conflicting ethical opinions that can be equally valid»[7] (the latter formulation is more precise than the former, since denying universality of every moral code does not imply denying that some codes may be more valid than others).

All these definitions use the notion of validity, but it can be replaced with similar notions - with other "cardinal virtues", as Scanlon calls them[8]: i.e. correctness and justification (Brandt and Frankena), appropriateness (Scanlon), acceptability (Postow), authority and credibility (Gowans), rightness (Harman), and finally, more traditionally and commonly, truth - "no moral system is universally true" (an aspect to which we will return). These notions are analogous since all of them may be understood in two different ways, as we will see below.

Therefore, according to meta-ethical relativism, since ethics cannot show which conflicting moral principles are more valid than others, fundamental moral disagreements between individuals, societies, historical periods are not solvable. That is, according to meta-ethical relativism, there are moral disagreements that cannot be solved, even if there were no linguistic confusions and the most extensive and exhaustive empirical information was available. Thus individuals, societies, historical periods may have equally valid conflicting moral principles, and there are no universally valid moral codes, which are valid for everyone in all places and times.

But what does it mean that moral principles can be equally valid? That is, what sense of validity and of the similar notions (correctness, justification, acceptability, appropriateness, etc., the other "cardinal virtues") come into play in these formulations? The answer is not so obvious and indeed deserves some attention.

5. The first distinction to make is the distinction between a normative sense and an epistemic sense of validity (and of the other notions). It is a distinction to which little attention has been paid in moral philosophy, and this fact has often been a source of confusion and misunderstanding; although more attention has been paid in the philosophy of law, in relation to the issue of the validity of legal rules.

In the philosophy of law at least two distinct senses of the validity of a rule are distinguished. In a first sense, a rule is valid when it belongs to a system of rules, is created according to a certain procedure and is not abrogated (if it has what is called a "formal existence"): this first sense is usually called

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[7] Brandt 1959, p. 271.
[8] Scanlon 1995, p. 143.

"descriptive." In a second sense, on the other hand, a rule is valid when it has a binding force, because it is in itself felt as a prescription. This second sense is usually called "normative". Thus, the sentence that a rule is valid in the normative sense means that the norm plays the role of a prescription, in so far as it claims to be obeyed and applied.

> The concept of validity as a binding force - Bulygin writes - is normative in the sense that saying that a norm is valid is not to assert a fact, but to ascribe an obligation to obey the rule in question[9].

Similarly to the legal validity of a norm, even regarding the validity of a moral principle we can distinguish the epistemic sense of the term, according to which to say that a moral principle is valid is to say that it conforms to an adequate procedure of foundation (or formation, individuation, identification etc.), and the normative sense of validity, according to which to say that a moral principle is valid is to recognize that it has a normative force, because it is accepted as obliging and binding by the agents.

It is therefore necessary to distinguish between normatively endorsing a moral principle and epistemically believing it well-founded, between thinking a principle is in error because morally wrong (moral error) and thinking a principle is in error because inconsistent or wrongly derived (epistemic error).

So if, from a meta-ethical point of view, we consider valid two conflicting judgments, such as 'abortion is right' and 'abortion is wrong', made by two different subjects, Mary and Jane, we mean that both judgments fulfil an adequate procedure of foundation, and therefore Mary and Jane do not commit an epistemic error; similarly, if we say that a judgment such as 'death penalty is wrong' is not universally valid, we mean that it does not always fulfil a procedure of adequate foundation, that is to say, it does not fulfil such a procedure in relation to every agent that makes that judgment, in every spatial and temporal circumstance.

What can be considered an adequate procedure for the foundation of a moral principle depends on which meta-ethical theory is held: as we will see below, it may vary from the reference to nature or to a rational method of reasoning, to the reference to emotions or evaluative attitudes of the agent.

EPISTEMIC VALIDITY

6. In order not to misunderstand the distinction, it should be added that the point of view from which we recognize the epistemic validity is ideally that of

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[9] Bulygin 1987, p. 202 (my translation).

an external observer, an ethical theorist who accepts an appropriate procedure of foundation for moral judgments and assesses whether a particular moral judgment is well-founded. It is not the point of view of moral agents involved in moral agency who make conflicting moral judgments and value the situation differently. Namely, it is the view of an ideal impartial spectator, who tries to avoid his personal evaluation, and puts himself in "a *morally detached* perspective"[10]. Instead, regarding normative validity, the view is that of a person involved in the moral evaluation, who judges whether a certain judgment should be morally endorsed, and puts himself in "a *morally engaged* perspective"[11].

It should also be pointed out that the term "validity" in the normative sense is used by a first-level relativist as a relative term (to say that something is valid in this sense is to say that it is "valid for..." an individual, a society, etc.)[12]; whereas the term "validity" in the epistemic sense is usually used by a second-level relativist as a non-relative term. That is, normative validity is relative to several standards of validity (which may consist in the decisions of agents, societies, etc.); epistemic validity is instead relative to a single standard (the procedure of foundation deemed adequate); and it is the fulfilment of this procedure, not the procedure itself, that is relative to circumstances and individuals.

To argue that even the epistemic validity should be relative (that even in this sense a moral judgment is valid for ...), would tie meta-ethical relativism to radical forms of cognitive relativism, which refuses the presence of common and inter-subjective standards from which to judge the validity of empirical judgments, and concludes that, from a cognitive point of view, each opinion has the same value. But meta-ethical relativism is not necessarily linked to radical forms of cognitive relativism; indeed, it generally stands as an alternative to them. In fact, it accepts the existence of a common standard (an adequate procedure of foundation for moral judgments) and argues that according to this procedure we can judge when a particular moral judgment is epistemically valid. Thus, for example, according to meta-ethical relativism, if it is plausible to argue that the term 'correct' is relative in the normative judgment 'abortion is correct', it is not plausible in the meta-judgment: "the judgment 'abortion is correct' is correct".

The use of the notion of truth in the formulation of meta-ethical relativism - two conflicting moral judgments are equally true – (instead of validity,

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[10] Horgan - Timmons 2006, p. 87.

[11] Horgan - Timmons 2006, p. 87.

[12] Stevenson 1961-2.

correctness, justification, etc.), may help to separate the issues of epistemic justification from those of normative justification, since the notion of truth has an obvious epistemic use (to which we will return immediately). But it should be noted that there is also a normative sense of truth, according to which to say that a moral judgment is true means to approve it. Thus if we say '"abortion is right" is true', we usually mean that the judgment is epistemically sound, but we could also mean that we endorse it.

VALIDITY AND TRUTH

7. Another distinction equally neglected is the one between different meanings of the epistemic notion of validity, depending on how the adequate procedure of foundation is conceived.

The first meaning relates this procedure to a standard rational method and, according to the standard conception of rationality, for beliefs this method consists in making use of empirical evidence, of inductive inference and of logical-deductive reasoning: the method of scientific knowledge. Only a moral judgment that can fulfil a method of this type can be called 'valid' in the same way that an empirical judgment that fulfils the test of empirical justification can be called 'true'. In so far as we solve empirical disagreements and we judge the truth of two conflicting statements (e.g. 'This room is square' and 'this room is not square') through a procedure of justification which uses empirical observation (measuring the sides of the room, etc.), the use of the standard rational method could solve moral disagreements. Only a moral judgment which is tested by applying a method of this type may thus be called 'valid'.

In this sense, the validity of a moral judgment is subject to very strong epistemic requirements, those that typically identify the notion of truth. The notion of truth is usually connected to more demanding requirements than the other epistemic notions (validity, justification, correctness, acceptability, and so on): the principle of bivalence (according to which every statement is true or false), a relationship with the world (according to which a sentence is true if it corresponds to the facts), stability, absoluteness and so on; conditions accepted by almost all theories of truth, and denied only by strong deflationary views (which identify truth with the other epistemic notions).

In saying that something is true, Crispin Wright notes, we assume:

> that to every truth-apt content corresponds a truth-apt negation; that a content
> is true just in case it corresponds to the facts, depicts things as they are, and so
> on; that truth and justification are distinct; that truth is absolute - there is no

being more or less true; that truth is stable - if the content is ever true, it always is[13].

In this sense, the notion of validity is synonymous with that of truth, in a non deflationary sense of the latter concept. And this is the sense in which the term 'validity' has been understood by some non-cognitivists to deny the relativistic implications of their view: relativism (which holds that conflicting moral judgments are equally valid) would be linked to the truth-aptness of moral judgments, denied by non-cognitivists.

> It is impossible – Ayer writes - to find a criterion for determining the validity of ethical judgments [...] because they have no objective validity whatsoever. If a sentence makes no statement at all, there is obviously no sense in asking whether what it says is true or false[14].

8. The second sense in which the epistemic notion of validity can be interpreted is in connection with weaker methods of reasoning than the standard one: a moral judgment that fulfils such methods could be said 'valid' even if it does not fulfil the rational standard method.

Many believe that the standard criterion of rationality is not applicable to ethics and stress the peculiarity of moral reasoning with regard to empirical reasoning. As opposed to the standard rational method, they propose less demanding methods of reasoning which are more similar to the different ways to solve moral problems in ordinary life.

Brandt, for example, has replaced the standard rational method with the 'qualified attitude method', according to which a moral judgment is rational if it conforms to the attitudes of fully informed and impartial agents; Rawls and the constructivists with the 'reflective equilibrium method', according to which a moral judgment is rational if it is the result of a conscious weighing and adjustment between specific intuitions and general ethical theories; and Hare with the principle of universalizability, according to which a moral judgment is rational if it can be universalized.

Brandt explicitly refers to this sense of validity in his formulation of meta-ethical relativism: those who argue that two conflicting moral judgments are equally valid are saying, Brandt writes, that

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[13] Wright 1996, pp. 7-8.
[14] Ayer 1936, p. 112.

the application of a "rational" method in ethics would support, equally, two conflicting ethical statements, even if there were available a complete system of factual knowledge[15].

9. Apart from these two meanings of the notion of epistemic validity, we may add a third meaning, according to which a moral judgment is epistemically valid if it conforms to a non-rational procedure of foundation.

What can be considered a non-rational procedure of foundation for a moral judgment depends on the different meta-ethical theories: it may consist in the expression of emotions or evaluative attitudes of the subject (a moral judgment is valid if it is a sincere expression of emotions and evaluative attitudes), or in the reference to intuitive a-priori truth (a moral judgment is valid if it is based on a non-inferential intuition), provided that the appeal to intuitions does not fall within the standard rational method.

Understood in this way, even those who deny that there is a rational method in ethics may consider 'epistemically valid' a moral judgment that fulfils such a procedure. For this reason, Brandt implicitly recognizes that even those who reject such a method (such as non-cognitivists who argue that "there is no unique rational or justified method in ethics"[16]) would agree to define "equally valid" conflicting moral principles.

In fact, from a non-cognitivistic point of view, Alf Ross acknowledges a validity of moral judgments which is independent from their truth.

> It is not *prima facie* unreasonable – Ross writes - to compare the approval of a moral principle with the acceptance of a proposition. Moral approval would on this construction be conceived as an attitude-deciding act in which a moral directive is accepted as valid; and validity is to be taken as a property of directives and consequently independent of the situation in which the directive is experienced and of the person deciding. 'Validity' is thought, on short, to be analogous to truth. [...] Against this interpretation, however, it may be argued that the acceptance of a moral directive is actually constitutive; that is acceptance is a subjective attitude which constitutes the validity of the directives. There exist, according to this view, no specific moral cognition[17].

Therefore, we may have more meanings for the epistemic notion of validity, and therefore more meanings for the sentence that conflicting moral judgments are equally valid: equally valid in a strict sense of the term 'validity' (according to the standard rational method), in a less strict sense (according to

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[15] Brandt 1959, p. 274.

[16] Brandt 1959, p. 274.

[17] Ross 1968, p. 63 f.

non-standard reasoning procedures), and in a broad sense (according to a non-rational procedure of foundation).

OBJECTIVISM AND RELATIVISM

10. The distinction between these various meanings of the epistemic notion of validity helps us to show that there are objectivistic views which are compatible not only with first-level relativism (a quite standard view), but even with second-level relativism, and vice-versa, that there are forms of second-level relativism which are compatible with objectivism.

On the one hand, there are theories that maintain the objectivity of ethics in all the three senses that we have seen above but recognize the presence of equally valid conflicting moral judgments. Some cognitivistic views stress that ethics has to follow the same rational method as scientific research, but at the same time they acknowledge the possibility of a disagreement not only in fact but also in principle, and therefore admit that there may be conflicting moral judgments which are equally valid in the sense that they would fulfil the standard rational method.

This is because they conceive moral disagreement as similar to the most complex cases of cognitive indeterminacy and vagueness, namely situations where the truth of a judgment is inherently indeterminate (because of the vagueness in the meaning or in the reference of terms) and it would be so even for ideal observers who were aware of all the morally relevant facts: "moral truth may elude our best epistemic efforts"[18]. Therefore, some moral disagreements are conceived as similar to the disagreements in relation to unresolvable problems, such as the existence of "agent causation, or abstract entities, or an all-perfect divinity"[19].

> The fact that there is no uniquely correct assessment awaiting discovery can appropriately explain why in some cases even idealized agents would fail to converge on the identity of the single best moral evaluation[20]

Nevertheless, the fact that morality is not completely determined, would not compromise the objectivity of moral knowledge, in the same way as cognitive indeterminacy does not compromise objectivity of scientific knowledge.

> Does realism about a discipline – David Brink writes - require that its disputes

[18] Shafer Landau 2003, p. 225.
[19] Shafer Landau 2003, p. 228.
[20] Shafer-Landau 1994, p. 336.

be resolvable even in principle? I think that a realist should resist the assumption that it ought to be possible, in practice or even in principle, to get *any* cognizer to hold true beliefs. All our beliefs are revisable, at least in principle, and dialectical investigation of our beliefs can identify explanatory tensions in our beliefs, and force more or less drastic revision in them if it is carried out thoroughly[21].

11. On the other hand, there are theories that expressly support meta-ethical relativism, but that do not rule out the objectivity of moral judgments, in some of the senses quoted above. They accept the presence of rational methods to address moral disagreements, but these methods cannot solve the problem and cannot say which of two conflicting moral principles is more valid or universally valid.

For instance, Brandt believes that the truth of a moral principle depends on being considered as such by a subject that tests that judgment with his "qualified attitudes". Yet different people's qualified attitudes towards the same action may be different so there may be equally valid conflicting moral principles: "the evidence - Brandt writes – rather supports the view that different persons could apply the standard method properly and come out with conflicting answers to *some* ethical questions"[22].

Another example is Gilbert Harman's or David Wong's meta-ethical theory. According to Wong, moral judgments are truth-apt like factual judgments: the truth of a moral principle depends on following "rules and standards of moral systems that people have developed to resolve internal and interpersonal conflicts"[23], that is, the elements that make up what is an "adequate moral system". In this way, moral properties can be derived from non-moral properties, and there are moral facts reducible to non-moral facts, precisely through "reference to rules and standards, items in the world that are distinct from moral statements"[24]. (Nevertheless, Wong refuses to consider his meta-ethics realistic in a strong sense: "by analyzing moral statements as statements about normative structures created by human mind, I am taking the position that there is no irreducible moral reality independent of human invention and choice"[25]). Yet since the criteria for defining what an adequate system of morality is are local, there are several adequate moral systems with different

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[21] Brink 1989, p. 199.
[22] Brandt 1959, p. 293.
[23] Wong 1986, p. 71.
[24] Wong 1986, p. 72.
[25] Wong 1986, p. 72.

rules and standards according to different moral societies, and there are conflicting moral principles which are equally true.

> By allowing for the extension of 'adequate moral system' to vary over different groups and societies, it allows for two sets of moral beliefs that conflict pragmatically to be equally true [...]. It allows for different members of one extension to be applicable to different groups or societies, and this also accounts for some diversity in moral belief[26].

The conclusion is shared with Harman: "there is not a single true morality"[27].

CONCLUSION

12. Therefore, in ethics, objectivity and relativity can be compatible with each other. Everything depends on the meanings in which the two notions may be understood.

As we have seen, metaethical objectivity means to recognize truth-aptness, rationality and (or) reality of moral judgments. Metaethical relativity means to recognize conflicting moral judgments which are equally valid. On the other hand, we have stressed the epistemic, non-relativistic and not univocal sense of the notion of validity (which may be more or less broad), not to be confused with the normative, relativistic, sense.

These are the most relevant meanings for the notions of objectivism and relativism in meta-ethics, and both are apt to be conceived as complementary rather than opposite.

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[26] Wong 1986, p. 65.
[27] Wong 2006, p. XII. Harman 2000, pp. 77 ff.

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