



The Sources of Relativism

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Ethics, Vol. 126, No. 1 (October 2015), pp. 175-195

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/682185>

Accessed: 30/09/2015 14:14

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The Sources of Relativism*

Kirk Ludwig

Carol Rovane's fascinating and deeply philosophical study of relativism advances a novel and subtle interpretation of the relativistic strain in philosophical thinking that identifies it as a response to the possibility of what she calls normative insularity—there being, or our encountering, others whom we recognize to accept truths (in a significant domain) which nonetheless we cannot embrace ourselves, in different cases, perhaps, for different reasons.

Nowadays the intuitive source of relativism is usually thought to lie in the possibility of a certain sort of faultless disagreement, in which two disputants come to recognize that while their views conflict, nonetheless neither is mistaken (both are right). Rovane calls this the Disagreement Intuition. This is often buttressed with an appeal to relativism of truth (the *Relative Truth Intuition*) to rescue the claim from the incoherence of maintaining that two views are both right and contradictory—though, as Rovane points out, this is at the risk of undercutting, at the same time, the sense that there is any conflict. Rovane looks back instead to central discussions of relativism in the twentieth century, which ultimately look back to Kant, that stress a different idea, namely, the possibility of radically different, more or less total, ways of approaching the world (or domains within the world). This she calls the *Alternatives Intuition*.

The book addresses two questions. The first is what the right account of relativism is. The second is what grounds we could have for thinking that relativism, properly understood, is true of one or another domain. The book is divided into two parts, addressing the first and second

* This is a critical study of Carol Rovane, *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013). Parenthetical citations in the text are to this book. I wish to thank Kate Abramson for helpful comments and suggestions.

questions, of two chapters each. Chapter 1 takes up the Disagreement Intuition, whether truth relativism can rescue it from incoherence, and its relation to antirealism. Chapter 2 develops the positive account in terms of the Alternatives Intuition, which Rovane calls *Multimundialism*, in contrast to the one-world view, *Unimundialism*. Chapter 3 takes up the question whether there is reason to think that Multimundialism may be true in the domain of natural facts. Chapter 4 takes up the question what reasons there might be to think it true in the domain of morality. Rovane argues that reflection on the holism of attitude attribution shows that Multimundialism is not a live option in the domain of natural facts. In contrast, she argues that the argument from holism fails for morality and that there is a case to be made in this domain for Multimundialism.

Rovane evaluates accounts of relativism on the basis of how well they satisfy four desiderata on an adequate account. (1) It should capture an important intuition about the content of relativism. (2) It should characterize relativism as a metaphysical, rather than an epistemic, doctrine that is controversial but worth taking seriously. (3) It should have the resources to defend itself against the charge of incoherence. (4) It should make sense of how we could live in accordance with it.

In the following, I will sketch the main line of argument, clarify the central claim, raise some questions, and make some suggestions. Inevitably, there is much valuable discussion that I will have to pass over without comment.

IRRESOLUBLE DISAGREEMENT AND RELATIVE TRUTH

The main charge that Rovane levels against the Disagreement Intuition, and its sidekick the Relative Truth Intuition, is not the apparent incompatibility of its two requirements, but the more subtle point that “disagreements have a *distinctive normative significance* that is entirely missing in the situations that are alleged to be metaphysically irresolvable disagreements, and this puts into doubt whether we should regard them as disagreements at all” (18). The distinctive normative significance in turn points to the Alternatives Intuition, which promises to explain it.

This charge is elaborated in relation to an example, which is a paradigm of the sort of case that prompts reflection on relativism. The example involves two people from different cultures. The first, Anjali, lives, and accepts, a traditional life in India, in which she has been, since her early teens, in a marriage arranged by her parents. She undertakes all the duties which attend that, “the bearing and raising of children, and cooking and cleaning house, and attending to the various needs of the wider family” (41). The second, Anne (as I shall call her—Rovane employs a first person narrator), is a middle-aged woman, of middle-class origins, from middle America, who has gone to the university, earned an MBA,

made a fortune, and retired early. She remains single and visits family on holidays, but she does not share her wealth with them. She and her family accept that she deserves her greater wealth because she has worked for it, and it shows that she has merit others less industrious lack. Anne, on a trip to India, meets Anjali. Through an interpreter they come in contact with each other's views about how to live, about one's responsibilities to one's parents and family, about one's role in one's society, about the relative value of self-determination, about the appropriate degree of autonomy one should have in relation to the desires and needs of others, and so on.

Interpreted as an ordinary disagreement, one of them is right, for example, about whether one should defer to one's parents' wishes about whom to marry, and the other wrong, and resolving the disagreement would amount to one convincing the other. If this were impossible, it would be at most an epistemic point. In contrast, on the (contemporary) relativist interpretation, they come to see, perhaps, that the conflict runs deeper than that: each sees that it "makes sense for each . . . to live by [her] own moral standards in [their] respective contexts" (43), and they each come to think then that each is right. On Rovane's preferred interpretation, the appearance of conflict disappears: Anne and Anjali simply mean different things when they speak of what is morally obligatory, or, more precisely, when Anne uses 'moral obligation' and Anjali uses 'kar-tavya' ('कृतव्य'). The terms they use are informed by different standards. Anjali means *morally-obligatory-in-the-Indian-traditionalist-sense* and Anne means *morally-obligatory-in-the-American-individualist-sense*. They do not disagree. Yet, though they both recognize that what the other believes is correct, so far as it goes, neither can *accept* what the other accepts.

The example is not supposed to determine directly which interpretation is correct. Rovane uses it to raise another point: that the usual "normative point of registering a disagreement is entirely missing" (51). The usual point is to resolve the disagreement by determining who is wrong. Since Anne and Anjali each agree that the views of the other are correct, there is nothing to resolve. The disagreement theorist, Rovane says, accepting that the usual normative point of registering disagreement is missing, will explain the point of registering disagreement as being to acknowledge "a particular form of exclusion that they think relativism intuitively involves" (51). This shows up in the evident impossibility of Anne and Anjali adopting each other's moral views alongside those they already have. Rovane calls this normative unresponsiveness and suggests that it is "the distinctive normative stance of the relativist" (57). (In the present case, the sense of exclusion rests on a connection, as Rovane is thinking of it, between moral belief and action.) The disagreement relativist then holds that registering disagreement acknowledges that, despite their both being right, they can neither embrace the other's beliefs because they are still contradictory. Rovane argues, however, that if that were

the explanation, then the interpretation of the example in which one gives up the idea of conflict should remove the sense that the different views could not be adopted together (that they were really contradictory), but this is not so. The disagreement relativist, then, does not have an adequate account of how they can both be right but it not be possible for either to adopt the other's views.

In closing her discussion of the Disagreement Intuition, Rovane turns to the suggestion that relativism can be rescued by appeal to the idea that in these cases truth is relative to a context of assessment (rather than of utterance). The aim of appeal to assessment relativity is to preserve a sense of disagreement or conflict about a proposition, while allowing both views to be true—relative to different contexts of assessment. That is, the goal is to reconcile the idea that both views are true with the idea that they are contradictory. In our example, a context of assessment is fixed by a cultural stance or associated set of standards. Rovane seems to agree that, on the assessment relativity view, though both Anjali's and Anne's claims are true, they are still contradictory. For my part, I do not see that there is a contradiction. If a domain is one in which truth is relative to a context of assessment, no object is the bearer of truth-values simpliciter. There is no semantic conflict even if the form of the claims are that p and that it is not the case that p . The rescue attempt fails. I will return to this below.

In any case, Rovane argues, instead, that assessment relativism fails the fourth criterion on an adequate account, namely, that it show how relativism is livable. The reason is that it violates a requirement on rationality, the all-things-considered requirement: "it is a requirement to arrive at and act upon *all-things-considered judgments* that take into account all of one's relevant beliefs, values, and other attitudes. Usually the requirement is understood as instructing us to take everything that we think into due account when we deliberate about *what to do*, but I want to discuss a parallel requirement, that we ought to take everything that we think into due account when we deliberate about *what is true*—including when we are deliberating about whether someone else's claim or belief is true" (65). Why is this a problem? Rovane says that the assessment relativist is committed to assessing others' beliefs as false when "we encounter relativism-inducing disagreements" (65). But this instructs us to ignore our other beliefs to the effect that the other's beliefs are true. Thus, we "*would be in violation of the all-things-considered requirement on rationality*" (66). Why does Rovane say that the assessment relativists instruct us to say that the other's beliefs are false? Well, they are false from the context of assessment from which one evaluates one's own moral beliefs, and that is the context of assessment which one occupies. And one cannot simply decide to occupy or take up the other's position, understanding this as a matter of adopting the other's culture together with its

systematically different way of viewing the moral universe. Even if this were possible, it would be an undertaking of years.

Yet, granting all of this, what is the problem with taking into account one's belief that the other's beliefs are true relative to her context of assessment? For on the assessment relativist's view, there is no conflict in holding that they are false relative to one's own standards but true relative to the other's. It would clearly be a mistake, on the assessment relativist's view, to think the other's moral beliefs were true simpliciter, just as it would be to think one's own were. It is true that the other's moral beliefs are false from one's own context of assessment, true that they are true from the other's context of assessment, and true that both of these claims are true and noncontradictory. As soon as the relativization to a context of assessment is taken into account, we can take into account all our beliefs without any tension. We can satisfy the all-things-considered requirement on rationality.

The deeper problem with assessment relativism lies in its inability to make sense of the idea of genuine disagreement, once we have relativized truth to a context of assessment. Although assessment relativity is not context relativity, it shares with it the relativization of truth to additional parameters. There is only a superficial appearance of conflict when I say "I am sitting" and you say "I am not sitting" because these sentences are evaluated for truth in relevantly different contexts (different speakers and times). They look contradictory, but uttered by different speakers they have different and compatible truth conditions. Similarly, there is only an appearance of conflict (accepting an assessment relative story about moral judgments) between Anjali asserting as true (what would be translated as) "One ought morally to defer to one's parents about whom to marry" (from her standpoint) and Anne asserting as true "It is not the case that one ought morally to defer to one's parents about whom to marry" (from her standpoint) because these claims are assessed for truth in relevantly different contexts (different sets of culturally embedded standards). The general point is this. If we treat the truth predicate as having n argument places, one of which takes a statement, s , where $x \neq y$, my saying that $T^n(s, \dots, x)$ and your saying that $T^n(s, \dots, y)$, are not in conflict (at least formally) because we are asserting the relation of a different sequence of things. The assessment relativity account has to have an error theory about the appearance of disagreement in the kinds of cases that motivate relativism. There is one available, namely, that when it seems to us that there is a disagreement, we are overlooking that the context of assessment is different. The question is whether this is a plausible account of the sense that there is real conflict of some sort in these cases. It is difficult to see that it is, and not only because it is difficult to make out the idea of truth having to be relativized to standards or cultures in the present application, but also because (a) it is difficult to

see how, when disputants arrive at the view that each is right, taking into account her situation, but still sense a conflict, we could explain it as a matter of overlooking the different contexts of assessment, since we have just explicitly taken them into account, and (b) it does not give center place to the sense of exclusion arising from a practical impossibility, that of implementing the other's position in one's own life.

Before we turn to the Alternatives Intuition, let's consider one more suggestion for what the source of relativism might be. This is the idea that the relevant sorts of disagreements are not so much disagreements of fact as disagreements about how to project moral discourse onto cases for which it does not render determinate verdicts. A model for this is the need to extend the law to treat cases that were not anticipated by its framers. There may be disagreements that look as if they are about what is legal (and reasons why they are framed that way), whereas in fact they are disagreements about how to extend the legal system. There would be a sense then in which disputants were disagreeing and a sense in which they could also agree that the other's position is not wrong (though not determinately right either), because not ruled out by how the law has been articulated up to this point. To take this as a model for our moral frameworks would be to accept that they have an open texture in Waismann's sense.¹ It would give rise to a conflict that has some of the features that are characteristic of confrontations that give rise to relativism. Furthermore, it looks analogous to the open future, and so it may seem apt for treatment by an assessment relative conception of truth. However, insofar as we take the case of Anne and Anjali to be our prototype, this would not appear to be a good model for the kind of relativism at issue. For in their case, the problem is not that their moral systems do not yield verdicts, and that they must work out how to extend them, yet work out different extensions, but that they do yield verdicts, which *prima facie* recommend different responses.

Perhaps we could think of different systems of moral standards as arising from a series of different decisions about how to extend a basic set of principles. If we really thought of these as free decisions (because the principles have an open texture) within certain constraints and allow the standards that result from different decisions to conflict, and not merely by giving apparently conflicting prescriptions, which are resolved when we take into account different circumstances, then we would open the possibility of conflicts among systems of morality akin to conflicts among different legal systems that start with a common conception of basic law. Then perhaps we could think of there being conflicts at least in the sense of conflicting prescriptions, which because of their source in

1. Friedrich Waismann, "Verifiability," in *Essays on Logic and Language (First Series)*, ed. Gilbert Ryle and Antony Flew (Oxford: Blackwell, 1951), 144–77.

free decisions about how to extend morality to unanticipated conditions or cases could be seen as equally legitimate—both right, if not uniquely, and neither wrong. The point of registering disagreement would be to acknowledge the conflict, but not to resolve it, since each would be equally legitimate, given that they were each developed (albeit differently) within the relevant constraints.² Whether this, at least partially, positivistic conception of the content of morality is plausible, and whether it could provide a good model for the sorts of actual conflicts that give impetus to relativism, is another matter, which I will not pursue any further here. It is, I think, a presupposition of Rovane's discussion that the content of morality is not even in part up to us in the way that this picture assumes.

THE ALTERNATIVES INTUITION AND MULTIMUNDIALISM

The positive case for the centrality of the Alternatives Intuition rests on three claims. First, it was the central idea guiding discussions of relativism in much of the twentieth century, whose origin can be traced back to Kant. Second, it allows us to explain the peculiar normative status of cases that illustrate relativism. Third, it affords an account that satisfies the four desiderata on adequacy Rovane lays out.

Kant's view that the world of which we have knowledge depends on the simultaneous operation of the faculty of sensibility and of understanding, while allowing the possibility in principle of different forms of sensibility and understanding, provides a model for how different ways of approaching the world might be correct yet not capable of being simultaneously embraced. This idea found a different expression in Carnap's account of linguistic frameworks (supposing that they are different exclusive ways of dealing with the same stretch of reality—it is not clear to me that Carnap was committed to this), and in Kuhn's conception of scientific theories before and after revolutions as incommensurable and exclusive in the sense of not being theories one could hold at the same time. And it is this idea, Rovane says, that Davidson was primarily responding to in his attack on relativism in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme."³

2. Here the thought is not that there are different forms of life that equally well express an ideally moral life in the sense that all the fixed constraints of morality are met. These would just be different determinants of a determinable, where differing circumstances may require different choices and generate different special obligations, and where agents may freely choose different paths while meeting their obligations—voluntarily taking on obligations or responsibilities associated with social roles, or taking up some among different moral causes, equally legitimately, where they cannot take up all. For in this case there is not even a *prima facie* conflict between different forms of life. The partially positivistic conception suggested in the text allows for different requirements in the same circumstances.

3. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Clarendon, 2001), 183–98.

What is most novel about Rovane's position arises out of her response to an objection to the very idea of exclusive alternatives in the sense sketched, which she labels the *Dilemma for Alternatives*. Truth-value bearers p and q are consistent or they are inconsistent. If inconsistent, they are not both true. But if they are consistent, then so is their conjunction. And if the conjunction is consistent, nothing prevents anyone from rationally embracing both. So there cannot be two sets of beliefs whose propositional objects are both true but which are exclusive, for if both are true, they are not inconsistent, and if consistent, they can be held jointly.

Strikingly, Rovane argues for a third alternative: "in some cases truth-value bearers are neither inconsistent nor consistent" (77). "According to the Alternatives Intuition that I am elaborating, *the most fundamental dividing issue between relativists and their opponents is really a logical one*. It concerns whether there is any such thing as normative insularity, or equivalently, it concerns whether logical relations run everywhere among all truth-value-bearers. Relativists deny this, while their opponents insist upon it" (79). When I first read this, I thought: there is no such position in logical space. Take any two propositions p and q . Every possible world is consistent. Either there is a possible world in which p and q both are true (consistent) or not (inconsistent). There is no third alternative.

However, it turns out that what Rovane has in mind is not in conflict with this, because she is understanding the "consistency" of p and q not as a matter of whether the truth of each excludes the truth of the other, but as a matter of whether someone who believes one can (coherently) simultaneously believe the other—whether they are cotenable. For when Rovane clarifies what she means by 'logical relation', she says: "Here is what I mean: *It is in the nature of a logical relation to possess a distinctive normative force, by virtue of which it mandates, licenses, or prohibits inferences among truth-value-bearers*" (94). This psychologistic reading of 'logical relations' comes out also in Rovane's characterizing Unimundialism as the view that there is a "*single, consistent, and comprehensive body of truth*" (79) and then going on to say that "these logical notions implicitly introduce the idea of a point of view from which consistent and conjoinable truths can be embraced together" (80).

Rovane proposes, then, not so much a third-way response to the Dilemma for Alternatives, as an objection to its assumption that compossibility entails cotenability. Rovane embraces one horn of the dilemma, on this way of putting it—that relativism entails the purely logical consistency of the alternative views—but denies that it follows that the consistent propositions (one accepted by one person and the other by another) are cotenable. Then we can restate relativism as the doctrine *that there are noncotenable sets of true (hence compossible) propositions*. Relativ-

ism on this understanding is a thesis in the philosophy of mind. It is a thesis about what is simultaneously thinkable (broadly construed).

Even so, there is a problem. For if to encounter another's inaccessible worldview we have to recognize it as true, while not accepting it, we seem to be required to withhold assent from a proposition transparently entailed by a proposition we accept, that is to say, for some substitutions for '*p*', we have to believe that *it is true that p* but not believe that *p*. Even if possible, this would appear to be a breakdown of rationality. At least, this is so if truth is all that is at issue. A more robust conception of what is involved in believing or accepting something may make room for a gap. If, for example, believing that one ought to respect the wishes of one's parents about whom one marries requires being committed to letting that guide one's actions (robust belief), then there is room for one to think (in some less robust sense) that it is true, but not believe it in the sense of letting it guide one's actions. This requires us to distinguish a thin sense in which we think or believe that it is true that *p* and a thick sense in which we do not believe that *p*, where the former sort of belief is, so to speak, purely theoretical, and the latter has practical dimensions, that is, it is integrated into one's living one's life in a way that the former is not. Then we can allow that if one believes that it is true that *p* in the thin sense, one can likewise believe in the thin sense that *p*, but it is, in a certain way, idle—a truth removed from the exigencies of life.

The final picture is this. Relativism at root is about the possibility of alternative ways of approaching a domain, in the sense of alternative sets of beliefs about it that are not cotenable. In this sense, there are no "logical relations" between the propositions believed, and these different points of view are normatively insulated from one another. In this sense, agents occupying different points of view live in different worlds, hence, Multimundialism. That is, metaphor aside, there are portions of the world that each engages with (in certain ways) in virtue of how she views them that the other cannot effectively engage with (in those ways) while engaged with the world in the way characteristic of her current stance toward it. It is situations like that of Anne and Anjali (or Kuhn's scientists trying to talk across a revolutionary divide) that give rise to this idea. It is misexpressed in the Disagreement Intuition. If there is conflict, they both cannot be right; if both are right, there is no genuine disagreement, and appeal to relativity of truth cannot capture the distinctive normative status of the relevant encounters.

MULTIMUNDIALISM IN THE DOMAIN OF NATURAL FACTS

Is Multimundialism a live option with respect to the natural world? Rovane argues that it is not. She draws here on Davidson. Rovane argues that

considerations of Charity (the need to find others largely right—and so in agreement with us—to find them interpretable) do not get us very far, but considerations involving holism get us further. The argument is given in the following passage:

given holism, truth-value-bearers derive their identities from the positions they occupy in an overall system of concepts and beliefs, and what makes it a system . . . is a *ubiquity of logical relations*. . . . In all cases where we can make sense of what others believe, we will find not only that they by and large agree with us about many matters in just the way that Davidson contended, but also that, at the points at which others diverge from us, their beliefs still stand in myriad logical relations to what we already believe, and as a result we shall not find any occasion for the thoroughgoing epistemic indifference of the Multimundialist that would follow upon an encounter with normative insularity. (146)

Is this enough? The idea is that we identify propositional attitudes only in rational patterns that individuate them and which are constitutive of their having the contents that they do, many of which we must see as true. There need not be, on Davidson's view, any one pattern for any given belief, but for any given belief, there must be a large pattern of related beliefs (and pro attitudes) in which it has a place. "No particular list of further beliefs is required to give substance to my belief that a cloud is passing before the sun; but some appropriate set of related beliefs must be there."⁴ This requires that we grasp the concepts involved in another's beliefs, and be able to entertain the propositions she believes, and believe many of the same things. But sharing many beliefs is compatible with not sharing all, and grasping concepts and being able to entertain propositions does not guarantee that we can come to believe the propositions entertained (or the argument could be much shorter). Thus, there still seems space, so far as all of this goes, for identifying a large body of beliefs, which we can (putting aside other worries) see as true but not accept, that is, which are logically consistent with ours (bear logical relations to them in that sense) but are not cotenable with ours. We still need to distinguish a thin and thick sense of 'belief' to make sense of how one can rationally see something as true but not accept it. But there seems room for some such distinction even in the domain of natural fact.

What would a model of this look like? Think of the positions of scientists committed to working within radically different scientific paradigms. Suppose in particular that we accept a Humean theory of the fundamental laws as generalizations that are members of a set satisfying

4. Donald Davidson, "The Method of Truth in Metaphysics," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 199–214, 200.

to the highest degree the requirement of simplicity and generality, and perhaps other desiderata as well, that account for all generalizations. And suppose we have good reason to think that there can be more than one set tying for best, but that they support radically different ways of explaining the world. Suppose that this induces on scientific practice radically different imperatives with respect to how to conduct scientific inquiry, what experiments to run, what observations are significant, and so on. Scientists working within different paradigms may well be able to understand what their counterparts are up to working within their different paradigms and to recognize both what those others believe about the world and that it is true. But all the same they can find it impossible to simultaneously adopt their own stance and that of the other. The trouble is that adopting each stance comes with practical commitments, and the commitments of each are not compatible with the commitments of the other. So the space opened up here between belief (in a thin sense) and acceptance has the same source as in the case of the conflict of systematically different systems of moral standards for behavior. This is not to say that this is the correct way to view natural laws or the practice of science. The goal is only to provide a model for how a form of normative insulation analogous to that exhibited in the case of Anne and Anjali might plausibly be said to arise in the domain of natural fact, so as to raise the question whether the argument from holism by itself shows that the Alternatives Intuition cannot get a grip in that domain.

A further issue arises about the relation between holism and Multimundialism when, at least at one point, Rovane appears to entertain, and even endorse, an extreme form of holism. She considers the objection to holism, and so its use as a premise in her argument, that “holism has the following problematic implication: If the content of any particular belief is individuated just by its position within a system of interrelated beliefs, it would appear to follow that no two subjects can share any beliefs without agreeing on *everything*” (149). In response, Rovane says that “if holism is true, then we must simply find a way to accommodate its problematic implication” (150). Yet, holism, if it had this problematic implication, far from providing a barrier against Multimundialism, when combined with the plausible claims (i) that not everyone thinks alike and (ii) that most people have at least some true beliefs, would entail it straightaway. If any change of belief is total change in the contents of all our beliefs (and other attitudes), we could never accept another’s beliefs (true or false) without giving up all our own. We would all “live in different worlds.” No belief in any cotenable set of beliefs would be cotenable with any in any other. While this would entail that we could not confront another’s worldview, recognize it as correct, but not change what we accept, it would still be a form of Multimundialism.

One response is to fall back to a position like Davidson’s on which different patterns of related attitudes can support attribution of the

same belief (151). Another is to try to make sense of the idea of sameness of belief in relation to certain purposes (though can they be the same purposes if we accept radical holism?) (151). However, this latter response does not secure sameness of content, and so it does not seem to speak to the issue. So the only position consistent with the appeal to holism that Rovane makes is a moderate holism of the sort that Davidson endorsed. As we have seen, it is not clear that this secures the desired result, but at least it does not entail its negation.

Rovane goes on to argue that a realist stance exposes a limitation in the argument from holism (178 ff.). The idea is that Davidson's arguments, against the background of a realist conception of the world as mind-independent, show only that anyone we could make sense of would have to have attitudes that stand in logical relations to ours. But this leaves it open that there be others whom we could not make sense of who had true beliefs which we could not embrace (given ours). There would be no knowable alternatives, but there could be unknowable ones.

Davidson rejected the view that the world is mind-dependent. But he also thought that the concepts of the propositional attitudes were not evidence transcendent. "What no one can, in the nature of the case, figure out from the totality of the relevant evidence cannot be part of meaning."⁵ Since meaning and belief are inextricable on Davidson's view, and belief and the other propositional attitudes come together or not at all, the point extends to the propositional attitudes generally. The relevant evidence is behavioral evidence. Thus, what we cannot figure out on the basis of behavioral evidence in particular cannot be part of meaning or thought. This is intelligible provided that the attitude concepts are designed to bring order to behavioral evidence and have no content beyond what is required for that job. This goes beyond holism of the sort that Rovane invokes, but it is part of Davidson's picture. If this can be harnessed to an argument (as Davidson aimed to do in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme") that secures that not only must such concepts be deployed on the basis of behavioral evidence, but also from our point of view, then it allows a robust realism compatible with there being few or no attitudes that are in principle undiscoverable.

Whether this view of the propositional attitude concepts is right and can be harnessed to an argument that shows our point of view to be in a sense universal is another matter. Doubt is cast on this by a final suggestion that Rovane makes, namely, that there may be empirical reasons to think there can be unknowable alternative ways of viewing the world. Kantian in spirit, the idea is that human cognitive and sensory capacities are biologically limited in certain ways, but biology is not per se so limited,

5. Donald Davidson, "The Inscrutability of Reference," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 227–42, 235.

so that it is open, pending further investigation, that there could be creatures with different cognitive and sensory capacities, revealing different things about the world, the exercise of which is not compatible with the exercise of ours. We have models of this. Diurnal birds have tetrachromatic color vision. They have four retinal color cone cells, rather than our three, sensitive to light at different peak frequencies, ranging further into the ultraviolet. Birds see the world differently in ways we cannot conceive. It may be said that the different color concepts involved differ only in how they are subjectively anchored in phenomenal experience. Still, the relevant facts about those subjective states are themselves facts about the world inaccessible to us (at least as things stand—whether this is a biological impossibility or a conceptual impossibility is a further issue). Can this line of thought be extended to nonsubjective states of the world? This is the locus of another realism/antirealism debate, not about whether the world is mind-independent, but about whether aspects of the mind-independent world outstrip in principle our capacities to conceive them because of our cognitive constitution, while possible others who conceptualize the world differently so as to grasp facts unavailable to us would be in a corresponding position with respect to aspects of the world that are thinkable to us. If so, there would be unrecognizable alternatives, or at least alternatives whose content we could not understand. In this case a robust Multimundialism would be an option in the domain of natural facts, but not a live option.

This way of realizing a form of Multimundialism is distinct from the suggestion I made above in thinking about scientists working in different paradigms, in light of a conception of the laws of nature that allow different total systematizations that are equally good representations of nature. In that case, the sense in which the two theoretical positions are not cotenable depends on treating acceptance as having a practical dimension. In contrast, the sort of exclusion just considered treats non-cotenable as a matter of not being able so much as to entertain some set of concepts that have application to the world given facts about one's cognitive-perceptual design. We may call the former sort *practical exclusion* and the latter sort *conceptual exclusion*.

MULTIMUNDIALISM IN THE DOMAIN OF MORALITY

Finally, we turn to Multimundialism in the domain of morality. For the purposes of discussion, Rovane assumes that “there is an irreducibly normative dimension to thought, choice, and action that cannot be captured in the descriptive language of science” (196). Rovane characterizes the domain of morality by the question, “*How should one live, given that there are other points of view besides one's own from which things matter?*” (199). Rovane argues that the issue of relativism, framed in terms of normative insularity,

arises in the domain of morality whether one is a cognitivist or non-cognitivist. For moral agents, on anyone's view, must make choices among multiple options and arrive at an all-things-considered-best judgment, which requires a (partial) transitive ordering of evaluative commitments, which in turn provides for "logical relations of *consistency* in domains of value" (207). Then "the cotenability of moral truths will rest on whether they can be jointly embraced and ranked together for the purposes of moral deliberation, and the possibilities for normative engagement with others concerning moral matters will rest on whether we and they can embrace the same bases for our respective moral deliberations" (219). How does this apply to the example of Anne and Anjali? What Rovane has in mind is that in actual fact thin moral concepts (*the good* and *the right*, and so on) are insufficient to provide guidance for a life, and they are filled in with thick moral concepts (*courage*, *venality*, *chastity*, *honor*, and the like) in terms of which the moral truths of different cultures and periods are expressed. That is to say, the abstract framework of morality stands in need of a conceptual interface with the particular forms of life different material, social, and cultural conditions make possible in order for morality to provide a practical guide to conduct. Thus, Anjali will deploy certain concepts pertaining to the web of familial obligations within which she conducts her life which have no direct analog in the network of moral concepts whose deployment guide Anne's conduct. The question of cotenability is whether one can combine into one system of conduct moral truths that draw on different families of thick moral concepts, which can then be ranked and evaluated on the same basis.

Does the argument from holism (if successful in the domain of natural facts) carry over to the domain of morality? Rovane argues that this reduces to the questions (1) whether we can understand different views about moral conduct as expressing shared underlying principles in different circumstances, or (2) at least whether the different principles of conduct, relativized to the circumstances, could be adopted together. Against the first, Rovane says that, while there are moral platitudes that plausibly are accepted across all human societies, such as, "*that, in general, killing, harming, and hindering agency are bad*" (253) and that "arbitrariness of moral response is in general wrong" (254), these are too generic to be action-guiding without supplement by thick moral concepts, and even the moral platitudes have to be interpreted in the context of the thick moral concepts they are integrated with, so the appearance of agreement is illusory. Against the second, Rovane says that this is an instance of When-in-Rome-morality, accepting ought statements conditionalized on social circumstances, but that in the relevant cases there is no way one could find oneself in those social circumstances (Anne in Anjali's or vice versa, for example) because they are tied up with one's identity (the network of values and commitments that structures the kind of life one aspires to lead).

On this second point, it is not clear that the practical impossibility of occupying a position tells against one's accepting a moral principle that says what anyone ought to do in it. I cannot give birth, but it seems to me that I can accept moral principles involving how one who can should act during and subsequent to pregnancy. I might, for example, accept that it would be wrong for anyone who is pregnant to engage in activities that were known to contribute to birth defects, like heavy drinking during pregnancy or smoking crack cocaine. Similarly, though I cannot become pregnant, I might nonetheless recognize that those who can have a moral right to decide for themselves whether to continue a pregnancy, prior to fetal viability. It seems plausible that one can extend this to differences that involve very different forms of social conditioning, even those tied up with one's identity. Thus, the fact that one cannot occupy a certain sociocultural position does not by itself appear to preclude one's accepting ought statements conditionalized on those circumstances.

In any case, Rovane takes the point about thick concepts informing conduct in different social conditions to undermine the application of holism by itself.

The difficulty for the Davidsonian argument . . . is that these points of agreement do not guarantee that others' thick moral concepts are potentially relevant to our own moral deliberations and inquiries, because of the way in which those thick moral concepts are geared to social conditions that are not ours. . . . This means that we may have nothing to learn from one another concerning *many* moral matters, and no basis on which to correct one another either. So even if we do accept various moral platitudes in common, we must allow that there are other moral matters about which we neither agree nor disagree, because we live by divergent thick moral concepts that are appropriate guides to moral life in our different moral worlds. (257)

I would have liked to see this argument more fully spelled out. The central point is that thick concepts designed for different social conditions are not useful guides in social conditions for which they are not designed, just as, perhaps, legal concepts, or concepts of etiquette, designed for certain social conditions would not have application in very different social environments. Practically they would not matter to our behavior. In this sense, we would learn nothing that would be useful to us. But would this mean that the different moral truths that guide another's life were normatively insulated from us? Why could we not endorse or accept the principles for action guidance in appropriate contexts but point out that they have no applicability to our circumstances because presuppositions for their application are not met? Why could we not still be able to engage in counterfactual reasoning employing them? Why

could we not be in a position to criticize the behavior of people whose circumstances make the application of their principles appropriate or to give them advice?

Consider a small-scale community in which kinship relations define the basic social structures of a community, the roles that various people (are to) occupy in virtue of their positions in kinship networks and traditional practices. It is common knowledge in such communities that these roles are assigned on this basis, it is inculcated from the earliest age, and it generates expectations about the behavior of others. The role structures can be expected to contribute to the cohesion of the community and to its functioning to secure a stable form of life for its members, and its continuance by future generations, in the material conditions under which it arose. To be born and raised into such a society is to be born into a network of role-defined obligations and duties with an associated set of thick moral concepts that play a role in their maintenance. We are unsuited by temperament, by training, by cultural conditioning, and by the extent of our knowledge, to enter into their form of life. We do not have the expectations, we do not have the attitudes, we do not have the principles, and we do not accept the relevant thick concepts. We could not unwind our life histories in a way that would enable us to step into their world. But this does not seem to be a barrier to understanding it. We could see why these principles and these thick concepts were appropriate for their material and social conditions. We could see the world they occupy from their point of view (which is not to say that it would be easy), even if we could not occupy it. Given their sociocultural conditions, and that they cannot occupy ours, we could see their principles as appropriate for them. Then it seems that while their practices and principles are not ours, we can endorse those practices and principles for them and not be indifferent to how they apply them, reasoning within the framework, identifying lapses, giving advice, and so on. We can disagree when one of them says that for someone in such and such a role, doing something is the appropriate thing to do, relative to the standards appropriate for someone in such conditions, even if we could never occupy that role, depending as it does on the whole sociocultural and material environment in which it makes sense.

This stance depends upon thinking that, even if the abstract framework of morality provides a guide to conduct in particular material, social, and cultural conditions only with the aid of thick moral concepts, we can nonetheless get a grip on the appropriateness of a set of thick moral concepts for a community given their circumstances. But this seems required if we are to think that, for example, our own thick moral concepts are not appropriate for the members of the community we are considering, given their material, social, and cultural conditions. And this seems to be a precondition for the sort of normative insularity we are trying to characterize.

Given this, a further question arises. Why could we not find their system of thick moral concepts developed in response to their social conditions *inappropriate* for them? Why can we not criticize them directly? Consider the way in which the concept of chastity and purity in Somalia is bound up with female genital mutilation (FGM). Are we to see this as beyond our criticism because the social presuppositions for their application are met for them? To the extent to which such practices rest in part on false factual beliefs, there are internal grounds for criticism. But suppose these removed. Have we no basis on which to criticize FGM? Would any criticism necessarily be a form of moral imperialism? Is any talk of universal human rights a form of moral imperialism? We might appeal here to universal (shared) principles against gratuitous harm, but if so, we must give up the idea that the principles are not shared because informed by different thick moral concepts, to meet the objection that from inside the relevant system of concepts, it is not seen as a gratuitous harm.

There is a dilemma here for relativism. To the extent to which we can see different practices as legitimate in their context, to that extent we see them as uncriticizable because they express moral values (even if translated through different thick moral concepts) that we share (and what other standards of moral legitimacy are we to employ?) relative to different social and material conditions. To the extent to which we do not see them as expressions of moral values we can recognize, we do not see them as legitimate even in their context. (This applies also to the conception of the content of morality as partially positivistic canvassed above.)

Perhaps I am requiring too high a standard for normative insularity. If we require only that the principles of others not be ones that can guide our lives, then the social conditions that make sense of the other's principles being inaccessible to us suffices. And perhaps this is enough for a variety of relativism based on the Alternatives Intuition. What this suggests, though, is that we need a taxonomy of the different possible varieties of relativism that may be grounded in the Alternatives Intuition and an account of their relations to one another. Here the barriers to acting in accord with another's different moral principles have to do not with the impossibility of grasping them or operating with them theoretically, or potentially endorsing them as appropriate for guiding the actions of those for whom their presuppositions are met, but with our not being able to occupy the position from which it would make sense to operate with them (as the poor cannot exercise the Aristotelian virtue of magnificence since it requires wealth to do so).

Understanding insularity in this narrower sense then, what blocks the argument from holism is that the alternatives involve truths the acceptance of which would have to make a practical difference to our lives. It is still true, if it was at all, that to identify the beliefs of others (even moral beliefs) we have to find them in appropriately related patterns of

attitudes and we have to find ourselves in agreement on many things to identify their contents. And it remains true that this means that there are logical relations between those beliefs' contents and what we believe. But these purely logical relations don't support the possibility of letting those truths guide our actions, given our circumstances. This seems fine—a way of making more than truth matter to acceptance.

We have been considering confrontations between different systems of thick moral concepts conceived of as solutions to problems that different material, social, and cultural circumstances give rise to. Suppose that the problems set by some circumstances have different, equally good solutions—that different systems of thick moral concepts can deal equally well with solving the sociocultural problems that they give rise to. This would be analogous to the scientists considered in the previous section adopting different frameworks of fundamental laws in solving for the simplest, most general set of laws that account for all generalizations. We would have a confrontation in the same circumstances that allows for agreement on the legitimacy of each system of moral concepts. This is an extension of the idea as applied to different circumstances. There the idea is that different circumstances give rise to different problems and call for different solutions. If circumstances always generate problems that have a uniquely best solution, then conflict arises only when there are differences in circumstances. But if circumstances don't present a problem that has a unique solution, then divergence of systems of thick moral concepts can potentially arise in response to the same circumstances.

The discussion has proceeded on the assumption that we can grasp the thick moral concepts that others operate with without adopting the associated commitments. Rovane does not suggest any difficulty, and I find it doubtful that there should be. But it is of interest to ask how matters look on the Alternatives Intuition, if we accept that we cannot grasp thick moral concepts (in the sense of being competent in their classificatory uses) in systems different enough from ours without at the same time adopting the commitments they require if one is to be guided by them. Perhaps it would be enough, as Williams says, that we be able to “grasp imaginatively [their] evaluative point,”⁶ without actually adopting the evaluative interests of the community in which they are deployed. But we may suppose for the sake of argument that there can be systems of thick moral concepts that are beyond even our imaginative reach while we maintain the commitments embodied in the thick moral concepts with which we operate. On this assumption, we can leverage a form of what I earlier called practical exclusion to support a form of conceptual exclusion, in the domain of morality. In this case, we could not

6. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), 142.

recognize what the other judges to be true. But perhaps we could have reason to think their judgments were true without knowing what they expressed.

In the end, Rovane suggests that there is a case to be made for Multimundialism in morality. She has one serious reservation about it, practical, rather than theoretical. If we adopt Multimundialism as our theoretical view, then as a practical matter it may close off from us the possibility of moral learning when it is open to us. (The same could be said for moral instruction.) In consequence, Rovane recommends that “we approach others from a state of *suspense* about whether the Unimundial or the Multimundial stance is the more appropriate stand to take toward them in the moral domain” (270).

How does Multimundialism fare on the four desiderata? (1) It captures a significant intuition about relativism, the Alternatives Intuitions. (2) It is a metaphysical thesis fundamentally about the mind-world relation—about the impossibility of a single point of view (in one of two senses) on the world as a whole. It is worth taking seriously in the sense that it is not obviously false, positions that philosophers have taken seem to lend it support, and there are actual encounters that suggest something of the sort may underlie them. (3) It has resources to draw on in responding to the charge of incoherence. (4) We can live in accordance with it—taking the case of Anne and Anjali as an example—because, at least where there is a practical dimension to acceptance, recognition of alternatives that are correct in their own terms that we cannot take up appropriately is a stable position from the standpoint of rational agency.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The fundamental idea of the book is that the source of views characterized as forms of relativism, about the domain of natural facts or the domain of morality, is the sense that there can be equally legitimate ways of approaching the world that exclude one another. This further resolves into two different thoughts. The first is that the mode of exclusion is practical, in the sense that what makes two sets of true beliefs noncotenable is that they come with systematically different and incompatible practical commitments. It is in connection with this that I introduced the distinction between thin and thick beliefs (or between belief and acceptance). The second is that the mode of exclusion is conceptual, in the sense that what makes two sets of true beliefs noncotenable is that the conditions for possessing the concepts involved in the one set exclude the conditions for possessing the concepts in the other set. In this case, we do not need a distinction between thin and thick beliefs, and the problem isn't the incompatibility of practical commitments concomitant to the beliefs. But in this case also there is no sense to be given to finding what

the other thinks or says true but not something one can accept. There can be no confrontation of one's thoughts with another's when one can't entertain them.

Rovane argues against relativism as a live option (recognition of the truth of the others' views without accepting them) in the domain of natural facts, by appeal to holism in attitude attribution, but allows that it might be a nonlive option. In the domain of morality, in contrast, she argues that appeal to holism is ineffective and suggests that there is a case to be made that relativism in the domain of morality is a live option. I have suggested that there are models for how both practical and conceptual exclusion could arise in both the domain of natural facts and in the domain of morality. Only practical exclusion provides a basis for relativism as a live option. Conceptual exclusion precludes recognizing what the others believe to be true. In the domain of natural facts, conceptual exclusion rests on the possibility of cognitive-perceptual systems that can correctly represent the world but that cannot be simultaneously realized. A model for practical exclusion is provided if the natural world presents us with an explanatory problem that admits of significantly different but equally good solutions that entail systematically different practical commitments in organizing research activities, while this allows full understanding of the norms governing the alternative. In the domain of morality, practical exclusion looks to be a natural locus for a form of alternatives relativism, if abstract moral principles are schematic in a way that calls for an interface with practice through a system of thick moral concepts, and different systems arise in response to different social, cultural, and material conditions. To the extent to which we can see other systems as fully legitimate, it seems we may, even if we cannot occupy the relevant position, operate with the relevant thick moral concepts in thinking about those who do. The idea that different systems of thick moral concepts are a solution to problems presented by different concrete circumstances suggests the possibility that in the same circumstances different systems may solve the problems presented equally well, each seen as legitimate though exclusive. We can leverage practical exclusion to arrive at conceptual exclusion if, first, operating with thick moral concepts requires at least the capacity to imaginatively project ourselves into the system of values they express, and, second, there are systems of thick moral concepts with associated values beyond our imaginative reach.

I have learned a lot from reading and thinking about Rovane's study of relativism. While I have not everywhere been fully persuaded by its arguments, I have no doubts about its importance. It is an impressive achievement to advance a novel and subtle interpretation of the relativistic strain in philosophy that holds out the prospect of making sense of how it could underlie our thinking about relativism in different

domains, be metaphysical, important, and controversial, have resources to defend itself against the charge of incoherence, and be something that could in a sense be lived. Not the least of its values is that it opens up new lines of inquiry about the sources and types of relativism and their relations to one another.