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Moral Relativism and the Possibility of Moral Progress

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WHITE PEOPLE ALWAYS THINK THAT
CULTURES THAT ARE FOREIGN TO THEM
ARE IN DANGER (I GUESS THEY EXPECT TO
KILL THEM)...

From a painting by Langston Allston

Preface

In September 2015, I started working on the ERC project “*The Emergence of Relativism – Historical, Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives*” with a completely different proposal for a dissertation. Thanks to my supervisor and principal investigator, Martin Kusch, I was given the opportunity to reconsider. This is when I started reading about moral relativism. Moral relativism is a very controversial topic, which is often associated with the slogan “anything goes” and a stance towards morality that is careless, cynical, and hence almost immoral itself. However, I was struck by a less apparent feature of the debate on moral relativism. Like others before me, I noticed the unrealistic image of communities as complete and internally harmonious wholes that is often assumed in discussions of moral relativism. I came to think that such a view of communities must lead to an image of communities as entirely static, which would make it difficult to think about change in moral norms. When I presented these vague ideas to members of the relativism project in July 2016, almost one year after I had started, it was Katherina Kinzel, a postdoc on the project, who pointed out that the question of change is closely related to the question of progress. This seemed interesting because of the obvious tension between progress and relativism. Finally, I had a topic. Can moral relativists account for the possibility of moral progress? I got to work and defended my new proposal in March 2017. I was working under the assumption that being able to account for the possibility of moral progress is a requirement any view of morality should be able to fulfill and that if moral relativists were unable to do so, this would be a problem for their view. Soon afterwards, I discovered that progress is a topic almost as controversial as moral relativism itself. This is when I realized I was trying to combine two unpopular topics. Fortunately, someone had tried to do it before me. In a then very recent book on moral relativism, J. David Velleman had argued that some versions of moral relativism, including his own, imply a standard of moral progress. As will be obvious, my thinking about the topic is greatly indebted to his work. Around the same time, Rahel Jaeggi’s *Critique of Forms of Life* was first published in the original German version *Kritik von Lebensformen*. It struck me that the main question of this book – whether and how we can criticize forms of life in a justified manner – is the most pressing issue underlying discussions of moral relativism. Bernard Williams had once called the idea that criticism of ways of life other than one’s own is pointless “the truth in relativism.” Jaeggi’s book also showed how closely the question of criticism is connected to the question of progress. Perhaps less obviously, my thinking about moral progress is greatly influenced by her book as well as a subsequent lecture on progress.

I thank my supervisors, Prof. Martin Kusch and Prof. Herlinde Pauer-Studer, for their support. Many thanks also to the members of the relativism project, Natalie Alana Ashton, Katherina Kinzel, Robin McKenna, Johannes Steizinger, and Niels Wildschut as well as extended team members Anne-Kathrin Koch, Delia Belleri, and Dan Zeman. I am also grateful to other members of the Philosophy Department of the University of Vienna who have made the last four years (and the many years before that) a great experience for me. Special thanks to Daniel Eugene Sharp, who is, among other things, often my first and sometimes my only reader. I also thank my family and friends for supporting me. I dedicate this thesis to my parents and my soon to be parents-in-law.

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Introduction

The main question of my dissertation is whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. While both moral relativism and moral progress are controversial topics, there is reason to assume that they do not go particularly well together. Judgments about moral progress seem to rely on a standard of progress that transcends a given context. Moral relativism, by contrast, is the view that moral norms are valid only locally, within a given context. Nevertheless, in the following chapters, I am going to challenge the view that moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of moral progress. Building on an argument developed by J. David Velleman, I am going to claim that a certain kind of moral relativism is not only able to account for the possibility of moral progress, but can do so in a way that is particularly attractive. This is because, once it is suitably modified, the resulting relativist conception of moral progress can avoid some of the criticisms associated with the notion of progress in general.

In Chapter 1, “Moral Relativism and Moral Progress: Preliminaries,” I set the stage for my investigation by defining what I mean by moral relativism in terms of four key commitments. Then, I introduce five different influential versions of moral relativism, which I focus on throughout the dissertation. In order to further characterize moral relativism, I contextualize it with respect to other metaethical positions. I conclude this chapter by explaining why, in light of their central commitments, accounting for the possibility of moral progress constitutes a challenge for moral relativists.

In Chapter 2, “Moral Relativism and Moral Disagreement,” I discuss some questions the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises for versions of moral relativism. This allows me to introduce some central topics in the debate on moral relativism that I will come back to and to discuss some implications of the versions of moral relativism I focus on in more detail. These implications concern the semantics of moral judgments as well as first-order normative consequences of their views with respect to questions of tolerance, the possibility of criticism, and confidence in one’s own moral commitments. I argue for a novel way to account for disagreements between members of different communities, which is particularly attractive from the point of view of the moral relativists I focus on.

In Chapter 3, “Moral Relativism and Social Change,” I approach the main question of my dissertation by discussing whether moral relativists can account for the phenomenon of change in the moral norms accepted by a community. This is important for my overall argument because it affects whether and in what way moral relativists can account for the

possibility of moral progress. In order to be able to account for the possibility of moral progress, moral relativists have to be able to account for change in the moral norms accepted by a community as well as for a standard with respect to which this kind of change can be evaluated as being for the better or worse. I argue that moral relativists face difficulties in accounting for certain phenomena of social change that matter with respect to the question of moral progress because they tend to make simplifying assumptions about communities. I show that these assumptions are not only inaccurate but also lead to problematic conclusions. I conclude this chapter by arguing that moral relativists do not have to rely on these problematic assumptions and that conceiving of communities in a more complex way allows them to go some way to account for the possibility of moral progress by giving an account of the “dynamics of social change.”

In Chapter 4, “Moral Relativism and a Standard of Moral Progress,” I turn to the question whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress directly. I reconstruct and analyze Velleman’s argument according to which certain versions of moral relativism, including his own view, provide a standard for moral progress. In order to develop a deeper understanding of this argument, I discuss the relationship between Velleman’s version of moral relativism and his earlier work on practical rationality. I further address a question that Velleman also anticipates: whether a view of morality that allows for a standard of moral progress is still a version of moral relativism. I conclude this chapter by exploring the consequences Velleman’s argument has for the question whether other versions of moral relativism can account for the possibility of moral progress and drawing some conclusions about the scope of the argument.

In Chapter 5, “Towards a Relativist Conception of Moral Progress,” I argue that the conception of moral progress that results from versions of moral relativism such as Velleman’s can be developed into a conception of moral progress that has distinctive advantages that make it interesting beyond the debate on moral relativism. These advantages stand out particularly clearly against the background of important lines of critique of the discourse of progress in general that have a bearing on how to conceptualize moral progress. I analyze important lines of criticism of the notion of progress and derive criteria for an adequate conception of moral progress. I argue that, given certain amendments, the conception of moral progress that follows from versions of moral relativism such as Velleman’s meets the relevant criteria and is thus able to avoid some of the criticisms. These advantages are due to the conception of moral progress following from a relativist account of morality. Therefore, the argument provides indirect support for this kind of moral relativism.

Finally, I revisit some of the questions the phenomenon of moral conflict raises for moral relativism in light of this assessment.

In the Conclusion, I summarize my main findings about whether and in what way moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress and draw some consequences for how to understand moral relativism.

1. Moral Relativism and Moral Progress: Preliminaries

The term “relativism” is used in a variety of different ways and contexts and it is not always clear what exactly it is supposed to mean. While this can be said of many philosophical “isms,” the situation regarding relativism is particularly difficult because, as Hartry Field points out, “the term ‘relativism’ has had the misfortune of being defined by its opponents” (Field 2009, 255). According to Christopher Gowans, the situation is similar with respect to “moral relativism”: “Moral relativism has the unusual distinction – both within philosophy and outside it – of being attributed to others, almost always as a criticism, far more often than it is explicitly professed by anyone” (Gowans 2012; quoted at Silk 2017, 207). David B. Wong puts the point even more drastically: “‘Moral relativism’ is overwhelmingly a term of condemnation, frequently of scorn and derision, a term of putting one’s opponent immediately on the defensive [...]” (Wong 2006, xi). While I will be concerned with the work of self-professed moral relativists, these quotations show, among other things, that moral relativism remains a minority position. The criticisms of moral relativism Gowans and Wong implicitly refer to take two main forms. According to one important line of criticism, moral relativism is not merely wrong, but incoherent. Gilbert Harman calls this argumentative strategy “dissuasive definition” (Harman 1975, 3). The best-known argument against relativism along these lines claims that relativism is dialectically self-refuting. This kind of argument can be illustrated as follows: consider a possible informal statement of relativism, such as “The truth of all claims is relative to a perspective.” This is itself a claim and therefore applies to itself, yielding: “The truth of ‘The truth of all claims is relative to a perspective’ is relative to a perspective.” The charge of self-refutation then takes the form of a dilemma the relativist confronts: either the claim that the truth of all claims is relative is itself true *absolutely*, in which case it leads to a contradiction; or the claim is itself true only *relatively*, in which case it would be dialectically ineffective, at least according to opponents of the view. Regardless of the merits of this argument, it is important to note that it only has traction concerning “global” formulations of relativism, which commit to relativism about all domains. Global versions of relativism can be distinguished from more “local” versions, which are restricted to a specific domain. As a variant of local relativism, moral relativism is not vulnerable to this argument. An informal statement of moral relativism, such as “What is morally correct is relative to a moral system,” does not lend itself to self-application because it is not itself a moral claim. Therefore, the self-refutation argument plays no role with respect to versions of moral

relativism.¹ However, even if the coherence of relativism is not at issue, the term “relativism” may still be used with critical intent for moral-political reasons. Here, the idea is that moral relativism is untenable because it has problematic first-order normative consequences. This is because relativism is often associated with a fear of losing all grounds for normative judgment.² Relativists’ claims of relativization are frequently taken to undermine the authority of the phenomenon in question and relativism is thus equated with a kind of skepticism or nihilism, according to which “anything goes.” As Wong points out, this use of “relativism” as a charge on moral-political grounds is not unique to a specific political camp, but is used in similar ways across the political spectrum (Wong 2006, xi). Of course, many moral relativists do not agree with this characterization.³

In this chapter, I will prepare the ground for my investigation of the question whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. I will begin by developing a general characterization of moral relativism (1.1.). Then, I will outline five influential versions of moral relativism (1.2.). Subsequently, I will discuss moral relativism’s relation to different metaethical positions (1.3.). Finally, I will explain why accounting for the possibility of moral progress presents a challenge for moral relativists (1.4.).

¹ For a detailed discussion of the “self-refutation argument,” see Max Kölbel’s “Global Relativism and Self-Refutation” (Kölbel 2011). T. M. Scanlon gives a parallel assessment of moral relativism’s coherence with respect to this challenge (see Scanlon 1998, 329f). The classic self-refutation argument is, however, not the only threat to relativism’s coherence. Paul Boghossian, for example, develops an argument based on a charge of incoherence that targets versions of local relativism (see Boghossian 2006b, 2011). I will discuss further challenges to the coherence of moral relativism in Chapter 2.

² In a similar vein, Scanlon observes that the “passion and haste” of the denials relativism provokes suggest a kind of fear (Scanlon 2001, 142, see also 1998, 328).

³ I will discuss the relation between moral relativism, moral skepticism, and moral nihilism in Chapter 1.3.5. and the question of moral relativism’s first-order normative implications in Chapter 2.4.

1.1. What is Moral Relativism?

The most succinct characterization of relativism in general is probably given by David Bloor, who suggests the following definition: “relativism is the negation of absolutism” or “ $R = \sim A$ ” (Bloor 2011, 436f). Bloor’s characterization amounts to a negative definition, in terms of what relativists deny, rather than a positive definition, in terms of what they are committed to (see Baghramian 2004, 2). As Bloor points out, it presupposes an understanding of “absolutism.” It further operates under the assumption, which Bloor commits to, that relativism and absolutism are “mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive categories” (Bloor 2011, 437). Given the plethora of philosophical positions, it is perhaps unsurprising that, as Bloor acknowledges, this view is not widely shared among philosophers. While many would agree that his definition expresses a necessary condition for relativism, they deny that it is sufficient. Therefore, they add further conditions and end up with a definition of the form: “ $R = \sim A \ \& \ F$ ” (2011, 437).⁴ Following Bloor and many other relativists, I take “absolutism” to be the opposite of relativism. I follow Harman in understanding the claim that morality is “absolute” as the view that “there are certain basic moral demands that everyone accepts or at least has reasons to accept” and the claim that morality is “universal” as the view that “these demands are supposed to be accepted as demands on everyone” (Harman 2000d, 39). On this rendering, “moral universalism,” understood as the view that moral norms are taken to have universal application by those who accept them, is compatible with moral relativism, while “moral absolutism,” understood as the view that everyone accepts or has reason to accept the same moral norms, is not.⁵

Bloor’s negative definition of relativism points to an important aspect: any version of relativism must at least deny “absolutism.” However, in order to be able to broach some of the problems moral relativists face, I will rely on a positive characterization of moral relativism. In particular, I will rely on Martin Kusch’s “standard model of relativism,” which tries to capture various features routinely identified by proponents as well as opponents of relativism (Kusch 2016, 106f). While this characterization focuses on epistemic relativism, it can be

⁴ According to Bloor, “F” denotes various “foolishness” conditions, which render the view implausible, while the correct definition of relativism is just “ $R = \sim A$ ” (2011, 437). Boghossian’s influential definition of epistemic relativism is an example of a definition of relativism that follows the pattern characterized and criticized by Bloor (Boghossian 2006a, 73).

⁵ Different characterizations of the difference between “absolutism” and “universalism” are possible. Wong, for example, understands “moral universalism” as “the view that there is a single true morality for all societies and times” and “moral absolutism” as “universalism plus the view that the core of the single true morality is a set of general principles or rules, all of which hold true without exception” (Wong 2006, xii). On this understanding, universalism rules out relativism.

adapted for the case of moral relativism, leading to a characterization in terms of the following commitments:

Dependence: What is morally right or wrong is relative to a moral system or practice.

Plurality: There are, have been, or could be, more than one such system or practice.

Exclusiveness: Moral systems or practices are exclusive of one another.

Symmetry: Moral systems or practices are on a par. (cf. 2016, 107)⁶

Following Maria Baghramian, I distinguish between “object of relativization,” that is, what is relativized, and “context of relativization,” that is, what the object of relativization is relativized to (Baghramian 2004, 4). This makes it possible to distinguish different versions of relativism not only in terms of their *object* of relativization, such as, for example, epistemic justification or moral correctness, but also in terms of the way they specify the *context* of relativization. A distinction that can be made between versions of relativism regarding their context of relativization is whether this context is specific to an individual or a collective.⁷ My discussion is restricted to versions of moral relativism that relativize moral correctness to social groups. As common in the literature on relativism, I will refer to these groups as “communities.”⁸ Unless otherwise specified, I will use “moral relativism” to refer to a position that takes the context of relativization to be specific to a community. These can be distinguished from versions of moral relativism that relativize moral correctness to single individuals. Where it seems necessary to make this distinction explicit, I will refer to “moral group relativism” and “moral subjectivism” respectively.⁹

⁶ In addition to adapting this “standard model of relativism” to the case of moral relativism, I have changed the formulation of *Symmetry*. Moreover, *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry* represent only a subset of the commitments Kusch identifies (see 2016, 107f).

⁷ Baghramian offers a more fine-grained taxonomy of contexts of relativization that recognizes historical epochs and conceptual schemes in addition to individuals and social groupings (2004, 6).

⁸ Although the notion of a “community” is not unproblematic, I take it to be preferable over alternatives, in particular, the notion of a “society,” in the context of moral relativism. While there will be at least some practices shared by all members of a society, following John Rawls, it cannot be assumed that all members of a society share all practices that involve moral norms. Rather, complex modern societies often contain different communities living according to different moral norms (Rawls 2001, 3). In contrast to this, Nigel Pleasants argues that “with allusion to the well-worn sociological distinction between *Gesellschaft* and *Gemeinschaft*, moral agents can only be conceived as constituting a moral *society*, not a moral *community*” (Pleasants 2018, 579). He makes this claim in the context of a comparison between scientific revolutions as described by Thomas S. Kuhn and “moral revolutions” and contrasts the group of moral agents with the “cohesive and tightly structured professional group” (2018, 579) of scientists, which Kuhn, in his view aptly, described as a community. While Pleasants might be right that there will be less agreement between members of communities on moral matters than there is between scientists about scientific matters, I will stick to the term “community” for the reason given. I will discuss some of the problems associated with the notion of a “community” in Chapter 3.

⁹ I follow Baghramian in her use of the term “subjectivism,” as denoting versions of relativism that relativize an object of relativization to a context that is specific to single individuals (Baghramian 2004, 5). This use differs, for example, from Miranda Fricker’s use of the term, who sees a kind of “subjectivism” at the root of all forms of relativism (see Fricker 2013).

Moral group relativists focus on the moral norms actually developed by different communities. While the term “moral system” that is often used in discussions of relativism suggests that the moral is a unified and distinct area of human life, the moral norms developed by communities are often part of complex and diverse social practices. This suggests that the moral is dispersed throughout a way of life. Rather than a separate area of human affairs, it is a special aspect of many different such affairs. As a result, versions of moral group relativism are concerned with morality in a “broad” rather than a “narrow” sense. On this broad understanding, moral norms concern not only prohibitions and requirements regarding how we must treat others – the part of morality that Scanlon describes with the phrase “what we owe to each other” (Scanlon 1998, 7) – but also things like ideals of character or virtues associated with certain roles and ideas of how to live a good life more generally. Bernard Williams associates the narrower conception of morality, for which he reserves the term “morality” or “the morality system,” with modernity, and the broader conception of morality, which he refers to as “ethics” and which he characterizes with respect to the more encompassing question “How should I live” with ancient thought (Williams 1985).¹⁰ In light of this distinction, it would be justified to speak of “ethical” rather than “moral relativism.” Nevertheless, the term “moral relativism” is more commonly used, although what is at stake in versions of moral relativism is typically a whole way of life and therefore corresponds to the broader notion of “ethics,” in Williams’s sense of the distinction between ethics and morality.¹¹

A crucial worry associated with the relativist’s commitment to *Dependence* is that it might lead to a kind of “conventionalism,” according to which whatever a community takes to be correct, is correct “for them.” However, this criticism depends on a specific understanding of what a commitment to *Dependence* requires. As Joseph Raz has pointed out, a different understanding of *Dependence* is available: instead of claiming that the moral practices of a community immediately determine moral correctness, relativists might only insist that moral correctness depends in some way on a community’s practices. According to Raz, moral group relativism is committed to the claim that moral correctness for an agent is *a function of* the moral practices of their group, but not necessarily to the claim that this function is identity

¹⁰ Wong draws on this distinction when he points out that the conception of morality implicit in his version of moral relativism “comprehends what has been called the ‘ethical,’ as opposed to what might be called the ‘narrowly moral’” (Wong 2006, 40).

¹¹ This is perhaps because the question of relativism seems most pressing with respect to the norms considered part of the narrower domain of morality, such as prohibitions against harming others.

(Raz 1999, 163f).¹² This more nuanced understanding of *Dependence* gives some leeway to distinguish between what a community takes to be correct and what is correct “for them.”¹³

While a commitment to a version of *Dependence* is crucial to relativism, it is not by itself sufficient to make a position a relativist one.¹⁴ The claim that the truth of moral judgements is *relative*, for example, to human nature or practical reason itself is not likely to be considered a relativist commitment in today’s context. What is needed in addition is a certain kind of variation that is guaranteed by *Plurality*.¹⁵ However, because of its commitment to *Plurality*, relativism is often taken to entail the problematic idea that anything can constitute a respectable moral system or practice, which is frequently expressed by the slogan “anything goes.” Therefore, it is important to note that *Plurality* does not commit the relativist to admitting just anything as a relevant moral system or practice. As, for example, Kusch points out: “*Plurality* permits the relativist to be highly selective in choosing those SPs [systems or practices, K.S.] with respect to which relativism applies” (Kusch 2016, 107).¹⁶ Depending on the details of their view, the relativist has different resources to rule out certain systems or practices as relevant options. This is connected to the fact that *Dependence* can be spelled out in more nuanced ways. As Isidora Stojanovic puts it, “moral relativism is compatible with the idea that there can be higher order constraints on moralities, or on acceptable sets on [sic] moral norms, or moral codes” (Stojanovic 2018, 122). In the same context, Stojanovic discusses a different claim often ascribed to relativists: “that for *every* moral claim, there is some set of norms relative to which the claim is true and some other set relative to which the claim is false” (2018, 122). She emphasizes that relativists are only committed to the weaker claim that “*there are* moral claims that are true relative to one such set of norms and false relative to another” (2018, 122).

¹² “Function” is in this context to be understood “in its natural signification – i.e. a thing that depends on and varies with something else” (Raz 1999, 163, n1).

¹³ However, the ties between what a community takes to be correct and what is correct for them cannot be entirely severed either. While a function that maps every actual practice to the same set of actually valid moral norms is possible, a view of this kind would no longer correspond to what we intuitively understand by relativism. As Raz puts it: “Functions which yield the same morality for all societies regardless of variations in their moral practices are excluded” (Raz 1999, 163, n1). As will become evident, moral relativists make use of the possibility to distinguish between what communities take to be correct and what is correct for them to different extents.

¹⁴ Bloor’s definition of relativism in terms of non-absolutism shows that *Dependence* is perhaps not a necessary component of a characterization of relativism either.

¹⁵ This is also implicit in Carol Rovane’s claim that the dominant argument for relativism nowadays follows a broadly Kantian argumentative strategy (although not one intended by Kant): (a) the first step is to argue that the world is in some sense mind-dependent (this is taken to be inspired by transcendental idealism); (b) the second step is to argue that there is more than one kind of mind on which a world might depend; (c) the conclusion is that there is more than one world (see Rovane 2013, 130).

¹⁶ As Kusch also points out, relativism is even compatible with the view that while alternative systems are possible, as a matter of fact there is no alternative to a particular system or practice (2016, 107).

For relativism to be an option, it does not suffice that two or more different systems or practices can be identified; in addition, they have to *exclude* each other. As Williams puts it, they have to differ in a way that is different from the way in which “the history or geography of two different times or places” (Williams 1975, 217) differ; that is, it cannot be the case that they can be conjoined. Rather, they need to be rivaling options that can conflict. This *Exclusiveness* can take different forms: in the simplest case, it is possible to identify a single proposition that one group denies while the other affirms it. *Exclusiveness* then takes the straightforward form of a logical contradiction: if we accept the claims of both groups, we end up holding inconsistent beliefs. Drawing on Williams, Kusch calls this kind of *Exclusiveness* “question-centered exclusiveness” because in this case, the systems or practices different groups abide by can be understood as mandating opposite answers to the same question (Kusch 2016, 107). For this to be possible, the relevant groups have to be sufficiently similar, for example, they have to share enough of the same concepts. Because groups might be too different, it will not always be possible to identify a single proposition that one group denies while the other one affirms it. Therefore, *Exclusiveness* cannot always be spelled out in terms of strict logical inconsistency. If groups are too different from one another, their judgments might become “incommensurable.” One common way to understand “incommensurability” is in terms of translation: if the judgments of different groups are incommensurable, then they are not intertranslatable.¹⁷ This is sometimes taken to have the additional consequence that members of these different groups cannot (at least not fully) understand each other. Because in cases of incommensurability it is not possible to identify a single proposition that one group denies while the other affirms it, some other kind of *Exclusiveness* has to be identified in order to cover them. For example, two moral systems or practices can exclude each other in the sense that it is impossible to follow both at the same time because they mandate conflicting courses of action. Kusch calls this “practice-centered exclusiveness” (2016, 107). As Williams emphasizes, this shows that “even in this limiting case [...], there has to be something which can be identified as the *locus* of exclusivity, and hence is not from every point of view incommensurable” (Williams 1975, 219). Another claim that is often associated with the relativist’s commitment to *Exclusiveness* is “radical difference,” that is, the claim that different systems or practices have nothing in common, for example, because they consist of different, non-overlapping basic principles. However, in contrast to this assumption, the

¹⁷ This understanding of incommensurability in terms of translation goes back to the work of Kuhn and it is the one usually relevant in discussions of relativism. Alternative understandings include the idea that “incommensurable items cannot be precisely measured by a single ‘scale’ of units of value” and the even stronger idea that items cannot be compared at all, which is also referred to as “incomparability” (Chang 1997, 1).

relativist must specify something all systems of moral norms have in common and that makes them *moral*. Therefore, while both incommensurability and radical difference can be understood as different ways of interpreting *Exclusiveness*, neither of them represents a necessary commitment for relativists.¹⁸

Despite the possibility of conflict between different systems or practices that relativists commit to, there must be at least some sense in which, on a relativist view, they are at the same time on a par. For relativism to be an option, it cannot be the case that the conflict in question can be resolved because one of the parties has to abandon their position.¹⁹ There is thus a constant tension between *Exclusiveness* and *Symmetry* and many of the challenges to relativism's coherence derive from this tension. A minimal version of *Symmetry* follows from the combination of *Dependence* and *Plurality*. If what is morally right or wrong is relative to a moral system or practice and there is more than one such system or practice, then there is no uniquely privileged moral system or practice from the point of which conflicts between existing moral systems or practices can be adjudicated. However, opponents of relativism often take the relativist to commit to the stronger claim that different systems or practices are "equally valid" (see e.g. Boghossian 2006a, 1–5). This is not understood as the claim that they are each valid in their own context – a claim moral relativists undertake in virtue of their commitment to *Dependence* – but as the claim that one is as good as the other. As, for example, Kusch points out, this understanding of *Symmetry* clashes with a different idea often associated with *Symmetry*, the idea that there is no perspective outside all systems or practices from which they can be evaluated in a neutral way. "Equal validity" presupposes that there is such a neutral point of view (Kusch 2016, 107).

Taken together, *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry* constitute a characterization that singles out versions of moral relativism. Because a denial of absolutism follows from the combination of these commitments, it does not contain an explicit denial of absolutism as a component. Much of the discussion that is to follow can be understood in terms of spelling out how the moral relativist's commitments are best understood in order to

¹⁸ An example of a view that takes relativism to require radical difference is Duncan Pritchard's discussion of relativism in the context of "Wittgensteinian epistemology." Pritchard argues that the concept of a "hinge proposition," which is central to Wittgensteinian epistemology, only leads to epistemic relativism if the following claim is endorsed: "It is possible for two agents to be committed to a radically different set of hinge propositions" (Pritchard 2011, 279).

¹⁹ This is also pointed out by Williams: "The questions to which relativism is supposed to give an answer may be raised by the case of conflicting consequences, but relativism will not stay around as an answer to them unless something else is also true, namely that the answering of a yes/no question of this sort in one way rather than the other does not constrain either the holder of S1 or the holder of S2 [where S1 and S2 are two different systems of belief, K.S.] to abandon respectively the positions characteristic of S1 and S2 (and of the difference between them). If this further condition does not hold, there will be a straightforward decision procedure between S1 and S2, and relativism will have been banished" (Williams 1975, 217).

make for a tenable position that can account for the possibility of moral progress. In the next section, I will introduce five influential versions of moral relativism.

1.2. Five Different Versions of Moral Relativism

The relativist's commitment to *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry* can be spelled out in various different ways, leading to different versions of moral relativism. I will focus on the versions of moral relativism developed by Gilbert Harman, Bernard Williams, Carol Rovane, J. David Velleman, and David B. Wong. While Harman and Williams have provided the most influential discussions of moral relativism in analytic philosophy in the twentieth century, Rovane's, Velleman's, and Wong's versions of moral relativism constitute examples of particularly interesting more recent formulations of the view. In this section, I will outline their respective versions of moral relativism.

1.2.1. Gilbert Harman's "Conventionalism"

Harman is widely recognized as a pioneer of moral relativism and his groundbreaking work remains an influential reference point in discussions of moral relativism. I will focus on what I take to be the two most extensive statements of his view in "Moral Relativism Defended" (Harman 1975) and the chapter "Moral Relativism" (1996) in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Harman and Thomson 1996). As Harman puts it in "Moral Relativism Defended," on his view, morality arises "when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations with one another" (Harman 1975, 3). Thus, on Harman's view, morality is the result of an *agreement*. More specifically, it is an agreement in "conditional intentions" (1975, 13). A "conditional intention" is an intention "to keep an agreement (supposing that others similarly intend)" (1975, 9).²⁰ A moral agreement can thus be understood as "an agreement in intentions," where each member intends "to act in certain ways on the understanding that others have similar intentions" (1975, 13). Harman emphasizes that this agreement need not be reached *explicitly*; rather, the agreement can and will often be reached only *implicitly*.²¹ To illustrate this kind of agreement, Harman appeals to Hume's metaphor of two rowers who settle for a joint rate of rowing without discussion (1996, 22). Although the relevant agreement need not be the result of an explicit discussion, (implicit) *bargaining* plays an important role for Harman's account. He emphasizes that morality is the result of a compromise reached between "people of different powers and resources" (1975, 13, see also 1996, 24). Harman's account of morality is relativistic because

²⁰ As Harman points out, his view relies on a wide notion of intention, including dispositions or habits (1975, 12).

²¹ Harman sets his conception of agreement apart from what at one point he calls a notion of disagreement as "a kind of ritual" (1975, 15). He argues that many objections raised against his view of morality depend on a misconstrual of agreement as a kind of ritual, in which agents explicitly agree on something.

different groups of people can reach different moral agreements. As Harman makes explicit in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, this view of morality commits him to the claim that there are only relational, but no non-relational moral facts (1996, 41–43).²²

The semantics of moral expressions plays an important role for Harman’s formulation of moral relativism and the most noticeable shift between his earlier and his more recent statement concerns this aspect of his view. This shift concerns both the scope and the content of his semantic commitments as well as their relative importance for his version of moral relativism. In “Moral Relativism Defended,” Harman presents his version of moral relativism as first and foremost a thesis about semantics. As he puts it: “My moral relativism is a soberly logical thesis – a thesis about logical form, if you like” (1975, 3). According to this thesis, certain moral judgments only make sense in relation and with reference to a specific moral agreement. Harman’s semantic claim is thus restricted to a certain kind of moral judgment, which he calls “inner moral judgments.” Inner moral judgments are judgments about the relation between an agent and a certain kind of action. More specifically, they concern the agent’s reasons to act a certain way. They contain expressions such as “ought,” “should,” and “right” or “wrong.”²³ The truth conditions of these judgments depend on what reasons agents have. Harman tries to motivate his semantic thesis by appealing to intuitions about linguistic propriety. According to him, it would be odd to make inner judgments about agents who are “beyond the pale” because they are not capable of being motivated by the relevant considerations.²⁴ More specifically, Harman suggests to “treat the moral ‘ought’ as a four-place predicate (or ‘operator’), ‘Ought (A, D, C, M),’ which relates an agent A, a type of act D, considerations C, and motivating attitudes M” (1975, 10). While the claim that “ought” is relative to an agent A, a type of act D, and considerations C can be accepted by absolutists and relativists alike, relativity to motivating attitudes M is distinctive of his version of relativism. On Harman’s view, these attitudes are conditional intentions to keep a moral agreement.²⁵ According to Harman, inner judgments have two characteristics: On the one hand, a speaker ascribes a reason to do something (and hence motivating attitudes M) to an agent A. On the other hand, the speaker endorses these reasons (and hence motivating

²² This is the case at least unless “facts” are understood in a deflationist way (1996, 43).

²³ Harman distinguishes a moral use of “ought” from different uses such as the “ought of expectation” (1975, 6). His thesis concerns only the moral use. He further distinguishes inner moral judgments from “non-inner moral judgments.” Examples of non-inner moral judgments include judgments that someone is evil or an enemy or that things ought to be different.

²⁴ Examples include “[i]ntelligent beings from outer space,” “a contented employee of Murder, Incorporated,” cannibals, and Hitler, but not Stalin (1975, 5–8).

²⁵ Harman notes that when C and M are supplied by the context, normally, “C will be ‘all things considered’ and M will be attitudes that are shared by the speaker and audience” (1975, 11). While it is possible to make inner judgments relative to an agreement one does not approve of, in this case the relativization has to be made explicit (1975, 10f).

attitudes M) and assumes that their audience does so too (1975, 8, see also 1975, 11). Whereas in “Moral Relativism Defended,” Harman claims that his version of moral relativism is primarily a “logical thesis,” in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* he emphasizes that relativism is not primarily a claim about “what people mean by their moral judgments” (1996, 5), but about “how things are” (1996, 17).²⁶ Thus, the semantic claim becomes less central. Another shift concerns the scope and the content of Harman’s semantic commitments. While in “Moral Relativism Defended,” it is restricted to “inner judgments,” in the context of the more recent statement of his view it concerns moral judgments in general and takes the following form:

For the purposes of assigning *objective* truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D*. Similarly for other moral judgments. (1996, 43)²⁷

While this semantic proposal applies to moral judgments in general, what he earlier calls “inner moral judgments” retains a special role. In order to bring out this point, Harman introduces the distinction between “critic relativity,” that is, relativity to a critic’s moral framework, and “agent relativity,” that is, relativity to the reasons an agent has (1996, 62). In case the moral framework of the critic and the agent in question differ, there are certain moral judgments the critic cannot make about the agent.

1.2.2. Bernard Williams’s “Relativism of Distance”

Williams’s formulation of moral relativism differs from Harman’s and many others in important respects and his defense of moral relativism is more qualified. I will focus on the statement of his formulation of relativism in “The Truth in Relativism” (Williams 1975) and subsequent discussion of this and other versions of moral relativism in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (1985). In “The Truth in Relativism,” Williams discusses relativism in general, but defends it only for the moral domain. His distinct take on what relativism amounts to builds on his influential distinction between “notional” and “real confrontations.” For a confrontation with a “system of belief” to constitute a real confrontation for a group of

²⁶ Relatedly, while in the context of the earlier statement of his view Harman remains agnostic about whether “some moralities are ‘objectively’ better than others” (1975, 4), in the context of the more recent statement of his view he takes a denial of this claim to be part of the relativist’s position (1996, 5).

²⁷ The addendum “objective,” which Harman introduces in the course of his discussion of this formulation, becomes necessary because he explores the possibility of combining relativism with a “quasi-absolutist” expressivist semantics. This kind of semantic proposal makes it possible to ascribe truth-conditions understood in a deflationist way. Therefore, the distinction between relativist and absolutist can no longer turn on truth, but has to turn on “objectivity” instead. Since the main point of adopting this semantics is to be able to account for disagreements, I will discuss the details of this proposal in Chapter 2.3.

people, it needs to present a “real option.” Because Williams thinks of systems of belief as shared by groups, likewise, “the idea of a real option is meant to be a social notion” (1975, 222). A system of belief presents a real option for a group of people, if either it is their system of belief already or it is possible for them to go over to this system whilst respecting two conditions. First, it has to be possible for them to adopt the new system and live with it without losing “their hold on reality” (1975, 222). Second, insofar as rational comparison between their old and their new system of belief is possible, they need to be able to “acknowledge their transition [...] in the light of such comparison” (1975, 222). The second condition is supposed to rule out that a system of belief can be a real option just because it is possible for a group of people to adopt it, for example, by force or use of “psychological technology” (1975, 223). However, in cases in which two systems are incommensurable, the second condition will have almost no application. The first condition guarantees that in such cases, in which a transition can only amount to conversion, conversion at least “can be lived sanely” (1975, 223). It rules out that going over to the other system and living according to it would require, for example, “extensive self-deception” (1975, 223). Whether a system constitutes a real option for a group of people is a matter of objective fact and therefore does not depend on whether the relevant agents think it is. Williams discusses the difference between real and notional confrontations with respect to both “diachronic and synchronic variation” (1975, 220) of systems of belief. If a system of belief does not present a real option, then a confrontation with it will be notional rather than real. According to Williams, our “vocabulary of appraisal – ‘true-false’, ‘right-wrong’, ‘acceptable-unacceptable’ etc.” (1975, 224) only has a point in cases of real, but not in cases of notional confrontation. In contrast to Harman on inner judgments, Williams does not claim that it would be linguistically inappropriate to make judgments of appraisal about systems of belief that do not present real options, but rather that there is no point in doing so: “[T]here is so little to this use, so little of what gives content to the appraisals in the context of real confrontation, that we can say that for a reflective person the appraisal questions [...] do not genuinely arise” (1975, 225). Based on this, Williams defines relativism as the claim that for a certain area of discourse, questions of appraisal do not arise in notional confrontations with different systems of belief. He takes this kind of relativism to give the right account of conflict between what he calls “ethical outlooks” (1975, 226). This endorsement of a version of moral relativism is premised on an assumption of moral anti-realism. Williams notes that given realism, appraisal would not lose its point even in notional confrontations. For example, given scientific realism, it makes sense to judge that a theory is false even if it does not present a real option. Therefore, relativism

has no role to play in domains for which realism is the correct account (1975, 227).²⁸ A difference between Williams's understanding of relativism and many other versions of the view is that the relevant distinction is not between an agent's own system of belief and all others. Rather, it is between those that are accessible to the agent along the lines of Williams's characterization of what constitutes a real option – which includes, but is not limited to, their own system of beliefs – and those that are not. Furthermore, the distinction between what counts as a real option and what does not is a matter of degree. Since both of the conditions for a system of belief to be a real option can be met to varying degrees (1975, 222), Williams's view amounts to what he later calls a “*relativism of distance*” (1985, 162) which does not “draw a line at all,” but recognizes “that others are at varying distances from us” (1985, 160).

In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams's endorsement of moral relativism is more tentative. He distances himself from versions of moral relativism such as the one defended by Harman, which he calls versions of “strict relational relativism” and from what he calls “vulgar relativism” – a view that he takes to be incoherent because it tries to combine moral relativism with “a non-relativistic morality of universal toleration” (1985, 159). His main interest is in the relation between reflectiveness and a relativistic outlook. The discussion remains premised on an endorsement of moral anti-realism and his question becomes the following: given that anti-realism is true and there are thus no objective, fact-like moral truths and given that modern life is characterized by reflectiveness, Williams asks “how much room” there is for a relativistic stance as a coherent part of a “reflective ethical outlook” (1985, 160–62). In the context of this discussion, Williams restricts his earlier endorsement of relativism for the ethical domain in two respects. On the one hand, he submits that, given the conditions of the modern world, notional confrontation can only occur over temporal, but not merely spatial distance: “Relativism over merely spatial distance is of no interest or application in the modern world. Today all confrontations between cultures must be real confrontations [...]” (1985, 163). Therefore, his relativism of distance has an application only concerning “diachronic,” but not “synchronic” variation of systems of belief. On the other hand, he restricts his claim with respect to the kind of appraisal it applies to. Even with respect to relativism concerning temporal distance, he makes an exception for judgments concerning justice. Judging a society to be “just” or “unjust” transcends the relativism of distance, in that even different ideas of social justice of the past can be seen as live options

²⁸ I will discuss the relationship between moral realism and moral relativism in general in Chapter 1.3.2.

today (1985, 165–67). Williams’s version of moral relativism is thus much more restricted than other versions of moral relativism.

1.2.3. Carol Rovane’s “Multimundialism”

According to Rovane’s version of relativism, which she calls “Multimundialism,” relativism is the view that there are many worlds rather than one – in a sense to be specified. I will focus on the most detailed exposition of her view in *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism* (Rovane 2013) with occasional comments on the development of her position in earlier publications (2002, 2009, 2010, 2012). Like Williams, Rovane develops a formulation of relativism in general and then goes on to ask whether it would constitute the best account with respect to different domains. In *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, she discusses whether relativism is the right account of “natural facts” as the objects of scientific investigation and “moral values” respectively. She defends relativism for the latter.²⁹ Rovane develops her idea of relativism as Multimundialism against the background of what she takes to be “the prevailing consensus view.” She identifies the “Disagreement Intuition” as the intuitive conception of relativism underlying this view. According to the Disagreement Intuition, “relativism would arise with a certain kind of disagreement that is said to be, first of all, ‘irresoluble,’ but also, second, irresoluble for the specific reason that both parties are right” (2013, 15f). In order to stabilize this intuition, some defenders of the view, notably those working in formal semantics, draw on what Rovane calls the “Relative Truth Intuition” (2013, 16).³⁰ According to the Relative Truth Intuition, truth is relative to context. While it could in principle be relied upon in order to motivate relativism independently, the Relative Truth Intuition is only a subsidiary intuition in the context of the Disagreement Intuition. It is needed to stabilize the Disagreement Intuition for without relativizing truth the Disagreement Intuition would threaten to violate the law of non-contradiction: if A truly believes p and B truly believes $\sim p$ then both p and $\sim p$ are true (2013, 16).³¹ Rovane’s own formulation of relativism does not rely on the Disagreement Intuition or the Relative Truth Intuition, but on a different intuitive conception of relativism, which she calls the “Alternatives Intuition.” According to the Alternatives Intuition, relativism arises with different conceptual schemes leading to “alternatives” in the sense of “*truths that cannot be embraced together*; or equivalently, [...] *truths that are not universal*, in the sense of being truths for everyone”

²⁹ Since I focus on moral relativism, I only consider her argument for the moral domain. Rovane’s assessment with respect to natural facts leads to a much more limited vindication of relativism (see 2010, 2013, Chapter 3).

³⁰ What Rovane calls the “prevailing consensus view” is thus closely related to “semantic relativism.” She attributes this view to Crispin Wright, Max Kölbel, François Recanati, and John MacFarlane (2013, 16, n1). I will discuss the relation between semantic relativism and moral relativism in Chapter 1.3.6.

³¹ I will discuss this problem in thinking about relativism-inducing disagreements in detail in Chapter 2.

(2013, 9). According to Rovane, it is the Alternatives Intuition and not the Disagreement Intuition that is in the background of the most important discussions of relativism in the twentieth century – in the context of logical positivism, cultural anthropology, philosophy of science, pragmatism and Nelson Goodman’s work – which the current debates on relativism descend from (2013, 72). Disagreement does not play a central role in any of these discussions.³² Just as the Disagreement Intuition, the Alternatives Intuition brings in its train some problems regarding the logical coherence of the view. Any formulation of relativism based on the Alternatives Intuition faces the so-called “Dilemma for Alternativeness:”

Any pair of truth-value bearers is either inconsistent or consistent; if the two truth-value bearers are inconsistent, then by the law of noncontradiction they cannot both be true; if they are consistent, then they are conjoinable; in neither case do we have alternatives in the sense that is supposed to be required for relativism according to the Alternatives Intuition – that is, truths that cannot be embraced together. (2013, 75)

To escape this dilemma, Rovane introduces a third possibility. Truth-value bearers can be neither consistent nor inconsistent because they do not stand in any logical relations at all. They can be “normatively insulated.” On Rovane’s view, the real issue dividing relativists and their opponents is thus 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” (2013, 79). These logical commitments correspond to distinct metaphysical commitments, which Rovane labels “Unimundialism” and “Multimundialism,” respectively.³³ Those who accept that logical relations run everywhere among all truth-value-bearers and hence there is no room for normative insularity also commit to the view that “there is a *single, consistent, and comprehensive body of truths*, and this amounts to a metaphysical commitment to the *oneness* of the world, or *Unimundialism*” (2013, 79). Relativists, by contrast, accept that there can be normative insularity and thus that some truth-value-bearers do not stand in any logical relations to one another. They therefore commit to the view “that there are many

³² According to Rovane, Williams was the first to insist “that the presence of logical conflict is a necessary condition for relativism” (2013, 74). At times, she presents the Alternatives Intuition as the more general intuition that there is a sense of “exclusion” between different claims. From this perspective, the Disagreement Intuition can be seen as one way to spell out this sense of exclusion in terms of contradiction: the relevant claims cannot be held together because they are inconsistent. Yet they can both be true, because their truth is relative to context.

³³ These are metaphysical commitments on a general understanding, on which “a claim counts as metaphysical if it is a highly general one concerning what is the case, or what there is, or the nature of the things there are” (2013, 80). Importantly, this is consistent with both Unimundialism and Multimundialism remaining neutral on many other metaphysical issues.

noncomprehensive bodies of truths that cannot be conjoined, that there are many worlds rather than one. In a word, they affirm *Multimundialism*” (2013, 91).

The starting point of Rovane’s discussion of moral relativism is a general characterization of the moral domain as answering to the following question: “*How should one live, given that there are other points of view besides one’s own from which things matter?*” (2013, 199). In order to be able to raise the question whether Multimundialism is the right account of moral values as separate from whether it is the right account of natural facts as the objects of scientific investigation, Rovane has to rule out a naturalistic reduction of moral values (2013, 195). Apart from this, Rovane’s discussion of morality is supposed to be neutral with respect to different metaethical distinctions. What is at stake between Unimundialism and Multimundialism is whether there can be normative insularity. However, normative insularity takes a special form in the domain of morals. Rovane identifies the kind of logical relations that matter in the moral domain as the relations of the elements of a transitive ordering from worst to best between the options we face in deliberation. Therefore, “the co-tenability of moral truths will rest on whether they can be jointly embraced and ranked together for the purposes of moral deliberation” (2013, 219). Unimundialism in the moral domain is the view that logical relations specified in this way hold everywhere; Multimundialism is the view that they do not.³⁴ What Rovane takes to be “the strongest case” for Multimundialism in the moral domain is a certain “picture of morals as products of history and culture” (2013, 239) which she adopts from Williams. Based on Williams’s work, she understands history and culture as the byproducts of intentional action that are beyond agents’ immediate intentional control. This picture supports Multimundialism because history and culture in this sense can provide for radically different conditions.

1.2.4. J. David Velleman’s “Perspectival Normativity”

Velleman’s version of moral relativism provides an account of moral reasons as relative to a perspective. He develops this view as a version of moral relativism in *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Velleman 2015), but it builds in interesting ways on his earlier work on practical rationality (1989, 2000, 2006, 2009). I will focus on Chapter V of *Foundations of Moral*

³⁴ According to Rovane, both Kantianism and Utilitarianism support Unimundialism “because each recognizes just one central moral truth from which all others flow as special instances or applications” (2013, 221). Interestingly, Hobbesian conventionalism – which, according to Rovane, underlies Harman’s argument for moral relativism – does not support Multimundialism either because it presupposes the possibility of making judgments about all possible conventions: “Insofar as the comparative evaluation of different possible moral agreements is intrinsic to the process of moral bargaining, we must grant that logical relations can and do reach across different moral agreements as well as hold within them” (2013, 234).

Relativism.³⁵ Velleman takes it to be the central task of a moral relativist to explain how mere “mores” can have “moral force and moral subject matter” (2015, 1). However, this is not an easy task: “The problem for the relativist is that *mores* and morality are as different as facts and values. How can the relativist bridge that difference?” (2015, 77).³⁶ What is supposed to bridge this gap is what Velleman calls “perspectival normativity.” Velleman’s discussion is framed in terms of reasons. He assumes that “morality obligates its subjects by being rationally binding on them – more specifically, by *generating complete and compelling reasons* for them to act, or to hold practical attitudes such as desires or intentions” (2015, 79, my emphasis). This affects the question of relativism: “On this assumption, whether different communities can have different moralities will depend on whether they can have differently constituted reasons” (2015, 79). Velleman addresses what he takes to be the relativist’s central challenge in two steps. In a first step, he sketches the outline of the form a relativist metaethics should take; in a second step, he develops one specific version of moral relativism in line with this outline. According to Velleman, relativists must provide an account of moral reasons that allows for the same facts to constitute different reasons for different communities. At the same time, they must provide an account on which the relation between reasons and what they are reasons for does not vary with different communities. Rather, relativism must “consist in the claim that *one and the same relation* is sensitive to differences among communities” (2015, 81, my emphasis). This is because otherwise the question of validity would recur:

[T]he relativist had better not go so far as to say that different communities reason in accordance with different relations between reasons and what they are reasons for, as if communities use different methods of practical reasoning. Such methods of reasoning would be merely conventional – the deliberative *mores* of one’s community – and so the problem of explaining the normative force of *mores* would recur at the level of practical reasoning. (2015, 80)

³⁵ As Velleman clarifies in the Introduction, the chapters of *Foundations for Moral Relativism* “do not add up to a monograph, and their contents do not add up to a theory. They are self-standing essays that offer some foundational ideas for a version of relativism” (2015, 3). According to Velleman, Chapter V, which bears the same title as the book, is “[t]he central chapter of the book” (2015, 4). I will discuss the details of Velleman’s view as stated in *Foundations for Moral Relativism* as well as how it relates to his earlier work, in particular *How We Get Along*, in detail in Chapter 4.1. and 4.2.

³⁶ Boghossian exploits this key difficulty for an argument against relativism: he argues that the relativist has to fail at this task because claims that an action is right or wrong according to a moral code cannot attain the normativity of claims that an action is right or wrong *simpliciter*. While the latter is a normative claim, the former amounts to nothing more than a “logical remark” (Boghossian 2011, 58). However, Boghossian’s argument depends on a specific understanding of the semantic commitments of relativists, according to which relativists recommend a new way of speaking, namely, to make judgments in the relevant domain explicitly relativized. I will discuss the semantic commitments actually associated with versions of moral relativism in Chapter 1.3.6. and Chapter 2.

In order to be able to stipulate one relation between reasons and what they are reasons for allowing for variation, rather than different relations, relativists must not subscribe to “anti-reductionism” about reasons: “Anti-reductionism about reasons is the view that there is no explaining or analyzing the relation between reasons, on the one hand, and the actions or attitudes that they are reasons for, on the other” (2015, 80). Relativists cannot be anti-reductionists because they need to “explain how one and the same set of facts can count or weigh or militate in favor of different things in different communities” (2015, 80), rather than just stipulate that they do.

Against the background of this general outline of a relativist metaethics, Velleman develops a specific version of a relativist metaethical position by means of what he calls “speculative sociology” (2015, 83). According to this position, human beings have a drive to sociality. Moreover, interacting with others is only possible if we understand each other. Therefore, the drive to social interaction is a drive to “mutual intelligibility.” In order to be able to interpret each other, agents have to converge on a shared “way of life,” that is, on “shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (2015, 89). This pressure to converge exists within but not between communities, leading to a plurality of moral communities converging on different ways of life.³⁷ Together with the drive to social interaction, this shared way of life determines what reasons an agent has. Because there is reason for ways of life to be recognizably moral, these include moral reasons.

1.2.5. David B. Wong’s “Pluralistic Relativism”

Wong’s “pluralistic relativism” presents another way of spelling out the main idea behind moral relativism. I will focus on the most recent and elaborate statement of his position in *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism* (Wong 2006), which can be understood as a restatement of his position as developed in his earlier *Moral Relativity* (1984). At the core of Wong’s pluralistic relativism is a commitment to pluralism about moral values, understood as the view that there exists a plurality of moral values deriving from different sources that are mutually irreducible (2006, 6). These different basic values can be in tension with one another. Because there is no one overriding kind of value that the other values can be derived from or subsumed under, in situations of conflict between different values, different resolutions are possible. However, as Wong also points out, a commitment to value pluralism is in itself insufficient for relativism because it is possible to combine it with the view that whenever two values conflict, there is a uniquely correct resolution. Thomas Nagel’s version

³⁷ These ways of life differ, for example, with respect to the action-types they distinguish (see 2015, Chapter IV).

of value pluralism, for example, is compatible with absolutism because Nagel combines it with the assumption that, given a conflict between two incommensurable values, judgment can still lead to a correct verdict (Nagel 1979, 135; Wong 2006, 95). The starting point of Wong's argument for moral relativism is what Wong calls "moral ambivalence." Wong characterizes moral ambivalence as the phenomenon that when being in a dispute with someone about a moral issue, one comes to understand and appreciate the other's point of view (Wong 2006, 5f). According to Wong, "naturalistic pluralism" – a combination of pluralism about values and methodological naturalism – can best account for this phenomenon. Wong characterizes this methodological naturalism as a rejection of *a priori* methods (such as logical or conceptual analysis) leading to self-evident and permanent truths without empirical control and an affirmation of a conception of philosophy as continuous with science (2006, 30). He takes both the assumption that there is a single true morality and that moral properties are *sui generis* to be pieces of *a priori* reasoning that should not be shielded from empirical control and which are in fact challenged by the empirical phenomenon of moral ambivalence (2006, 32f).³⁸ Once these assumptions are dislodged, value pluralism, understood as leading to a plurality of different adequate moralities, can account for moral ambivalence. Moral ambivalence is possible because when different values that are irreducible to each other conflict, different decisions may be permissible, leading to different moralities that weight and interpret values in different ways. This explains why, in a case of moral conflict, we can come to appreciate the opponent's point of view. Wong's naturalistic account of morality leads to "significant constraints on what could count as an adequate morality, given its functions and given human nature" (2006, 44). On Wong's view, morality has an "inter-personal" as well as an "intra-personal" function. While its inter-personal function is to "promote beneficial social cooperation" (2006, 39), its intrapersonal function is "promoting a psychological order within the individual" (2006, 40). These functions are interdependent. Examples of constraints that Wong derives from this characterization of morality together with information about human nature, which he takes from scientific studies, include:

- A "minimal psychological realism," that is, considerations of what humans can be motivated to do (2006, Chapter 6);
- Some incorporation of a norm of reciprocity, in order to reinforce cooperation in the light of human self-interest (2006, 47–51);

³⁸ The form of naturalism Wong endorses does not lead to a full reductionism about the normative. Rather, he expects his account to be formulated in normative and evaluative, though not in irreducibly moral terms (2006, 36).

- Justification of subordination, since no moral code can be stabilized by pure force (2006, 59–62);
- Some incorporation of the value of accommodation, that is, the ability to cope with moral difference, which on Wong’s conception will always be a part of moral life (2006, Chapter 9).

These constraints do not leave room for only one adequate morality. There is not one unique correct way of balancing different values. A plurality of genuinely different and equally adequate moralities is therefore possible. This is how naturalism and pluralism lead to relativism. However, the constraints on adequate moralities affect what is morally right or wrong in a given context. That is, what is morally right or wrong for a community is not determined solely by the set of norms accepted by that community, but by “some corrected version of that set” (2006, 71). Thus, on Wong’s version of moral relativism, while the moral norms of a community depend on the community’s practices, they are not determined solely by these practices (cf. Chapter 1.1.).

Although Harman, Williams, Rovane, Velleman, and Wong commit to some version of *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry*, there are important differences between their views. However, all of them try to spell out the main idea underlying moral relativism: that different sets of moral norms are binding for members of different communities. Moreover, as will become clear, their views face similar problems regarding the coherence of moral relativism. In the next section, I will further analyze their views by contextualizing their shared commitment to moral relativism as a metaethical position among others.

1.3. Contextualizing Moral Relativism as a Metaethical Position

Moral group relativism is best understood as a metaethical position, or rather, as a family of metaethical positions. This bears mentioning because moral relativism is sometimes understood as a first-order normative position, that is, as a moral or ethical rather than a metaethical view.³⁹ As indicated by my discussion of different versions of moral relativism, moral relativism does not represent a single unified position. There is thus no expectation that moral relativists will agree on key metaethical issues concerning the semantics, ontology, epistemology, and psychology of morality. Therefore, the distinction between relativist and non-relativist positions in metaethics is at the outset best seen as orthogonal to other theoretical options.⁴⁰ At the same time, the issue of relativism is not completely independent of other metaethical questions. Some independently held metaethical commitments are more easily compatible with or even show a tendency towards relativism, while others are less likely to lead to relativistic conclusions or are even deemed strictly incompatible with relativism. In this section, I will identify some of these relationships in order to situate moral relativism as a metaethical position.⁴¹

1.3.1. Moral Relativism and Noncognitivism

One of the most basic distinctions in metaethics is the distinction between cognitivism and noncognitivism. While cognitivists hold that moral judgments express beliefs and are therefore truth-apt, noncognitivists hold that moral judgments express mental states other than belief (such as emotions or desires) and are therefore not truth-apt (see e.g. Miller 2003, 3). Noncognitivism is closely connected to an “expressivist” semantics of moral judgments, that is, “the view that certain kinds of language have the function of expressing states of mind rather than representing facts” (Camp 2018, 87). In fact, “noncognitivism” and “expressivism” are sometimes used interchangeably (see e.g. Miller 2003, 37). Different versions of noncognitivism differ with respect to what they take to be the relevant attitude. A

³⁹ Amy Allen, for example, construes relativism as a first-order normative position and contrasts it with contextualism understood as a metaethical position (Allen 2016, 212). However, even when relativism is understood as a metaethical position, it can be understood as having first-order normative consequences. I will discuss some of these consequences in Chapter 2.4.

⁴⁰ While moral relativism is best seen as a metaethical position, it does not usually figure in taxonomies of metaethical positions as a distinct option (see e.g. Miller 2003; Stahl 2013). Rather, it is understood that versions of some positions will turn out to have relativistic consequences, while others will not. However, metaethical relativism is listed as a “central organizing option” in the recently published *Routledge Handbook of Metaethics* (McPherson and Plunkett 2018).

⁴¹ For reasons of space, I will restrict my discussion to some of the metaethical positions most often discussed in connection with moral relativism. Since the details of these positions are subject to intricate discussions, I have to rely on simplified definitions of these positions that do not do full justice to any of the specific worked-out theories that fall under these categories.

paradigmatic example of a noncognitivist position is A. J. Ayer's "emotivism," according to which moral judgments express emotions or sentiments of approval or disapproval (Ayer 1946, Chapter 6). In a famous passage, Ayer characterizes his position as follows:

Thus if I say to someone, "You acted wrongly in stealing that money," I am not stating anything more than if I had simply said, "You stole that money." In adding that this action is wrong I am not making any further statement about it. I am simply evincing my moral disapproval of it. It is as if I had said, "You stole that money," in a peculiar tone of horror, or written it with the addition of some special exclamation marks. (1946, 107)⁴²

A challenge that all versions of noncognitivism face is the so-called Frege-Geach problem, developed by Peter Geach and attributed to Gottlob Frege (Geach 1965). In his development of this challenge, Geach exploits the fact that, contrary to what noncognitivists claim, moral discourse *seems* to be truth-apt. As Alexander Miller puts it, moral judgments such as "Murder is wrong" seem to be declarative sentences involving predicates and sentences such as "Jim believes that murder is wrong" are syntactically well-formed (Miller 2003, 60). This raises a problem concerning embeddings of moral judgments in so-called "unasserted contexts." For example, moral judgments can be part of conditional judgments. Moreover, together with simple moral judgments, these conditionals can be part of valid inferences, such as inferences instantiating modus ponens. From "Murder is wrong" and "If murder is wrong, then getting your little brother to murder people is wrong," we can, for example, infer that "Getting your little brother to murder people is wrong" (2003, 41). While it may be plausible that assertions of simple moral judgments express certain attitudes, it is much less clear how this should work in these unasserted contexts. If the expressivist gives a different account of, for example, a moral judgment and a conditional containing a moral judgment, they will undermine the validity of inferences because they have created a setting of equivocation (2003, 40–42). More recent versions of noncognitivism, such as Simon Blackburn's "quasi-realism" and Allan Gibbard's "norm-expressivism," differ from earlier versions in that they provide solutions to this problem (see Blackburn 1993, 1998; Gibbard 1990, 2003). Miller describes this task as follows: "It is the project of explaining how we can legitimately talk *as if* we were entitled to assume that moral predicates express properties, and so on, even though we are not" (Miller 2003, 52). This is why Blackburn describes his own view as a "quasi-realism."

Noncognitivism is sometimes associated with moral subjectivism. Berit Brogaard, for example, develops an argument in favor of a version of moral subjectivism based on the

⁴² Other well-known early versions of noncognitivism include Charles L. Stevenson's development of emotivism and R. M. Hare's "universal prescriptivism" (see Stevenson 1944; Hare 2003).

plausibility of a version of emotivism (Brogaard 2012). However, the relation between noncognitivism and subjectivism is not straightforward. Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons observe that while expressivism is often accused of leading to relativistic conclusions, it is seen as an answer to relativism by proponents of the view. They argue that their version of expressivism does not lead to relativistic conclusions (Horgan and Timmons 2006). Moreover, there seems to be no particular affinity between noncognitivism and versions of group relativism. Expressivist semantics, however, do play an indirect role for some versions of group relativism.⁴³

1.3.2. Moral Relativism and Moral Realism

The distinction between metaethical positions that is perhaps most often alluded to in discussions of relativism is the distinction between moral realism and moral anti-realism. Realism can be characterized in different ways and the relation between realism and relativism depends on the details of the characterization. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord offers the following definition, which he takes to hold for realism in all domains: “[R]ealism involves embracing just two theses: (1) the claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false [...] and (2) some are literally true. Nothing more. (Of course, a great deal is built into these two theses.)” (Sayre-McCord 1988, 5).⁴⁴ Some of what is built into these theses can be unpacked by noting that an even simpler definition, which suggests itself, would not suffice to single out moral realism. According to this simpler definition, realists would only commit to the following: that (1) the claims in question are truth-apt and that (2) some of them are true. This would not be specific enough because moral anti-realists share these commitments. In other words, realists and anti-realists (as well as error-theorists) all subscribe to cognitivism and both realists and anti-realists develop “success” rather than “error” theories (Sayre-McCord 1988, 10).⁴⁵ The simpler definition, thus, does not capture what is at issue between realists and anti-realists. What is it that realists are committed to additionally? One common approach to get at the point of realism is in terms of “mind-independence.” According to Sharon Street, realists posit “evaluative truths” that are independent of our “evaluative attitudes” (Street 2006, 109) and according to Miller, “they think that there really are moral facts and moral properties, and that the existence of these moral facts and instantiation of these moral properties is constitutively independent of human opinion” (Miller

⁴³ I will discuss the role semantic expressivism plays for some versions of moral group relativism in Chapter 2.3.

⁴⁴ The second clause serves to distinguish realism from so called “error theories,” which claim that while moral claims are truth-apt, none of them are true (see Mackie 1977).

⁴⁵ I follow Sayre-McCord in this use of “anti-realism.” A different use which describes all non-realist positions, including versions of noncognitivism and error theory as anti-realist is also possible.

2003, 4). While Sayre-McCord is wary of adopting these terms for a definition of realism in general (because, for example, a realist account of psychological facts cannot be plausibly committed to mind-independence of those facts (Sayre-McCord 1988, 6)), he accepts it in the case of morality. This is already implicit in Sayre-McCord's definition of realism: because moral claims seem to describe objective properties, in order for (some of) them to be "literally true" as "literally construed" they have to correspond to objective moral properties. Any account involving mind-dependence would, according to him, be implausible as a literal construal of the meaning of the claims in question and their truth-conditions in the case of morality (1988, 22).⁴⁶

It is commonly assumed that realism and relativism exclude each other and that a kind of anti-realism (or noncognitivism) is therefore a presupposition of relativism. This seems to undermine the claim that the distinction between relativist and non-relativist positions is best seen as orthogonal to other distinctions. However, while realism and relativism are incompatible on most understandings of these views, there are exceptions. Rovane emphasizes that on her understanding of relativism as "Multimundialism," the issue of realism is indeed orthogonal to the question of relativism (Rovane 2013, 12). She identifies the idea that anti-realism is a presupposition of relativism as underlying both the "prevailing consensus view" focusing on the Disagreement Intuition as well as the debates on relativism in the twentieth century focusing on the Alternatives Intuition (see Chapter 1.2.3.). Against this, Rovane points out that while the question of whether there can be "alternatives," in the sense of truths that cannot be embraced together, in a certain domain is a metaphysical question in a broad sense, it is independent of the question of whether truths are mind-independent (2013, 83f). Therefore, relativism as Multimundialism is compatible with both realism and anti-realism.⁴⁷ Harman too has recently argued against the widespread assumption that realism and relativism are incompatible. In a recent paper, he describes his version of

⁴⁶ A similar characterization is offered by David Enoch, in particular, for "non-naturalistic realism" (Enoch 2018). However, Peter Railton claims that a definition in terms of mind-independence does not capture many versions of "naturalistic realism" (Railton 2018, 45). If this is true, my discussion of the relationship between realism and relativism does not apply to such versions of naturalistic realism.

⁴⁷ Rovane explores the prospects for establishing Multimundialism on anti-realist grounds as well as realist grounds (2012, 2010). With respect to the domain of natural facts as the objects of scientific investigation, she argues that scientific realism might even invite relativism because "the realist conception of the facts as mind-independent forces us to concede the possibility of knowers unlike us" (2010, 115), with different kinds of knowers giving rise to different "worlds." Her argument that relativism and realism are compatible depends on a specific understanding of realism in terms of "mind-independence." In earlier work, she introduces what she later calls unimundialism – the view that there is a single comprehensive and complete body of truths – as a "realist ideal" that plays the role of a minimal requirement of realism: while different notions of realism may posit further additional requirements, none will be incompatible with this basic requirement (2002). On such a definition, relativism and realism are indeed mutually exclusive. Rovane distances herself from this earlier understanding of realism, which leads to the common assumption that realism rules out relativism, in more recent publications (see e.g. 2009, 68, n14).

relativism as a form of realism: “The relativity of moral right or wrong relative to a moral framework is a version of moral realism, just as the relativism of motion and rest to a spatio-temporal framework is a version of realism about motion” (Harman 2015, 859). In order to square his commitments to realism and relativism, he argues that the relevant facts must be relational (2015, 858). However, such a view would not qualify as realist given Sayre-McCord’s definition and its emphasis on “literal truth” of judgments as “literally construed” (Sayre-McCord 1988, 5). Whether realism and relativism are compatible thus depends on exactly how these views are understood.

1.3.3. Moral Relativism and Metaethical Constructivism

Another metaethical view that is of particular importance for the discussion of moral relativism is metaethical constructivism. Metaethical constructivism can be characterized in terms of “proceduralism” (see e.g. Barry 2018, 385). According to this kind of characterization, constructivism is the view that what makes some normative judgments true is that they are the upshot of a certain procedure. While “restricted” versions of constructivism rely on normative judgments as the input of these constructive procedures, “unrestricted” versions of constructivism aim to construct the truth of all normative judgments (Barry 2018, 385f; see also Street 2010, 367f). Only unrestricted versions of constructivism count as metaethical positions.⁴⁸ Prominent versions of metaethical constructivism include versions of “Kantian” constructivism, such as the view developed by Christine Korsgaard, as well as versions of “Humean” constructivism, such as the view developed by Sharon Street (Korsgaard 1996, 2009; Street 2008).⁴⁹ Both of these kinds of constructivism are versions of “constitutivism”; that is, they argue that “the procedure is determined by constitutive standards of agency or the practical point of view” (Barry 2018, 388). According to “constitutivism” in general, “normative facts of certain kinds are explained by facts about the constitutive features of something” (Smith 2018, 371). The kind of constitutivism relevant in the context of Kantian and Humean constructivism explains what reasons an agent has based

⁴⁸ Whether constructivism constitutes a distinct metaethical position is a matter of dispute (see Barry 2018, 386; Street 2010, 363). Because of its important relation to relativism, I consider metaethical constructivism a distinct metaethical position.

⁴⁹ Although she previously adopted a “proceduralist” approach herself (see e.g. Street 2008, 209), Street has argued that a characterization along these lines opens the constructivist to criticism and that a different formulation, in terms of a practical point of view, is therefore preferable (2010). Following this latter approach, she characterizes metaethical constructivism as the view that “the truth of a normative claim consists in that claim’s being entailed from within the practical point of view, where the practical point of view is given a *formal* characterization” (2010, 369). In a more recent paper and drawing on Korsgaard, Street further suggests to understand the constructivist strategy in terms of three steps: identifying a relevant practical point of view, identifying a common problem faced by anyone occupying this point of view, identifying a solution to this problem (Street 2016, 168–70; cf. Korsgaard 2008).

on what is constitutive of agency. They differ with respect to the upshot of the procedure so defined. As Street puts it, they disagree “over whether *moral* conclusions follow from the practical point of view given a formal characterization” (Street 2010, 369). While Kantian constructivists argue that the constitutive standards of practical reasoning make moral requirements rationally mandatory, Humean constructivists deny this. As long as we assume that morality is intimately connected to the reasons an agent has, Humean constructivism can thus be seen as undermining moral absolutism and therefore leaning towards a kind of moral relativism. Because what is at stake are the deliberative procedures or practical standpoints of individual agents, Humean constructivism in general seems to lead to subjectivism rather than group relativism.

Kantian and Humean versions of constructivism can be distinguished from a different kind of metaethical constructivism, which conceives of morality as a “social construction.” According to this kind of constructivism, the moral norms that bind us are ultimately constructed by members of communities trying to figure out a way to live together. This can be seen as a version of constructivism characterized in terms of proceduralism. However, the relevant procedure is different. While Kantian and Humean constructivist focus on the deliberation of agents, social constructivists focus on historically developed agreements between members of different communities as the relevant procedure. Social constructivism is of particular importance for moral group relativism because it offers a straightforward way to bridge the gap between the fact that communities live according to moral norms and the validity of these norms. Therefore, social constructivism is the most straightforward formulation of moral group relativism.⁵⁰

In spite of important differences, all of the versions of moral relativism I focus on can be understood as versions of social constructivism. They understand morality as something that has been created by human beings in the course of history. This is perhaps most obvious with respect to Harman’s “conventionalism” and Wong’s “pluralistic relativism.” While Harman focuses on the social constructivist idea of implicit agreements between members of a community, Wong describes his own position as a version of constructivism and presents it

⁵⁰ If versions of social constructivism succeed in accounting for the validity of moral norms, they can do so without appealing to any ontological commitments that are “supernatural,” in the sense that they go beyond those involved in a scientific understanding of the world. This kind of compatibility with naturalism is generally seen as an advantage of metaethical views. Street even suggests that “the central task of metaethics” can be characterized as “the task of reconciling our understanding of normativity and normative discourse with a naturalistic understanding of the world” (Street 2010, 375). Harman has argued that naturalism – understood as “an approach to ethics that is [...] dominated by a concern with the place of values in the natural world” (Harman 2000b, 79) – “tends toward relativism” (2000b, 80). However, many different metaethical positions claim to be compatible with naturalism. Thus, as Harman also points out, it is possible to be an absolutist and a naturalist at the same time (2000b, 80).

as part of a long tradition of constructivists (Wong 2006, 37). Velleman's idea that members of a community have to converge on a shared way of life that includes moral norms is notably constructivist as well.⁵¹ Williams and Rovane have a slightly different understanding of morality. They emphasize that moral norms are a product of history and culture. Nevertheless, because they share the understanding that morality is something developed by humans in the course of history, even if only unintentionally and as a byproduct of their intentional actions, Williams's and Rovane's views can be understood as versions of social constructivism in a broad sense.⁵²

1.3.4. Moral Relativism and Internalism about Reasons

Another distinction that plays some role in discussions of moral relativism is the distinction between "internalism" and "externalism" about reasons. While "internalism about reasons" has come to mean different things, a broad characterization of the underlying issue drawing on Williams's groundbreaking discussion of the topic suffices for my purposes.⁵³ What is at stake between internalists and externalists on this view is the right way to conceive of the relation between reasons and motivation. While internalists about reasons hold that having a reason to do something is importantly connected to the agent's being motivated to do so (or at least being capable of being motivated given suitable circumstances), externalists deny this. In the words of Williams's influential discussion of the matter, internalists commit to the claim that statements about reasons are relative "to the agent's *subjective motivational set*" (Williams 1981, 102), including "such things as dispositions of evaluation, patterns of emotional reaction, personal loyalties, and various projects, as they may be abstractly called, embodying commitments of the agent" (1981, 105) that can be formally described as "desires." According to externalists about reasons, by contrast, a statement about what an agent has reason to do is not so relative and can be true or false independently of the agent's motivations. Although internalism about reasons does not have to lead to relativistic consequences, it is of special interest with respect to relativism. This is because if a reason

⁵¹ Velleman presents a special case. As will become clear, his view can also be understood as a modified version of Kantian constructivism. However, as Velleman emphasizes in the Introduction to *How We Get Along*, the social plays a special role on this kind of view (Velleman 2009, 1). I will discuss Velleman's view in detail in Chapter 4.1. and 4.2.

⁵² In Rovane's case, this has to be squared with her claim that relativism is at least compatible with realism. According to her, the picture of morals as historically and culturally developed is compatible with realism because in the case of morality, realism cannot plausibly be a matter of complete independence from human history: "It would be preposterous to suggest that we might make sense of morality in a way that abstracts altogether from all aspects of the human condition, including human history as well as human nature. So if there is any room for a 'realist' conception of moral 'facts' as genuinely mind-independent, it had better not be allied with that preposterous suggestion" (Rovane 2013, 103).

⁵³ For an overview of different versions of internalism about reasons, see Errol Lord and David Plunkett's "Reasons Internalism" (Lord and Plunkett 2018).

only applies to an agent given a certain motivational state, then different sets of reasons can apply to different agents. As long as we assume that morality is intimately connected to the reasons an agent has, internalism about reasons can thus be seen as undermining moral absolutism and therefore leaning towards a kind of moral relativism. Because what is at stake is the “subjective motivational set” of an individual agent, internalism seems to more straightforwardly lead to subjectivism rather than group relativism.⁵⁴ However, internalism about reasons is also an important motivation for Harman’s version of moral group relativism. It is one of Harman’s central commitments that it does not make sense to ascribe moral reasons to an agent who lacks the relevant motivation. Harman’s semantic thesis about “inner judgments” is thus closely connected to his commitment to internalism about reasons. Harman’s commitment to internalism about reasons also ties in with his thesis that morality rests on an agreement because the relevant desire-like state that is required for being motivated to act in a certain way and thus to have a moral reason, on his view, is a “conditional intention” to keep a moral agreement (Harman 1975, 13, see also Chapter 1.2.1.). Interestingly, both Velleman and Wong develop an account of reasons that undercuts the distinction between internalism and externalism as introduced above. In different ways they both argue that reasons must be related to a motivating state, but this state is not subjective in the sense that it is specific to a single individual; rather, it is something common to all human agents (Wong 2006, Chapter 7; Velleman 2009, Chapter 5).

1.3.5. Moral Relativism, Moral Skepticism, and Moral Nihilism

Moral relativism is often seen as closely associated with moral skepticism and moral nihilism. Korsgaard, for example, claims that “realism is seen by many as the only hope for ethics, the only option to skepticism, relativism, subjectivism, and all the various ways of thinking that the subject is hopeless” (Korsgaard 1996, 34). In a similar vein, Michele Moody-Adams describes relativism as “a skepticism about moral objectivity based on claims about the diversity of moral practices” (Moody-Adams 2002, 2). Moral skepticism can be understood as a challenge to the view that there can be moral knowledge or that moral norms can ever be adequately justified. Moral nihilism, by contrast, can be understood in terms of the claim that (although moral claims are truth-apt) there simply is no moral truth or justification. However, these positions are often conflated. According to David Copp, for example, the moral skeptic “denies that any moral standard has any genuine credibility, and she is not swayed from her position by the fact that many people regard some of them as credible. She thinks that no

⁵⁴ James Dreier develops an argument in favor of a kind of moral subjectivism based on the truth of internalism about reasons (Dreier 1990).

moral standard has any adequate and appropriate warrant, grounding, certification or justification” (Copp 1991, 205f, first emphasis mine). In a similar vein, Korsgaard describes the moral skeptic as “someone who thinks that the explanation of moral concepts [as well as their use and practical and psychological effects more generally, K.S.] will be one that does not support the claims morality makes on us” (Korsgaard 1996, 13). In these characterizations, the skeptic is portrayed as someone who, rather than subjecting the status of moral norms to skeptical doubt, makes a negative claim about their validity. This blurs the line between moral skepticism and moral nihilism. What relativism shares with skepticism or nihilism broadly understood is the denial that there is a set of absolute moral truths that could be known or an absolutely valid set of moral norms that could be justified. In addition, both arguments for moral skepticism and arguments for moral relativism can take the form of an inference to the best explanation based on the phenomenon of persistent moral disagreement.⁵⁵ However, the main reason opponents of relativism often associate moral relativism with skepticism or nihilism is that they take the claim that what is morally right or wrong is relative to a given moral system to undermine the authority of moral norms. This comes out clearly in Scanlon’s discussion of relativism as a “debunking doctrine.” As Scanlon points out, the reason relativism is often equated with a form of skepticism is that the relativists’ commitment to *Dependence* is often construed in conventionalist terms, that is, as claiming that “the rightness or wrongness of an action is determined by those standards that are generally accepted in the society in question” (Scanlon 1998, 333):

So understood, relativism is often seen as a *debunking doctrine*, according to which morality is *merely* a matter of social convention – where the ‘merely’ reflects the assumption that being generally accepted in a society could not, by itself, confer anything like the authority that moral judgments are commonly supposed to have. This is, at least, the way relativism is frequently imagined by nonrelativists, and no doubt some relativists also have this kind of debunking claim in mind. (1998, 333, first emphasis mine)

Relativism is thus understood as a form of skepticism along the lines of Korsgaard’s characterization: it is seen as a view according to which the correct account of our moral practices including their practical and psychological effects – that they are a matter of convention – undermines the claims morality makes on us. As Scanlon points out, this understanding of relativism as a “debunking doctrine” that is equivalent to skepticism about

⁵⁵ Matt Lutz and Jacob Ross discuss the role of moral disagreement for arguments in favor of moral skepticism (Lutz and Ross 2018, 485–87). I will discuss the role moral disagreement plays in arguments for moral relativism in Chapter 2.

the validity of moral norms is the reason why many oppose moral relativism. In addition, it is a problem for moral relativists who do not see their view as a skeptical doctrine:

This challenge to the importance of moral judgments is a significant threat from a nonrelativist's point of view. It is also a serious problem for those relativists who do not see their relativism as *a form of skepticism*. I believe that many philosophers who defend relativism take themselves to be defending a nonskeptical or, as I will call it, *benign* relativism, according to which the requirements of morality vary but are not for that reason to be taken less seriously. (1998, 333, first emphasis mine)

In a similar spirit as Scanlon's "benign" relativist, Velleman emphasizes that "moral relativism must not only deny the existence of universal morality; it must also assert the existence of local moralities. Otherwise it won't be relativism; it will just be nihilism" (Velleman 2015, 76). Relativisms' relationship to skepticism and nihilism is thus less close than opponents assume. In order to be a distinct position, moral relativism must account for the validity of different sets of moral norms and thereby distinguish itself from skepticism and nihilism. In order to do so, moral relativists have to give an account of morality that is relativist without thereby undermining the claims morality makes on us.⁵⁶

1.3.6. Moral Relativism, Semantic Relativism, and Semantic Contextualism

Versions of moral relativism often involve claims about the semantics of moral judgments. Here, semantic relativism seems to provide a particularly interesting option for moral relativists.⁵⁷ Semantic relativism is most often contrasted with semantic contextualism. Roughly speaking, while semantic contextualism is the view that the meaning of an utterance depends on the context in which it is uttered, semantic relativism is the view that while the meaning of an utterance does not depend on the context in which it is uttered, whether it is true or false does depend on context. Semantic relativists and semantic contextualists build on

⁵⁶ I will return to this requirement in Chapter 4.3.

⁵⁷ Semantic relativism has been developed in order to account for ordinary discourse in areas that are intuitively taken to be subjective, such as judgments of taste. It is typically discussed as an option to account for discourse in a relevant area next to "contextualism," "objectivism," and "expressivism" (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, Chapter 1). While "expressivism" has been discussed above in connection with noncognitivism, "objectivism" – the view that utterances in the relevant area of discourse express what they seem to express and are true simply in virtue of how things are – is most naturally associated with moral realism, in particular non-naturalistic realism. In spite of its specific interest in solving problems arising within truth-conditional semantics, semantic relativism can be – and has been – seen as a precise formulation of the intuitive idea that truth is relative and is sometimes referred to as "new relativism" (Baghramian and Carter 2017) or "new age relativism" (Wright 2007). However, the philosophical significance of arguments concerning the empirical adequacy of semantic theories with respect to ordinary discourse has also been challenged (see e.g. Wright 2008, 182, 2012, 463f; Stanley 2016, 185). While semantic relativism is not typically defended for moral discourse, there are exceptions to this rule (see e.g. Brogaard 2008; Kölbel 2005). Crispin Wright discusses the distinctive character of moral discourse and argues that it differs from paradigmatic applications of semantic relativism such as judgments of taste (Wright 2012, 449).

a two-dimensional semantic framework “in the well-trying Lewis Kaplan tradition” (Wright 2007, 262). This framework distinguishes between “contexts of use,” in which an utterance is made, and “circumstances of evaluation” (Kaplan 1989, 494). This makes it possible to distinguish between two kinds of “meanings” of a linguistic expression: “character” and “content” (1989, 500–507). While the content of an utterance is determined relative to its context of use, its truth-value is determined relative to its circumstance of evaluation or “index” (Lewis 1980, 79). The character of an expression can thus be understood as a function from contexts of use to contents, while the content can be understood as a function from circumstances of evaluation to extensions (Kaplan 1989, 505f). In general, “the result of evaluating the content of a well-formed expression α at a circumstance will be an appropriate extension for α (i.e. for a sentence, a truth value; for a term, an individual; for an n-place predicate, a set of n-tuples of individuals, etc.)” (1989, 501). A well-known application that illustrates a major advantage of this framework is Kaplan’s treatment of indexicals such as “I”: An expression such as “I am here now” expresses different contents depending on the speaker, time, and place of the context of use. These contents can then be evaluated as true or false relative to the circumstance of evaluation. The utterance is true if and only if the content expressed in this context is true when evaluated with respect to the circumstance of the context. While “I am here now” is true at all contexts in which it is uttered, it is nonetheless not a necessary truth. The two-dimensional framework helps bring out this distinction (1989, 509).

Semantic relativists and semantic contextualists adapt this framework by introducing additional parameters, such as a set of moral standards.⁵⁸ This makes them particularly interesting from the perspective of moral relativists because the resulting “semantic relativity” corresponds to the relativist’s commitment to *Dependence*. The relevant kind of parameter-relativity can be incorporated at (at least) three different levels:

- (1) at the level of the *context of use* of an utterance (determining its *content*),
- (2) at the level of the *circumstance of evaluation* of the *context of use* of an utterance (determining its *truth-value*),
- (3) at the level of the *circumstance of evaluation* of a *context of assessment*, at which the utterance is assessed (determining its *truth-value*).⁵⁹

⁵⁸ The kinds of truth-value relativity initially explored by Kaplan and Lewis are not usually associated with philosophical relativism. However, for a criticism of semantic relativism that targets this presupposition, see Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne’s *Relativism and Monadic Truth* (Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009).

⁵⁹ The difference between accounts of type (2) and accounts of type (3) corresponds to a distinction between two different kinds of relativization that can be drawn informally: the truth of a moral judgment can either be

This distinction leads to a more fine-grained taxonomy of semantic positions, distinguishing between:

- (1) Contextualism: the view that the *context of use* determines the *content* of an utterance,
- (2) Speaker Relativism: the view that the *context of use* determines the *truth-value* of the content of an utterance (see e.g. Kölbel 2002),
- (3) Assessor Relativism: the view that the *context of assessment* determines the *truth-value* of the content of an utterance (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014).⁶⁰

Depending on how exactly they take the content of an utterance to depend on context, different versions of contextualism can be distinguished. While “indexical contextualists” claim that moral expressions such as the predicate “morally wrong” have to be interpreted in a way that is structurally similar to indexicals, such as “I;” “relational contextualists” claim that the structure of utterances containing moral expressions contains hidden argument places, so that, for example, “morally wrong” does not express a one-place predicate, but a two-place predicate, denoting a relation between an action and a moral standard (cf. Finlay 2017, 187, n1).⁶¹ In addition, versions of “speaker contextualism,” which take the relevant parameter of the context to be the moral standards accepted by the speaker, can be distinguished from versions of “group contextualism,” which take the relevant parameter in the context to be the moral standards shared by the speaker and the members of their group (see e.g. Silk 2017, 212).

Although versions of semantic contextualism and semantic relativism have a particularly close relation to metaethical relativism because they incorporate kinds of semantic relativity, various combinations of semantic and other metaethical commitments are in principle possible. Therefore, the relationship between moral relativism and semantic relativism is less close than it might be expected. As has been pointed out, for example, by

relativized to the standards of a speaker, who makes the judgment, or to the standards of an assessor, who assesses it.

⁶⁰ While a threefold distinction is common, terminology is inconsistent. There are (at least) two different ways to draw the somewhat contested line between “semantic relativism” and “semantic contextualism.” One way to draw the line is to call all semantic positions that relativize content to context “contextualist” and all positions that relativize truth-value to context “relativist.” This is the strategy I follow above. Another way to draw the line is to call all positions that relativize to contexts of use “contextualist” and only positions that relativize to contexts of assessment “relativist.” The best-known advocate of the latter strategy is MacFarlane, who calls what I call “speaker relativism” “indexical contextualism” (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014). The idea is that these kinds of views are versions of “contextualism” because the parameter relevant to the truth value is supplied by the context of use of an utterance and “non-indexical,” according to Kaplan’s canonical definition of indexicals, because this kind of semantic relativity does not affect the content of an utterance (cf. Kaplan 1989, 506).

⁶¹ I take it to be a disadvantage of MacFarlane’s taxonomy that, because it equates all types of content-sensitivity to contexts of use with indexicality, it has a hard time distinguishing between different kinds of contextualism, understood as the view that the content of an utterance is relative to context. Nevertheless, MacFarlane does, at some point, distinguish between “indexical” and “relational” in addition to “nonindexical” contextualism (see MacFarlane 2011, 539).

Alex Silk, the informal claim that moral correctness is relative underdetermines current semantic options.

Informal relativizing claims – like that ‘x is wrong’ can be true “relative to” (as applied to, etc.) one person/group but false relative to another – fail to distinguish among the candidate semantic theories. (For this reason it isn’t always clear where many self-described “relativist” views fall on questions of contextualism, relativism, etc. in the present senses of these positions.) (Silk 2018, 105; see also Stojanovic 2018, 119)

In fact, most of the moral relativists I focus on commit to some version of semantic contextualism rather than semantic relativism. More specifically, they commit to some version of group contextualism rather than speaker contextualism. According to Velleman, statements such as “Action A is wrong” “should be interpreted as containing an implicit indexical, as in ‘wrong-for-us’, the reference of ‘us’ being supplied by the context of utterance” (Velleman 2015, 77). This amounts to a version of indexical contextualism. In the context of his discussion of what he calls “inner judgments,” that is, judgments about what reasons an agent has, Harman suggests to “treat the moral ‘ought’ as a four-place predicate (or ‘operator’), ‘Ought (A, D, C, M),’ which relates an agent A, a type of act D, considerations C, and motivating attitudes M” (Harman 1975, 10, see also Chapter 1.2.1.). This amounts to a version of relational contextualism. Harman’s more recent proposal for the semantics of moral judgments, according to which at least “[f]or the purposes of assigning *objective* truth conditions, a judgment of the form, *it would be morally wrong of P to D*, has to be understood as elliptical for a judgment of the form, *in relation to moral framework M, it would be morally wrong of P to D*” (1996, 43), can be understood as a version of relational contextualism as well. While the semantics for moral judgments suggested by Wong and Rovane fit less clearly in the framework of two-dimensional semantics, they too can be understood as committing to versions of contextualism. Rovane’s claim that utterances containing moral expressions can be “disambiguated” with respect to the context in which they are made (Rovane 2013, 45) and Wong’s claim that the meanings of moral concepts differ across different communities (Wong 2006, 72) can be understood as versions of semantic contextualism in the broad sense that the content of judgments containing moral expressions varies with context. Williams, by contrast, explicitly rejects any “relational” construal of the semantics of moral expressions. His notion of “thick concepts” goes beyond contextualism, in claiming that different communities use *different* concepts that are action-guiding but not intertranslatable.⁶²

⁶² I will discuss Williams’s view of thick concepts in Chapter 4.4.3.

Thus, most of the moral relativists I focus on can be understood as committed to some version of semantic group contextualism. However, as Stojanovic and Silk emphasize, there is no entailment in either direction. On the one hand, metaethical relativism is compatible with different semantics for moral judgments; on the other hand, there might be reason to allow for parameter-relativity, even if the parameter supplied is always the same (Silk 2018, 115; Stojanovic 2018, 126). A relativist or contextualist treatment of semantics opens up the space for variation of standards, but does not anticipate the substantial metaethical decision.⁶³ Thus, metaethical relativists are not committed to semantic relativism or contextualism, but semantic relativism and contextualism provide for interesting options from their point of view because they incorporate a kind of semantic relativity that corresponds to the relativist's commitment to *Dependence*.⁶⁴

To conclude, while there are some affinities between moral relativism and some positions within metaethics, the question of moral relativism and moral absolutism is in principle independent of other metaethical questions. However, all of the moral group relativists I focus on can be understood as committing to versions of metaethical constructivism that focus on the idea that the moral norms that are binding for members of different communities are constructed by these communities. In the next section, I will turn to the question why, in light of their metaethical commitments, accounting for the possibility of moral progress presents a challenge for moral relativists.

⁶³ Against this Wong claims that “one would expect a natural language to allow for such variation that affects truth-conditions only if it were taken for granted that it occurs” (Wong 2011, 416).

⁶⁴ I will further explore the semantic commitments of the versions of moral relativism that I focus on in Chapter 2.

1.4. Moral Progress as a Challenge for Moral Relativism

Moral progress is a controversial topic. On the one hand, claims about moral progress are often met with suspicion. To judge that a certain transformation constitutes or would constitute progress presupposes strong normative assumptions of a kind to be discussed in this section. Moreover, in the history of philosophy, the notion of moral progress is closely tied to a particular discourse of progress characteristic of the Age of Enlightenment – what Georg Henrik von Wright calls the “Great Idea of Progress” (von Wright 1997, 2). This discourse has fallen into disrepute for a multiplicity of reasons (see e.g. Allen 2016).⁶⁵ On the other hand, proponents of the notion emphasize the important role the idea of moral progress can play in guiding action. According to Rahel Jaeggi, the notions of “progress” and, in particular, “regress” are vital tools for analyzing historical as well as ongoing transformations (Jaeggi 2018b, 191). Michele Moody-Adams even argues that belief in moral progress “is a condition of the possibility of morally constructive action for beings like us, with limited powers of understanding, memory and prediction, and who act in a world that frequently frustrates hopes for moral change” (Moody-Adams 2017, 154). Although there are some episodes in history that are taken to exemplify instances of moral progress almost unanimously in the literature on moral progress – the abolition of slavery being perhaps the most prominent example (see e.g. Anderson 2014; Coliva and Moruzzi 2012; Jamieson 2017) – it need not be taken for granted at the outset that there really is moral progress. Therefore, metaethical positions should not be expected to explain the purported fact that there is moral progress, but, rather, to explain the *possibility* of moral progress. However, moral relativists face difficulties in accounting for the possibility of moral progress. In light of the roles attributed to the notion of moral progress and the intuition that moral progress is at least possible, this constitutes a problem for moral relativism.

The source of relativism’s difficulties with progress in general can be located with reference to the two different “components” of the notion of progress that von Wright identifies:

The notion of progress – and its opposite regress – can be defined in a way which is at the same time illuminating and thought-provoking. Progress is change for the better; regress change for the worse. The definitions split the concepts in two components: the notion of change and the notion of goodness. The first is a descriptive or factual idea – change being the transition in time from a state of affairs to a new one. The second is an evaluative idea.

⁶⁵ I will discuss these criticisms in detail in Chapter 5.1.

Progress thus involves two conceptual ingredients: a factual and an evaluative one. Neither of them is unproblematic, and least of all their conjunction to a whole. (von Wright 1997, 1)

Von Wright's rendering of "progress" as "change for the better" emphasizes the potentially thorny issue of the interplay of the two different components that make up progress, which von Wright calls "conceptual ingredients": change and goodness.⁶⁶ The problem for relativists to account for progress arises with respect to this interplay. In order to evaluate if a change is for the better or worse, it needs to be judged relative to something else that can serve as a suitable standard of evaluation. However, whether establishing a suitable standard of evaluation presents a challenge for the relativist depends on how exactly moral progress is understood. "Moral progress" can mean slightly different things, depending on the kind of change that is taken to be involved.⁶⁷ For one, a conception of moral progress can be either "individualistic" or "collective"; that is, it can consider the moral development of an individual or that of a community. Although individualistic conceptions of progress can accommodate considerations of group-membership, they will typically focus on mechanisms of transformation that pertain to the individual, such as reflection.⁶⁸ With respect to collective conceptions of moral progress, a further distinction can be made, again, depending on the type of change involved. One kind of collective moral progress would consist in an increased compliance with the moral norms accepted by a community. Such a transformation would intuitively constitute a "change for the better." While this kind of collective conception of moral progress is closely connected to individual moral progress, it cannot be reduced to it. Although the development of a community depends on the attitudes of its members, social development can be something other than the aggregate of independently achieved individual developments.

With respect to individual moral progress, no special problem arises for versions of moral relativism of the kind I am concerned with. Even if moral relativism is true and what is morally right depends in some sense on the practices of a certain group, individual agents can aspire to act in accordance with what is morally right and make progress with respect to this

⁶⁶ In addition, it relates progress to regress, understood as "change for the worse." While the concepts of progress and regress depend on each other, they raise slightly different questions and their exact relation needs to be determined. Von Wright takes regress to be the opposite of progress; however, progress can also be contrasted with stasis or decline (cf. e.g. Koselleck 2006). The challenge progress presents for the relativist could be framed in terms of regress as well. After all, just as things might change for the better, they might also change for the worse. To be unable to account for the possibility of regress thus seems equally troubling.

⁶⁷ General definitions of progress, such as, for example, Dale Jamieson's "Naïve Conception" of progress, which is supposed to be neutral between different normative and metaethical positions and according to which "[m]oral progress occurs when a subsequent state of affairs is better than a preceding one, or when right acts become increasingly prevalent" (Jamieson 2002, 318) do not distinguish between these different kinds of moral progress.

⁶⁸ Because of their focus on practical deliberation, Kantian and Humean constructivists tend to conceive of moral progress in terms of individual development (see e.g. Arruda 2017).

standard.⁶⁹ For similar reasons, no special problem arises for relativism to account for collective moral progress if it is conceived in terms of increased compliance. Both notions can be understood in relation to the moral norms accepted by a community. These norms set the standard for improvement. They can, however, be contrasted with another kind of collective conception of moral progress that involves a genuine change in the moral norms accepted by a community. Intuitively, this kind of change can be for the better or worse. However, in contrast to the other kinds of moral progress, the possibility of a community's moral norms themselves changing for the better raises the question with respect to which standard a change of this kind can be evaluated. This is where the challenge for moral relativism lies.

Of course, as a moral agent, the relativist is committed to a set of moral norms that can serve as a standard of progress. If the practices of their own community change, they can describe this change as morally progressive retrospectively, in light of their new set of moral norms. Likewise, if they register a change in the practices of a community other than their own, they will be able to judge this change as morally progressive or regressive based on their own moral norms. However, according to the relativist's metaethical commitments, any set of moral norms can license this kind of self-certifying judgment about progress with respect to any kind of change. While the relativist's metaethical theory can explain why others make judgments according to the same pattern – they too would judge a change in their own practices to be progressive retrospectively and judge changes in the practices of communities other than their own according to their own standards – the account seems to undermine the possibility of moral progress rather than vindicate it. To see why, consider a community that is committed to a set of moral norms that serves as a standard S_1 at t_1 and two possible courses of change, one leading them to commit to S_2 at t_2 and one leading them to commit to S_3 at t_2 . No matter what course of change the community takes, they will be able to interpret the change as progressive retrospectively (in light of their new norms accepted at t_2) – even if the two courses of change are diametrically opposed.⁷⁰

In reflecting on judgments about progress in general, Charles Larmore expresses the following related worry about establishing a suitable standard of progress:

Relying as they must on our current ideas of what is true, important, and right, our judgments about progress can begin to appear irredeemably parochial. We may wonder whether they

⁶⁹ Individual moral progress might, however, raise a special problem for what I have called moral subjectivism, that is, versions of moral relativism that relativize to individual points of view.

⁷⁰ Another way to put the problem is to point out that there is a tension between the judgments about moral progress the relativist can make and their own metaethical commitments, which seem to undermine the validity of these judgments. This formulation of the challenge brings out the similarity between the relativist's problem to account for the possibility of progress and other challenges deriving from tensions between the relativist's purported first- and second-order commitments, which I will discuss in Chapter 2.4.

amount to anything more than applauding others in proportion to their having happened to think like us. Is not the notion of progress basically an instrument of self-congratulation? What can we say to someone who objects that our present standpoint is merely ours, with no more right than any other to issue verdicts upon earlier times? (Larmore 2004, 47)

Since this problem of “self-congratulation” concerns judgments about progress in general, the moral relativist could argue that the account they can give of judgments of moral progress is the correct one. This is just what making judgments about progress is like and moral relativism gives an accurate account of this situation. However, in what follows, I am going to accept the terms of the challenge and pursue the question whether moral relativists can account for moral progress in a sense that goes beyond the account in terms of first-order moral commitments outlined above. That is, I am going to ask whether moral relativism understood as a metaethical position has the resources to give a more vindicating account of the possibility of moral progress.

Prima facie, there is reason to believe that moral relativism cannot give such an account of moral progress. This is because it seems that, in order to account for the possibility of moral progress, the relativist would have to be able to refer to a standard of progress that goes beyond the moral norms of different communities. In addition, it seems that such a standard would have to be independent of and external to the practices to be assessed. This is in tension with the relativist’s metaethical commitments, according to which there is no such standard. In fact, the required standard sounds a lot like the absolute moral norms that the relativist denies exist. If, by contrast, the practices of different communities are the only source of moral norms, as suggested by relativism, it seems like an assessment that goes beyond self-certification is impossible. Therefore, it seems that moral relativism as a metaethical position fails to account for the possibility of moral progress.⁷¹

An argument along these lines has recently been formulated by Annalisa Coliva and Sebastiano Moruzzi with respect to semantic relativism about moral discourse:

Now, on any relativist proposal a change in moral judgement involves a change in moral standards – that is, in those standards from which the moral judgement is issued. But, by relativist lights, the change of standards, in its turn, cannot be *ethically* motivated since there aren’t ethical values outside a given system. If standards change, on a relativist view, this is not in any sense a *moral* progress, but, rather, a mere change of preferences. It seems thus that a truth-relativist has a problem in explaining a crucial feature of moral disputes. More

⁷¹ A similar reasoning seems to underlie Anita Superson’s reflection on why feminists might eschew moral relativism: “Most feminists also believe that we have made feminist progress, politically, socially, and economically, though we still have a way to go. Were moral relativism true, there could be no feminist moral progress, since progress implies a standard by which we measure improvement” (Superson 2017, 533).

precisely, it seems that the relativist story makes it utterly mysterious why we have a *sense of moral progress* when we come to the resolution of a moral dispute. Indeed, by the lights of relativism, such a sense of moral progress would be no more than an illusion fostered by conflating the agreement with our preferred moral standards with an objective ethical improvement. (Coliva and Moruzzi 2012, 52)

Coliva and Moruzzi assume that in order to be able to account for moral progress rather than mere change, the moral relativist would have to be able to refer to “ethical values outside a given system.” While they present their argument as “a new challenge for truth-relativism” (2012, 48), I take it to be exemplary of the kind of reasoning according to which relativists in general cannot account for progress. A similar argument underlies criticisms of Kuhn’s work on scientific development, which has been understood as a form of relativism (see e.g. Sankey 2017). Kuhn distinguishes phases of “normal science,” in which research is closely guided by a scientific paradigm and takes the form of puzzle solving, from phases of “extraordinary science,” in which anomalies have caused a crisis with respect to an established paradigm.⁷² It is the notion of change through paradigm-shifts that poses problems for Kuhn with respect to his account of scientific progress (Kuhn 2012, 166–69). This is because if a scientific paradigm determines, among other things, what counts as scientific progress, it becomes unclear with respect to which standard a change in paradigms can be evaluated as progressive.

In addition, progress is often conceived as a teleological enterprise leading towards a specific goal. Drawing on Stan Godlovitch, Amanda Roth calls views of this kind “utopian” conceptions of progress (Godlovitch 1998; Roth 2012).⁷³ She distinguishes two kinds of utopian conceptions of progress:

The first kind of utopian conception of ethical progress posits an ideal ethical end-state, claims that this end-state is the one and only one best way for the world to be, and understands progress in terms of coming closer to that end-state. [...]

Closely related to this “progress as getting closer to the ideal end-state” view is a second utopian view, whose conception of progress posits not one ideal state of the world toward

⁷² As Kuhn specifies in the Postscript to *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, he uses “paradigm” in two different senses. On the one hand, the term refers to “exemplars,” that is, particular scientific achievements that structure a field of research. On the other hand, it refers to a whole “scientific matrix,” consisting of symbolic generalizations (such as general laws), ontological models (affecting the metaphysical presuppositions of scientific theories as well as mere heuristics), values (different interpretations and weightings of the values accuracy, simplicity, consistency, and plausibility) as well as exemplars (Kuhn 2012, 186–90).

⁷³ While Roth distinguishes “utopian” from “evolutionary” conceptions of progress, Godlovitch initially distinguishes “Teleological or Culminative Progress” from “Improvement or Ameliorative progress” (Godlovitch 1998, 272f). He understands “utopian” or “millenarian” progress as a combination of teleology and improvement, in the sense that progress is not only understood in terms of eventually reaching a defined goal, but that every step in this process constitutes an improvement (1998, 276).

which we aim, but merely a fixed standard of evaluation by which we can distinguish improvement from mere change or deterioration. (Roth 2012, 385)⁷⁴

While the latter kind of utopian progress – which Roth also calls “quasi-utopian” (2012, 387) – can be understood as equivalent to the assumption that a notion of progress requires access to a standard that is independent of and external to the practices to be assessed, the former kind formulates an even stronger requirement. Here, a further obstacle for relativists to account for progress becomes evident: any notion of progress that presupposes a single ideal end-state is in tension with the relativist’s commitment to *Plurality*, according to which there are different moral communities that live according to different practices. On a relativist view, there is no reason why we should expect this to change in the course of progress.⁷⁵

To conclude, the commonly held view that moral relativism and moral progress are incompatible relies on several assumptions about what constitutes moral progress. Only if progress is understood as a collective phenomenon involving a genuine change of the moral norms accepted by a community does a special problem for relativists to account for progress arise. In addition, the argument that moral relativists cannot account for moral progress, in the sense specified, relies on the following assumptions: (1) In order to be able to assess a change as being for the better or worse, a suitable standard is needed; (2) this standard needs to go beyond the moral norms of different communities; (3) in order for this standard to go beyond the moral norms of different communities, it has to be independent of and external to the concrete practices that are to be assessed. Moreover, many conceptions of progress implicitly or explicitly involve a kind of “teleology” in the sense that they conceptualize progress as leading to a specific goal. Insofar as they presuppose a *single* goal or end-state, these conceptions are in tension with the relativist’s commitment to *Plurality*. It is thus a certain kind of conception of progress that underlies the common assumption that relativists cannot account for progress. However, since it seems difficult to see how one could have a conception of progress without depending on these assumptions, accounting for the possibility of moral progress does constitute a serious challenge for moral relativists.

In this chapter, I have prepared the ground for my investigation of the question of whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. I have defined moral relativism in terms of four basic commitments, outlined several prominent relativist

⁷⁴ Roth refers to “ethical” rather than “moral” progress because she takes herself to be concerned with progress regarding the “good” rather than the “right,” in Scanlon’s sense of this distinction (Roth 2012, 387; cf. Scanlon 1998, 171–76). However, because what is at stake in discussions of moral relativism corresponds to a broad notion of morality, which includes the good as well as the right, this restriction does not matter too much for the present discussion. Roth distinguishes utopian from “evolutionary” conceptions of progress (Roth 2012, 385). I will discuss this alternative kind of conceptions of progress in Chapter 3.4.

⁷⁵ I will return to this point in Chapter 5.2.

positions, and placed moral relativism within the context of other metaethical positions. I have also argued that moral relativism faces a *prima facie* challenge; namely, it seems that moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of moral progress. In the remainder of the dissertation, I will investigate whether and under what conditions the moral relativist can meet this challenge. However, before I address the main question of my dissertation directly, in the next chapter, I will turn to some questions the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises for moral relativism. This allows me to analyze some important challenges to the coherence of moral relativism and to discuss the metaethical commitments of the moral relativists I focus on in more detail, in particular concerning the semantics of moral discourse. In addition, it allows me to discuss some first-order normative consequences of moral relativism. Having these details in view will help me develop my argument and draw out some of its consequences in subsequent chapters.

2. Moral Relativism and Moral Disagreement

Disagreement in general is a pervasive feature of everyday life and an important concern in different areas of philosophy. Moral disagreement in particular poses significant philosophical and practical challenges. In contrast to disagreements about, for example, matters of taste, moral disagreements are often perceived as burdensome and in need of resolution. In contrast to disagreements about “middle-sized dry goods,” they can prove particularly hard to resolve. It is characteristic of moral disagreement that it can persist through argument and can therefore at least sometimes seem to resist rational resolution. In this respect, moral disagreement is often unfavorably compared to disagreement about non-moral matters such as, for example, scientific matters (see e.g. Rawls 1993, 55). One can distinguish “intra-group” disagreements, that is, disagreements between members of the same group from “inter-group” disagreements, that is, disagreements between members of different groups. In the context of moral group relativism, the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement is of particular importance.⁷⁶ It leads to two different sets of questions that are highly relevant in the context of moral relativism. On the one hand, it leads to questions about the metaethical commitments required to account for the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreements. On the other hand, it leads to questions about the right practical stance towards the moral commitments of others and oneself given moral conflict. All of these questions constitute challenges to the coherence of moral group relativism.

In this chapter, I will discuss some central questions the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises for moral relativism. I will begin by describing the twofold role moral disagreement plays for moral relativists and showing why accounting for the possibility of moral inter-group disagreement presents a challenge for moral relativists (2.1.). Then, I will discuss two different strategies to address this challenge (2.2.). Subsequently, I will introduce a further strategy and argue that it presents the best option to address the challenge moral inter-group disagreement poses for moral relativists (2.3.). Finally, I will discuss the implications moral relativism has with respect to the practical questions raised by the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement, that is, with respect to questions concerning tolerance, the possibility of criticism of the practices of other communities, and confidence in one’s own moral commitments (2.4.).

⁷⁶ I will discuss the topic of moral intra-group disagreement in Chapter 3.

2.1. Moral Disagreement and Moral Objectivity

In spite of the prevalence of disagreement as a phenomenon in everyday life and widespread concern with disagreement in different areas of philosophy, it is not trivial to say what a disagreement in general amounts to. It is perhaps most intuitive to think of disagreement along the lines of the following provisional characterization:

A and B disagree if A holds p and B holds q and q implies $\sim p$.

However, this formulation is ambiguous as to whether A and B are taken to *believe* or *assert* p and q , respectively. This ambiguity, which is arguably part of our intuitive understanding of disagreement, is made explicit by the distinction between disagreement as a “state” and disagreement as an “activity,” which Cappelen and Hawthorne introduce with respect to agreement (see Cappelen and Hawthorne 2009, 60). Intuitively, we can distinguish between two people “having a disagreement,” that is, being engaged in the activity of disagreeing with one another and two people “being in disagreement,” that is, being in a state of holding conflicting attitudes, even if they do not know about it (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, 119). This distinction matters because disagreement conceived as a state and disagreement conceived as an activity need not coincide. Not only is it possible that two people are in a state of disagreement without ever discovering it, perhaps less obviously, it is also possible that two people engage in the activity of disagreeing without being in a state of disagreement because their disagreeing rests on a misunderstanding. I follow David Plunkett and Tim Sundell in using the term “dispute” in order to “refer to any linguistic exchange that *appears to* evince or express a genuine disagreement” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 6, my emphasis) wherever it seems necessary to make this distinction. The notion of disagreement as a state is often taken to be explanatorily prior to the notion of disagreement as an activity (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, 120; Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 10f). It is assumed that any account of disagreement as an activity will draw on an account of disagreement as a state, even though people may at times engage in the activity of disagreeing because they mistakenly take themselves to be in a state of disagreement.⁷⁷

So far, this would provide us with the following characterization of disagreement as a state, based on which more specific notions of disagreement as activity could be developed:

⁷⁷ However, as will become clear below, the notion of disagreement as an activity remains important because intuitions about whether a given interaction constitutes a genuine disagreement play an important role in arguments about semantics. A notion of disagreement that is specifically tailored to fulfill the purpose of adjudicating between different semantic proposals is Silk’s notion of “discursive disagreement,” which is defined via a linguistic criterion: the “*licensing of expressions of linguistic denial* (‘no’, ‘nu-uh,’ etc.)” (Silk 2018, 6). In this sense, two people disagree if the assertion of one is appropriately met with an expression of linguistic denial by the other.

A and B are in a state of disagreement if A *believes* p and B *believes* q and q implies \sim p.

According to this still provisional characterization, disagreement would be understood in terms of the incompatibility of the contents of doxastic attitudes, such as belief. More specifically, the incompatibility would take the form of inconsistency. If one party to a disagreement were to take the other party's belief on board, they would end up holding inconsistent beliefs. However, in the context of metaethics, such a definition of moral disagreement begs the question against noncognitivism. According to noncognitivist positions in metaethics, moral judgment is not a matter of belief in the first place (see Chapter 1.3.1.). In order to account for disagreement, noncognitivists argue that moral disagreement is not best understood as conflict between different doxastic attitudes, but as conflict between different non-doxastic attitudes, such as desires. Recognizing this possibility, MacFarlane introduces the distinction between "doxastic" and "practical noncotenability" (MacFarlane 2014, 121f). The idea is, roughly, that one disagrees with a doxastic or nondoxastic attitude if one could not coherently adopt it. In the case of practical rather than doxastic noncotenability, the resulting incoherence would not be inconsistency of beliefs, but a kind of "practical incoherence" (2014, 122).⁷⁸

For these reasons, a suitable definition of disagreement should conceive of disagreement as a state rather than an activity and define this state in a way that is acceptable for cognitivists and noncognitivists alike. Therefore, I adopt the following "ecumenical" characterization of disagreement which Plunkett and Sundell develop based on Gibbard's work (cf. Gibbard 2003):

Disagreement Requires Conflict in Content (DRCC): If two subjects A and B disagree with each other, then there are some objects p and q (propositions, plans, etc.) such that A accepts p and B accepts q, and p is such that the demands placed on a subject in virtue of accepting it are rationally incompatible with the demands placed on a subject in virtue of accepting q. (Perhaps, though not necessarily, in virtue of q entailing not-p.) (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 11)

This definition shows that, while there is a sense in which conflict is crucial for disagreement, it need not take the form of inconsistency. Given such an encompassing characterization of disagreement, the perhaps most intuitive case in which A and B disagree because A believes

⁷⁸ MacFarlane further distinguishes between "preclusion of joint satisfaction" of nondoxastic attitudes and "preclusion of joint (reflexive) accuracy" of doxastic attitudes (2014, 123ff). However, these only come apart from doxastic and practical noncotenability given certain assumptions about the contents of beliefs and desires that are largely independent of the issue at hand.

and asserts p and B believes and asserts ~p receives the status of a special case of a more general phenomenon of conflicting attitudes, which Plunkett and Sundell render as accepting rationally incompatible objects of some kind.⁷⁹

Moral disagreement plays an important role in discussions of moral group relativism. For one, the phenomenon of persistent moral inter-group disagreement is often referred to as a motivation for moral group relativism.⁸⁰ As Gowans points out, the “disagreement thesis,” that is, the claim that “there are widespread and deep moral disagreements that appear persistently resistant to rational resolution” (Gowans 2000, 2), raises questions about moral objectivity, that is, the question whether what is morally right or wrong is a matter of objective fact.⁸¹ The view that morality is objective in this sense is most closely connected, but not necessarily restricted to versions of moral realism.⁸² On most construals, the view that what is morally right or wrong is a matter of objective fact rules out moral relativism.⁸³ A rejection of this claim is thus taken to be a presupposition of moral relativism. Therefore, the persistence of moral disagreement is often taken to undermine moral objectivity and thus clear the way for moral relativism. This is because of the relation between objectivity and (the possibility of) convergence. If disagreements in an area of discourse can always be resolved, this will eventually lead to convergence of the views of the participants in the discussion. A tendency towards convergence can thus be seen as indicating that the subject matter is a matter of objective fact. Gowans calls this “the *Agreement Indicator of Objectivity*” (2000, 16). Conversely, if disagreements in an area of discourse cannot be resolved, this undermines the assumption that the subject matter is a matter of objective fact. Because moral disagreements often prove difficult to resolve, this at least puts moral objectivity into question. Arguments in favor of moral relativism, therefore, often rely on the idea that some

⁷⁹ This might seem to stack the deck in favor of noncognitivism. However, the setup leaves room to argue that disagreement in a certain domain should only be understood in terms of inconsistency of the contents of beliefs and assertions. By contrast, defining disagreement in these terms at the outset would rule out a spectrum of metaethical positions. The more encompassing definition thus has a claim to provide for a more neutral setting, in which a substantial debate can take place.

⁸⁰ While I focus on moral group relativism and, therefore, on inter-group disagreement, a motivation of subjectivism based on disagreement in general is equally possible.

⁸¹ One of the most influential examples of an argument against moral objectivity based on the existence of diversity and disagreement is J. L. Mackie’s “argument from relativity” (Mackie 1977, 36–38).

⁸² It is often assumed that this view implicitly underlies our ordinary moral discourse and practices and therefore deserves the status of a default position in metaethics (see e.g. Enoch 2018). However, recent experimental findings have put this into question by suggesting that intuitions on moral objectivity vary with “distance.” Experiments show that subjects are more likely to agree that at least one of two judges arriving at opposite moral verdicts about an action is mistaken if they are told that judges are from their own culture than if they are told that one of the judges is from a different culture (see Sarkissian et al. 2011).

⁸³ As exceptions, I have in mind interpretations that allow for “relational” moral facts, such as, for example, Harman countenances when discussing moral realism as well as Rovane’s view of the relationship between moral relativism and moral realism. This points back to the somewhat contested relationship between moral relativism and moral realism (see Chapter 1.3.2.).

moral disagreements resist rational resolution. As Wong puts it: “The most frequently traveled path to moral relativism starts from the existence of moral disagreement and runs through an argument to the best explanation” (Wong 2011, 411). Because lack of agreement concerning moral matters can only be seen as presumptive, but defeasible evidence for a lack of moral objectivity, the argument has to assume the form of an inference to the best explanation. However, this is not a conclusive argument and can at best serve to motivate the view. One reason for this is that what Gowans calls the disagreement thesis is an empirical claim. As such, it can only show that there are disagreements that have not been resolved and that therefore seem irresolvable. It cannot show that these disagreements are in fact irresolvable. It is hard to see how the latter could ever be empirically observable.⁸⁴ If it could be established that existing moral disagreements are in fact irresolvable, the relativist’s claim to provide the best explanation of the phenomenon would be much stronger. The mere fact that disagreements remain unresolved, by contrast, is compatible with different explanations. It is, for example, compatible with the view that all moral disagreements could in principle be resolved based on rational argument. Therefore, a variety of different metaethical positions can account for the existence of persistent moral disagreements. That is to say, convergence is neither necessary nor sufficient for objectivity. It is possible for people to reach an agreement about some topic, where it is commonly assumed that this is not an objective matter of fact (for example matters of taste). At the same time, it is possible that there are objective facts which do not guarantee convergence.⁸⁵ Therefore, the case for moral relativism and against moral objectivity based on the phenomenon of moral disagreement is not conclusive.⁸⁶

However, while the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement plays an important – although inconclusive – role in motivating moral group relativism, at the same time, it also presents a challenge to the coherence of the view. This challenge to account for moral inter-group disagreement can be put in the form of a dilemma the moral group relativist confronts. It seems that either:

⁸⁴ Michele Moody-Adams makes a similar point with respect to what she calls “descriptive cultural relativism” (Moody-Adams 2002, 29ff). I will discuss her argument in Chapter 3.

⁸⁵ Realist characterizations of objectivity in terms of mind-independence are in principle independent of considerations of convergence. However, there is a limit to this kind of explanation in terms of principled epistemic obstacles: positing a realm of objective moral facts loses its initial attractiveness once it is admitted that we do not have access to them.

⁸⁶ This is implicit in Gowans’s definition of an “indicator” (such as the *Agreement Indicator of Objectivity*): “To say that X is a key indicator of Y is to say that (a) X is non-accidentally related to Y in an important respect (causally or logically) such that (b) the absence of X provides strong *presumptive but defeasible* evidence for the absence of Y” (Gowans 2000, 15, my emphasis).

- 1) Moral disputes between members of different communities constitute genuine moral disagreements, then one of the parties to the disagreement has to be mistaken (*Horn 1*); or
- 2) Moral disputes between members of different communities do not constitute genuine moral disagreements, then their views are compatible (*Horn 2*).⁸⁷

In both cases, relativism will have been ruled out because it requires both that the moral systems or practices of different moral communities can exclude each other and that there is a sense in which they are on a par. The challenge can thus be put in terms of the relativist's commitment to both *Exclusiveness* and *Symmetry* (see Chapter 1.1.):

- If there is *Exclusiveness*, then there is no *Symmetry* because one of the parties to a disagreement has to be mistaken.
- If there is *Symmetry*, then there is no *Exclusiveness* because the claims of the parties to the (apparent) disagreement are compatible.

According to *Horn 1* of the dilemma, disagreement rules out *Symmetry*. That is, if the relativist holds that moral disputes between members of different communities constitute genuine moral disagreements, they must also commit to the view that one of the parties to this disagreement is mistaken. This would be problematic for the relativist because if whenever members of different communities disagree one of them is mistaken, then there will be no *Plurality* in the sense required by relativism and specified by *Exclusiveness* and *Symmetry*. The problem that arises for the relativist on the first horn of the dilemma is due to the common assumption that disagreements have a certain normative significance: they show that something has gone wrong and that at least one party to the disagreement (but possibly both) is mistaken. Disagreements thus prompt us to gather more evidence and engage in argument in order to find out who is right and who ought to change their beliefs. They are often taken to be of eminent importance because they can thereby issue a dynamic towards better beliefs (see e.g. Rovane 2013, 21).

While this is plausible enough as an intuition about disagreements, Crispin Wright has developed an argument that shows that the case can be made based on even more basic intuitions. The context of this argument is Wright's attempt to reconfigure the debate between realists and anti-realists in light of a minimal conception of truth and truth-aptness as common

⁸⁷ A similar problem is highlighted by Rovane as the "Dilemma for Alternativeness": "Any pair of truth-value bearers is either inconsistent or consistent; if the two truth-value bearers are inconsistent, then by the law of noncontradiction they cannot both be true; if they are consistent, then they are conjoinable; in neither case do we have alternatives in the sense that is supposed to be required for relativism according to the Alternatives Intuition – that is, truths that cannot be embraced together" (Rovane 2013, 75, see also Chapter 1.2.3.).

ground between realists and anti-realists.⁸⁸ According to this minimalist conception, any predicate that satisfies some basic platitudes about truth is a truth-predicate and any discourse that exhibits certain syntactic features and “discipline” (norms for warranted assertion) allows for the definition of such a minimal truth-predicate (Wright 1992, Chapter 2). Against this background, the realist’s position (with respect to a certain domain of discourse) can be redescribed as the claim that a more than minimal truth-predicate is operating in the area of discourse in question. In Wright’s framework, this amounts to the claim that the respective area of discourse exerts “Cognitive Command.” A discourse exerts “Cognitive Command” if in case of disagreement it is clear *a priori* (without any further investigation) that at least one of the disputants has committed a mistake that qualifies as a cognitive shortcoming (see 1992, 92f, 1992, 175).⁸⁹ However, by what he calls the “Simple Deduction,” Wright shows that in a setting of truth-aptness, it will always be the case that at least one party to a disagreement is mistaken:

1	(1) A accepts P	— Assumption
2	(2) B accepts Not-P	— Assumption
3	(3) A’s and B’s disagreement involves no mistake	— Assumption
4	(4) P	— Assumption
2, 4	(5) B is making a mistake	— 2, 4
2, 3	(6) Not-P	— 4, 5, 3 <i>Reductio</i>
1, 2, 3	(7) A is making a mistake	— 1, 6
1, 2	(8) Not-[3]	— 3, 3, 7 <i>Reductio</i>

(2006, 41, cf. also 2001, 56)

This threatens to undermine the distinction between realism and anti-realism as Wright understands it because it suggests that in a setting of truth-aptness, Cognitive Command is indeed pervasive.⁹⁰ Max Kölbel calls this “the problem of a priori error” (Kölbel 2002, 24).⁹¹

⁸⁸ Wright takes this to be necessary because he takes issue with three major paradigms of anti-realism: Dummett’s anti-realism, which disputes the adequacy of truth-theoretic semantics, error theory, which disputes that there are any truths, and expressivism, which disputes the truth-aptness of judgments in a given domain (Wright 1992, 7–11). Note that this is a wider understanding of “anti-realism” than the one I adopt above following Sayre-McCord (see Chapter 1.3.2.).

⁸⁹ The underlying metaphor is a platitude about technological devices such as fax-machines: if two fax-machines create different output, it is clear *a priori* that either they were presented with different input or one of them (or both) function(s) less than perfectly. According to Wright, the criterion captures the essence of any substantial realist conception of correspondence: that when we are making true claims with respect to a certain domain of discourse we are in a “mode of representation” (1992, 91f).

⁹⁰ Wright immediately notices this problem, but at first calls it a “trivializing move” and tries to make room between believing something not-true and what counts as a cognitive shortcoming. He further pushes the realist to give a positive account of “Cognitive Command” in areas of discourse for which it is unintuitive, such as the comic (1992, 148–57). However, Stewart Shapiro and William Taschek subsequently pointed out that, in the context of an epistemically constrained notion of truth, believing something not-true is believing something the

It shows that, given only minimal assumptions about truth and what a mistake amounts to, that A holds p and B holds $\sim p$ cannot be made compatible with the idea that neither of them is mistaken. This makes the negative consequences the relativist faces on the first horn of the dilemma appear inescapable.⁹²

According to *Horn 1* of the dilemma, disagreement rules out *Symmetry*. To avoid this consequence, it seems that the relativist must claim that what appears to be a moral disagreement between members of different communities does not in fact constitute a genuine disagreement. However, this lands the relativist on the second horn of the dilemma. According to *Horn 2* of the dilemma, *Exclusiveness* requires disagreement. That is, if the relativist holds that disputes do not constitute genuine disagreements, they must also commit to the claim that the disputants' views are compatible. This would be problematic for the relativist because it would vindicate *Symmetry* only at the expense of giving up *Exclusiveness*. If different systems are compatible, it is at least possible that they just represent different aspects of one universal system, similar to the geography of different places (see Williams 1975, 217). This would be insufficient for moral relativism, which requires that different moral systems or practices are rivaling options rather than complementing each other. In the next section, I will look at two possible strategies to avoid this dilemma that seem available to the moral relativist.

opposite of which is knowable. This amounts to a cognitive shortcoming (Shapiro and Taschek 1996). Wright's notion of "superassertibility," according to which "[a] statement is superassertible then, if and only if it is, or can be, warranted and some warrant for it would survive arbitrarily extensive increments to or other forms of improvement of our information" (Wright 1992, 48) constitutes such an epistemically constrained notion of truth.

⁹¹ Kölbel puts forward an analogous argument, according to which it seems that in a setting of truth-conditional semantics all areas of discourse are objective. He calls this the "problem of excess objectivity" (Kölbel 2002, 19f).

⁹² Can a noncognitivist avoid Wright's argument? It depends. Original formulations of noncognitivism which commit to the claim that moral judgments are not truth-apt can avoid it because the argument is based on basic intuitions about the truth predicate. However, more recent versions of noncognitivism have reacted to the Frege-Geach problem of expressivism by construing ways that vindicate the truth-functional behavior of moral judgments indirectly (see Chapter 1.3.1.). Therefore, these positions are susceptible to this argument (see also Kölbel 2004, 65f).

2.2. Faultless Disagreement and the Problem of Lost Disagreement

The phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement thus plays a conflicting, two-fold role for versions of moral group relativism. On the one hand, it is an important motivation underlying arguments for the view. On the other hand, accounting for the phenomenon presents a major challenge to the view. This is due to the different implications that considerations of disagreement can have with respect to moral objectivity. While in the context of arguments for moral relativism, the prevalence of moral disagreement seems to undermine moral objectivity, Wright's argument seems to show that in order to account for the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement in the first place, moral relativists are forced to presuppose moral objectivity, thereby rendering their view incoherent. Before moral group relativists can draw on the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement in order to motivate their view, they need to address the challenge posed by the phenomenon. Two different ways of addressing the challenge are suggested by the dilemmatic structure of the problem. The relativist can attempt to embrace either horn and deny that the problematic consequences do in fact follow. In order to escape the problem along these lines, the relativist has to argue either:

- 1) That moral disputes between members of different communities constitute genuine moral disagreements, yet none of the parties to the disagreement has to be mistaken (*Strategy 1*); or
- 2) That moral disputes between members of different communities do not constitute genuine moral disagreements, yet their views are incompatible (*Strategy 2*).

According to *Horn 1*, disagreement rules out *Symmetry*. This horn of the dilemma relies on the assumption that if there is a genuine disagreement, then at least one of the parties to the disagreement must be mistaken. This intuitive assumption is supported by Wright's "Simple Deduction." *Strategy 1* challenges this assumption nonetheless. It tries to establish a revised notion of disagreement that does not imply that one of the parties to the disagreement is mistaken; that is, it tries to vindicate the possibility of what has been called a "faultless disagreement." The notion of a faultless disagreement epitomizes the difficult balancing act the relativist has to achieve. Kölbel defines faultless disagreement as follows:

A faultless disagreement is a situation where there is a thinker A, a thinker B, and a proposition (content of judgment) p, such that:

- (a) A believes (judges) that p and B believes (judges) that not-p.
- (b) Neither A nor B has made a mistake (is at fault). (Kölbel 2004, 53f)

In order to make the idea that disagreements can at least sometimes be faultless plausible, Kölbel appeals to intuitions about disagreements in certain areas of discourse, such as matters of taste. However, it is difficult to make the notion of a faultless disagreement coherent. Wright’s “Simple Deduction” seems to show that, given some minimal assumptions about truth, logic alone undermines the notion of a faultless disagreement. There are different options to make the notion coherent nevertheless. One way to render the notion of a faultless disagreement coherent is by relativizing the relevant notion of truth. Kölbel uses the resources of semantic relativism in order to do so. Against this background, he argues that it is only a mistake to assert something that is false relative to one’s own perspective (2004, 70). Therefore, as long as both disputants assert a proposition that is true relative to their own perspective, their disagreement will be faultless. An obvious possible criticism of such a notion of disagreement is that it takes away the normative significance of disagreements (see e.g. Rovane 2013, 30). However, this is not taken to be an unwanted consequence by proponents of the view, at least for certain areas of discourse, which seem intuitively subjective, such as matters of taste.

Another possibility to render the notion of a faultless disagreement coherent is to challenge certain background assumptions that are part of classical logic and figure implicitly in (the interpretation of) arguments such as the Simple Deduction. One such option is to develop an intuitionistic solution by rejecting the “Law of Excluded Middle.” Wright has suggested a solution along these lines. His idea is not to undermine the argument he calls the “Simple Deduction”, but to dispute its canonical interpretation. He points out that the deduction leads to a conclusion of the form: “ $\neg(\neg A \wedge \neg B)$ ” (“It is not the case that neither A has made a mistake nor B has made a mistake”). Double negation elimination is necessary to get from there to a conclusion of the form: “ $A \vee B$ ” (“Either A has made a mistake or B has made a mistake”) (Wright 2001). Intuitionism blocks this step, “which is not in general intuitionistically valid” (2006, 42).⁹³ A further option is to reject the “Principle of Non-Contradiction” in order to develop a corresponding dialetheist version of faultless disagreement employing a paraconsistent logic. Joanna Odrowąż-Sypniewska argues that Graham Priest’s dialetheist account of vagueness can account for faultless disagreement because it makes it possible that in borderline cases both “Fx” and “ $\neg Fx$ ” are true. Therefore, if in a borderline case A holds “Fx” and B holds “ $\neg Fx$,” both can be right (Odrowąż-Sypniewska 2013, 26). However, Priest disagrees with this assessment. In his view, Kölbel’s

⁹³ Wright motivates this view by appealing to the claim that the propositions under dispute in the relevant cases present a “quandary,” roughly, in the sense that we do not know whether they are knowable (2001, 92, 2006, 44f). The resulting view has been criticized by Kölbel (Kölbel 2004, 60–62). Wright himself has expressed dissatisfaction with this solution in later work (Wright 2006, 48–50).

definition of faultless disagreement, which Odrowąż-Sypniewska draws on, already presupposes the Principle of Non-Contradiction. According to Priest, “[u]tterances of p and $\neg p$ need not signal a disagreement. What signals a disagreement is when one speaker accepts (asserts) p and the other rejects (denies) p – and rejecting something is not the same as accepting its negation. [...] if p is both true and false, someone who denies p (or $\neg p$) gets it wrong” (Priest 2013, 94). It thus remains an open question whether a viable dialetheist notion of faultless disagreement can be defended.

Regardless of the merits of these options to account for disagreement in the context of a relativist position in general, none of these strategies to account for the possibility of faultless disagreement seems to be an obvious option from the point of view of the versions of moral group relativism I focus on. Challenging the assumptions of classical logic in order to account for moral inter-group disagreement would be an unusually strong commitment to undertake in this context. While adopting semantic relativism is a viable option for moral relativists, as discussed above, most of the authors I focus on are committed to versions of semantic contextualism, rather than semantic relativism (see Chapter 1.3.6.). Therefore, *Strategy 1* is available to them only at the cost of adopting additional semantic commitments that are controversial.

According to *Horn 2* of the dilemma, *Exclusiveness* requires disagreement. This horn relies on the assumption that if there is no genuine disagreement, then the views of the parties to a dispute are compatible. *Strategy 2* challenges this assumption. It tries to recover a stable notion of conflict in spite of giving up disagreement. Because this option does not require taking on any additional commitments for the moral group relativists that I am concerned with, *Strategy 2* seems less costly. In fact, both Rovane and Velleman choose this strategy to deal with the challenge of moral inter-group disagreement. According to Rovane, the point of “ordinary disagreements” is the point of the law of Non-Contradiction. Given an ordinary disagreement, agents face the following options: they can hold on to their belief, change it, or suspend judgment. Even in case they always hold on to their belief and remain “self-confident internalists,” the normative significance of ordinary disagreements is still in place. They have to take their opponent to be mistaken (Rovane 2013, 23–26). Rovane questions that the situations that are often construed as relativism-inducing disagreements can be understood in terms of ordinary disagreements at all. This is precisely because they lack the normative significance associated with such disagreements (2013, 30). Multimundialism can accommodate these situations because, on this view, the different and seemingly conflicting judgments of the parties to an apparent disagreement do not stand in any logical relations at

all. It is thus one of the upshots of Rovane's discussion of relativism as Multimundialism that relativists should give up talk of disagreement with respect to the situations that motivate the view. To illustrate this point, Rovane discusses an example of a situation that could be construed as a relativism-inducing disagreement.⁹⁴ In this example, a woman who lives according to the moral standards of "American individualism" encounters a woman who lives according to the moral standards of "Indian traditionalism." The two women engage in an apparent disagreement concerning whether deference to parents is morally obligatory, which they identify in the course of a conversation about their respective lives with the help of a translator. On what Rovane calls the "prevailing consensus view," they are taken to have a disagreement concerning the same content, yet the same content would be true relative to the moral standards of "American individualism" while false relative to the standards of "Indian traditionalism" and vice versa. On Rovane's conception of relativism, by contrast, the example gets a completely different interpretation: the content of the claim "deference to parents is morally obligatory" is not the same across alternatives. The claims the two women make need to be "disambiguated": contrary to appearance, they are not talking about the same thing. One is making a claim about what is "morally-obligatory-in-the-American-individualist-sense." The other one is making a claim about what is "morally-obligatory-in-the-Indian-traditionalist-sense." Therefore, there is no disagreement. Yet, according to Rovane, there is no agreement either because their respective beliefs cannot be conjoined (2013, 41–48). There is thus a sense in which their beliefs exclude each other without there being a disagreement.⁹⁵

Like Rovane's version of moral relativism, Velleman's version of moral relativism explicitly and deliberately does not entail an account of moral inter-group disagreement. While he notes that moral disagreement – and more specifically the question whether faultless disagreement between members of different communities is possible – is often taken to be at issue between relativists and their opponents, Velleman does not think that relativists should commit to the claim that faultless disagreement is possible. Rather, moral relativists should base their case on the claim that there is no moral disagreement between members of different

⁹⁴ Rovane emphasizes that examples cannot carry the burden of proof in the debate on relativism because they can always be interpreted in different ways. In general, she maintains that it is unlikely that either relativist or absolutist will be able to convince someone who is already convinced of the opposite position. Thus, neither position should be assumed as the default position at the outset. The decision whether to prefer relativism or absolutism should on her view derive from substantial philosophical considerations (2013, 38f).

⁹⁵ Rovane thus responds to what she calls the "Dilemma for Alternativeness" (2013, 75) – according to which two truth-value bearers are either consistent and therefore conjoinable or inconsistent and therefore at most one of them can be true – by rejecting the terms of the dilemma. On her view, truth-value bearers can be "normatively insulated," that is, neither consistent nor inconsistent. In terms of the way I construe the dilemma, her solution amounts to embracing one of the horns and denying that the conclusion follows. Her view accounts for *Exclusiveness* without disagreement.

moral communities because they do not share enough common ground. According to Velleman, relativism does not require that both parties to a disagreement are right, it only requires that there is no disagreement because there is no judicable question between their views. Thus, both parties remain in equal standing (Velleman 2015, 55). More specifically, Velleman sees two different obstacles to moral disagreement between members of different moral communities. On the one hand, they lack a shared taxonomy of action-types or “doables”: “Disagreement about morality is disagreement about what may or may not be done, and so it requires agreement about what is doable. For communities with different domains of doables, the question what may or may not be done is therefore moot” (2015, 55). On the other hand, the perspectival nature of normativity undermines the possibility of disagreement. Velleman takes the latter to be the more fundamental obstacle to moral inter-community disagreement (2015, 2). Drawing on John Perry’s “The Problem of the Essential Indexical,” Velleman develops an account of reasons as perspectival that has consequences for the semantics of moral expressions (see Perry 1979, see also Chapter 1.2.5.). Velleman shares the common view that according to moral relativism, judgments about the rightness or wrongness of an action are “elliptical unless indexed to a reference class“ (Velleman 2015, 75): “Claims of wrongness must be about wrongness-for-members-of-x, where x ranges over different cultures or societies or, as I will call them, communities” (2015, 75f). According to Velleman, the fact that an action A is wrong for a community x can only become action-guiding when it is expressed by the implicitly indexical judgment “A is wrong.” This judgment, in turn, is interpreted as “A is wrong-for-us” where the reference of “us” is supplied by the context, that is, the community speaker and hearer are part of (2015, 77). According to Velleman, whether the value for x is supplied explicitly or by the context makes all the difference: “Spelling out the proposition so as to eliminate the role of context defeats the purpose of practical guidance” (2015, 78). It is this connection between the fact that action A is right or wrong for community x and its “action-guiding mode-of-presentation” that bridges the gap between factual and normative. However, Velleman concedes that while members of different communities do not share enough in common to disagree, there is a sort of “practical disagreement” between them, in the sense that they follow conflicting courses of action (2015, 76).

Strategy 2, that is, giving up the claim that moral disputes between members of different communities constitute genuine moral disagreements, yet holding on to the claim that their views are nevertheless incompatible, is thus the strategy of choice for some of the moral group relativists that I focus on. However, this solution comes at a cost because the

moral disputes in question intuitively seem to constitute disagreements. The downside of this strategy is closely connected to the so-called “problem of lost disagreement,” which is often evoked in the context of semantics, in particular as a problem for contextualism. According to *Horn 2* of the dilemma, if disputes between members of different moral communities do not constitute genuine disagreements, then their views are compatible. The problem of lost disagreement is based on the reverse implication that if the views of the parties involved in a dispute turn out to be compatible, then their dispute does not amount to a genuine disagreement. The charge is that contextualists cannot account for disagreement because on their preferred interpretation the utterances of the parties involved in a dispute turn out to be compatible. Stephen Finlay puts the problem as follows: “If two speakers use the same sentence to say different things, then when one asserts the sentence and the other asserts its negation, the contents of their utterances will not (ipso facto) be inconsistent or incompatible” (Finlay 2017, 187). MacFarlane spells out what this means for the case of disagreements about taste: “If in saying ‘That’s tasty’ Yum is asserting that the food tastes good to her, and in saying ‘That’s not tasty’ Yuk is asserting that it doesn’t taste good to him, then their claims are compatible and it is mysterious why they should regard themselves as disagreeing” (MacFarlane 2014, 118).⁹⁶

The problem of lost disagreement is often taken to be “the Achilles’ heel of contextualism” (2011, 118). Because most of the versions of moral group relativism I focus on can be understood as committing to some version of a contextualist semantics for moral discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that most of them face this problem. The semantic analysis Velleman suggests for moral judgments amounts to a version of indexical contextualism. Rovane takes her interpretation of apparent moral inter-group disagreements to be supported by “the holistic account [of meaning, K.S.] promoted by Quine and Davidson on which questions about what speakers mean by their words and speech cannot be settled independently of questions about what their psychological attitudes are” (Rovane 2013, 48). While it is not framed in terms of formal semantics, her view of the semantics of moral judgments can be understood as a version of semantic contextualism, in the broad sense that the content of judgments containing moral expressions varies with context (see Chapter 1.3.6.). However, the views I focus on are best understood as committing to versions of “group-contextualism” rather than “speaker-contextualism.” Group-contextualism is often considered as a possible solution to the problem of lost disagreement from the perspective of

⁹⁶ It is often assumed that objectivism has an advantage over other semantic options because it can offer the most straightforward account of disagreement. Somewhat more controversially, semantic relativists also claim to have an advantage over contextualists and expressivists because of the account of disagreement they are able to give (see e.g. MacFarlane 2014, Chapter 6).

semantic contextualism. According to Silk, for example, while versions of speaker-contextualism fail to account for disagreement, versions of group-contextualism can account for disagreement, but at the cost of facing a different problem – the problem of how a speaker can be justified in assuming what the standards of the relevant group are (Silk 2017, 212). Silk’s assessment relies on the tacit assumption that all relevant disagreements occur between members of the same group. However, the moral disagreements most relevant in the context of versions of moral group relativism occur between members of different groups. Therefore, the problem of lost disagreement recurs in the form of lost inter-group disagreement.

The strategies suggested by the dilemmatic structure of the challenge the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement poses for versions of moral group relativism thus allow proponents of the view to give a coherent account of apparent moral disagreements between members of different communities. On the one hand, moral group relativists can argue that disagreements need not involve mistakes and that, therefore, “faultless disagreement” is possible. On the other hand, they can argue that while moral disputes between members of different communities do not constitute genuine disagreements, there is still a sense in which their views are incompatible. However, both of these strategies come at significant cost. From the point of view of the versions of moral relativism I focus on, arguing for the possibility of faultless disagreement would require controversial revisions with respect to the semantics of moral discourse or even the logical principles guiding it. While giving up on disagreement is not seen as a cost by those moral relativists who pursue this strategy, such as Rovane and Velleman – rather, they take it to be a point of moral relativism that moral disagreement between members of different communities is impossible – there is a cost involved because the situations often appealed to in order to motivate moral relativism, such as the one described by Rovane, seem to constitute genuine moral disagreements. In the next section, I will introduce a different strategy and argue that it presents the best option to account for the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement from the point of view of the moral group relativists that I focus on.

2.3. Moral Disagreement as “Metalinguistic Negotiation”

While the strategies discussed in the previous section go some way to address the challenge the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement poses for versions of moral group relativism, neither of them is completely satisfactory from the point of view of the moral group relativists that I focus on. The first strategy, claiming that moral disputes between members of different communities evince a genuine, but faultless disagreement, would require significant revisions to their semantic views. The second strategy, giving up the claim that the relevant disputes evince genuine disagreements at all, comes at the cost of “losing” disagreement, in the sense that the view cannot account for intuitive cases of disagreement. However, a different strategy is available. According to the problem of lost disagreement, disagreement is lost on a contextualist analysis of an area of discourse. This is because if by saying “That’s tasty” Yum is saying that the food tastes good to her and by saying “That’s not tasty” Yuk is saying that it does not taste good to him, they are intuitively not disagreeing because they express compatible contents (MacFarlane 2014, 118). It seems that, analogously, on a semantic group contextualist analysis of moral discourse, if by saying “X is morally good” a member of group A is saying that X is morally good according to the standards of her community and by saying “X is not morally good” a member of group B is saying that X is not morally good according to the standards of his community, then there will be no disagreement. The underlying assumption is that disagreement presupposes sameness of meaning. Plunkett and Sundell have recently challenged precisely this assumption (Plunkett and Sundell 2013). According to them, many ordinary disagreements, in particular disagreements involving normative or evaluative vocabulary, can be understood in terms of what they call “metalinguistic negotiations.” As I will argue, the moral group relativist is best off accounting for disagreements in terms of metalinguistic negotiation.

In developing the notion of a “metalinguistic negotiation,” Plunkett and Sundell draw on Chris Barker’s work on vagueness. Barker distinguishes between “descriptive” and “metalinguistic” uses of ascriptions of gradable adjectives, such as “tall.” In the typical case, a standard of tallness is established as part of a context of utterance and ascriptions of the predicate “tall” are used descriptively to communicate information about people’s height. However, it is also possible to use ascriptions of a predicate such as “tall” metalinguistically in order to communicate information about the contextually determined standard of tallness. For example, in a situation in which the height of someone is out of question (say, because they are in plain view), a speaker can communicate something about the standard of being tall accepted by a certain community by uttering “x is tall (around here)” (Barker 2002, 1f). If

disagreement were to occur in such a situation, then it would center on how to use words and not on whether someone is tall. It would thus amount to a “metalinguistic dispute.” Plunkett and Sundell further distinguish between cases of metalinguistic disputes which could be settled based on “information about what the context is actually like” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 14), such as the dispute about a standard of tallness in a particular community, and metalinguistic disputes in which this is impossible because the dispute turns on how the context ought to be. Only the latter kind of dispute constitutes a “metalinguistic negotiation.”

To see in what way metalinguistic negotiations constitute disagreements, assume that Oscar and Callie are cooking chili together and that Oscar utters “That chili is spicy” while Callie responds “No, it’s not spicy at all” (2013, 14f). According to Plunkett and Sundell, this exchange constitutes a genuine disagreement in spite of the fact that, given a contextualist analysis, the contents literally expressed are compatible because Oscar and Callie are making these judgments with respect to different sets of standards. Nevertheless, they are disagreeing in virtue of the fact that in expressing these contents, they are also pragmatically advocating the standards with respect to which they make the respective assertions. Their disagreement focuses on the question how to use “spicy” in the context at hand. It is a genuine disagreement because the contents accepted and communicated – “we should use ‘spicy’ in such a way that it applies to the chili” and “we should not use ‘spicy’ in such a way that it applies to the chili” – are “rationally incompatible” (2013, 15). Further examples given by Plunkett and Sundell include disputes about what should count as “cold” in a shared office or what should count as “rich” when determining a tax base (2013, 15).

All of these examples constitute metalinguistic negotiations about the appropriate parameters with respect to which context-sensitive expressions should be used and are thus cases in which speakers use the same expressions with the same “character,” but different “contents” in the sense of Kaplan’s distinction (see Chapter 1.3.6.). However, Plunkett and Sundell also develop the notion with respect to cases in which speakers use the same expressions with different meanings in the sense of different characters (2013, 16). Here, examples include disputes about whether “athlete” should be used so that it applies to animals (2013, 16), whether “Midwest” should be used so that it includes Missouri, whether “planet” should be used so that Pluto counts as a planet (2013, 17), and whether “torture” should be used so as to include waterboarding (2013, 19). As Plunkett and Sundell emphasize, both kinds of metalinguistic negotiations can constitute disagreements worth having because how we use words matters. This is because of the important functional roles certain words play. Consider a metalinguistic negotiation concerning different meanings attached to the

expression “morally right.” In this case, the dispute turns on the question “which concept should play a functional role that concerns matters of how we navigate our decisions about how to treat others, what to hold each other responsible for doing, and how to live more generally” (2013, 20).⁹⁷

Importantly, when speakers engage in a metalinguistic negotiation, the condition of sameness of meaning is not fulfilled because they appeal to different concepts or use context-sensitive expressions with respect to different standards. The contents the disputants literally express are thus not incompatible. Nevertheless, when speakers engage in a metalinguistic negotiation, they are genuinely disagreeing because by expressing the contents they literally express they are at the same time pragmatically advocating the parameter setting or the concept they associate with the word in virtue of which they express these contents (2013, 15). Therefore, while they do not literally express incompatible contents, they do accept and communicate incompatible contents (2013, 18).⁹⁸ As Plunkett and Sundell note, disputes about how best to use words can be carried out both explicitly and implicitly (such as in the case of metalinguistic negotiations) and they concern what has been called “conceptual ethics,” that is, roughly, ethical considerations regarding the use of words (2013, 3; see also Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b). When metalinguistic disputes are carried out explicitly, they amount to what Plunkett and Sundell refer to as “canonical disputes,” that is, they center “on the truth or correctness of the content literally expressed by the speakers” (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 6). Metalinguistic negotiations, by contrast, constitute what they call “non-canonical disputes,” they “do not center on *literally expressed* content” (2013, 7). However, on their view, both kinds of disputes can constitute genuine disagreements.

Plunkett and Sundell’s main aim is to undercut a kind of argument that they take to be prevalent in metaethics and which leads from intuitions about disagreement to semantic conclusions. In particular, the kind of argument they have in mind leads from the intuition that certain exchanges constitute genuine disagreements to the conclusion that sameness of meaning must be involved and that semantic proposals involving any kind of variation of meaning can thereby be ruled out. Their account of metalinguistic negotiation as a kind of genuine disagreement suffices to block this kind of argument. It is either invalid or implicitly relying on the false premise that all genuine disagreements are canonical disputes (2013, 7 n20). However, they also emphasize that the notion of metalinguistic negotiations provides

⁹⁷ The same explanation for the importance of metalinguistic negotiations involving “morally right” could be given in terms of different contents due to different contextually salient standards rather than different characters associated with the word.

⁹⁸ Metalinguistic negotiations thus count as genuine disagreements according to the definition of disagreement in terms of the principle *Disagreement Requires Conflict in Content* (see Chapter 2.1.).

resources to account for disagreement for semantic positions that are often criticized for being unable to account for disagreement in a given domain, most notably semantic contextualism (2013, 4).

The idea behind Plunkett and Sundell's account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation is to concede that there is no conflict between what the parties in a dispute literally express and yet to insist that their exchange can constitute a genuine disagreement. Plunkett and Sundell's strategy to account for disagreement thus has certain similarities to a "hybrid" expressivist view according to which, while utterances in an area of discourse have descriptive content, their meaning is not exhausted by this descriptive content (cf. 2013, 4, n12). This kind of hybrid expressivist view provides room to argue that, while there might be no conflict between what is expressed on the level of descriptive content, the utterances made involve a conflict in attitudes.⁹⁹ Strategies to account for moral disagreements along these lines have in fact already been pursued by moral group relativists who do not concede that moral disagreement between members of different communities is lost on their view. The most worked out attempt to vindicate intra-group disagreement among the moral group relativists I focus on is due to Wong. Wong's "pluralistic relativism" entails an account of the semantics of moral judgments that resembles contextualism (see Chapter 1.3.6.). Moral judgments are construed as judgments about reasons. The question of meaning is put in terms of the question of the reference of concepts of moral reasons. These may vary among different communities. Wong describes this as a kind "conceptual relativity" (Wong 2006, 72); however, it can also be seen as a kind of contextualism, in the broad sense that the meaning of moral terms varies with different contexts. In any case, it inherits the problem of lost disagreement contextualism faces. However, Wong manages to give an account of inter-group disagreement by drawing on what he takes to be an insight from noncognitivism – the idea that conflict can be situated on a different level than inconsistent contents (2006, 72). Replying to the charge that "Relativism makes it impossible to explain moral disagreement" (2006, 76), Wong distinguishes between two kinds of conflict:

One type is conflict over what moral judgments are claimed true. This sort of conflict occurs only when those who disagree use moral terms with the same reference, at least with respect to the disagreement at hand (in case the references as a whole differ but overlap). The other type

⁹⁹ In their defense of metaethical contextualism, Gunnar Björnsson and Stephen Finlay rely on a strategy that is similar in this respect, which they describe as "quasi-expressivist." On their view, speakers in a moral dispute express contents that are relativized to their standards and are therefore compatible. However, because of conversational interests they assess the content that is pragmatically salient, rather than the content literally expressed. The pragmatically salient content is the content that would be expressed by the same statement made with respect to their own standards (see Björnsson and Finlay 2010).

of conflict is *illocutionary and pragmatic and is made possible by the action-guiding functions of morality*. That is, conflict can occur between prescriptions to do certain things or to become a kind of person in the sense that conforming to one prescription necessarily precludes conforming to the other, and this conflict can occur even when the prescriptions are both true. (2006, 77, my emphasis)

Wong's semantic account precludes him from construing all kinds of serious moral disagreements as disagreements about truth. On his conception of the semantics of moral statements, two people can disagree about a moral issue although both of their judgments are true because the concepts they employ differ. What happens on the semantic level is that people are strictly speaking expressing compatible contents because they apply different concepts. Nevertheless, they are in conflict on a pragmatic or illocutionary level.¹⁰⁰ Because people who are in moral disputes often take themselves to be disputing the truth of moral claims, Wong has to provide an "error theory" for these cases. He attributes this conception to the widespread assumption that there is a unique solution to all moral questions (often but not necessarily supported by the common idea that moral properties are part of the fabric of the world). Furthermore, because people's concepts overlap and where they overlap a resolution of the conflict in terms of truth will be possible, it is hard to separate these two kinds of cases. Even for people with different moralities, there will be some overlap and, therefore, some of their disputes will be in fact about truth. According to Wong's "error theory," people overgeneralize from these frequent cases to all cases of conflict (2006, 76–80).

Harman makes a somewhat similar attempt to account for the possibility of moral inter-group disagreement. His semantic views undergo a slight shift from the earliest to more recent formulations of his version of moral relativism. In "Moral Relativism Defended," Harman explicitly commits to a relational contextualist semantics for a certain group of moral judgments that he calls "inner judgments." In *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, he extends this semantic view to all moral judgments and restates it in a way that makes it less clearly contextualist, but still sufficiently similar to contextualism to inherit the problem of lost disagreement (see Chapter 1.2.1.). In this context, Harman explores a "quasi-absolutist" semantics, which he understands as a further development of emotivism, for the sake of accounting for disagreement. On this account, quasi-absolutist terminology is taken to "express the speaker's attitude toward certain standards" (Harman 1996, 35). Harman implicitly concedes the problem of lost disagreement for the contextualist semantics of moral

¹⁰⁰ Wong's analysis of two different kinds of disagreement corresponds to Plunkett and Sundell's distinction between "canonical" and "non-canonical disputes." In specifying the point of pragmatic conflict in terms of the function of morality, he comes close to Plunkett and Sundell's explanation for why metalinguistic negotiations are worth engaging in in terms of the functional role played by concepts. I will return to this point in Chapter 5.4.

judgments he suggests, when he writes that “[e]motivism, *unlike pure moral relativism*, allows people with different moral frameworks to express moral disagreements” (1996, 34 my emphasis). The quasi-absolutist semantics can account for disagreement because relying on it “a moral relativist projects his or her moral framework onto the world and then uses moral terminology as if the projected morality were the single true morality, while at the same time admitting that this way of talking is only ‘as if’” (1996, 34). The language of projection introduces a discrepancy between moral discourse and the facts. However, Harman does not ascribe any error to the speaker. Rather, he takes the moral relativist to be fully aware of this mismatch between the way they express themselves and the facts as they are. Harman’s account of moral inter-group disagreement resembles Wong’s account in that both take themselves to be developing an insight from noncognitivism. However, the “quasi-absolutist” semantics Harman suggests ends up resembling versions of semantic relativism rather than contextualism because the quasi-absolutist terms are used according to a relativized norm of assertion and Harman emphasizes that they are not synonymous with their explicitly relativized counterparts (1996, 36–37).

I take Wong’s and Harman’s discussions to show that the main idea underlying an account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation – that disagreement can be located on a level other than conflict between literally expressed contents – is already implicit in moral group relativists’ attempts to account for moral inter-group disagreement. Although Velleman is not among those moral relativists who try to vindicate the possibility of moral inter-group disagreement, a glimpse of the idea behind this revised notion of disagreement shows up in his discussion of the topic. In the context of his discussion of different taxonomies of action-types as an obstacle to the possibility of moral inter-group disagreement, Velleman writes the following: “Insofar as they can disagree about which action-types to invent, *they disagree just by living differently*, each converging on ordinary choices from among its own, socially constructed domain of doables” (Velleman 2015, 55, my emphasis). In addition, he refers to the fact that members of different communities follow incompatible courses of action as a “practical disagreement” (2015, 76). In these passages, Velleman countenances the possibility of a disagreement over how to act, in spite of the fact that there is no conflict in the contents literally expressed. Although in claiming that there can be no genuine moral disagreement between members of different communities, Velleman implicitly agrees to the terms of the problem of lost disagreement, he thus goes some way to anticipate a notion of disagreement that would allow the relativist to speak of disagreement with respect to the situations crucial to motivating relativism. Accounting for moral inter-group disagreement

in terms of metalinguistic negotiations can be understood as spelling out the idea implicit in Velleman's discussion that members of different communities *can* genuinely disagree just in virtue of living differently, distinguishing between different action-types, and adopting different standards.

Accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiations presents a strategy that is distinct from the strategies suggested by the dilemmatic structure of the challenge moral disagreement poses for the moral relativist. Rather than embracing either horn, it takes issue with some of the presuppositions underlying the dilemma. The account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiations blocks arguments of the sort of Wright's "Simple Deduction." If non-canonical disputes can constitute genuine disagreements, then it need not always be the case "that if two speakers genuinely disagree with each other, then at least one of them says something false" (Plunkett and Sundell 2013, 13, n38). In this sense, it can be seen as a further development of *Strategy 1*.¹⁰¹ Does this mean that the notion of a metalinguistic negotiation is a way to spell out a coherent conception of "faultless disagreement"? It might seem so because both disputants involved in a metalinguistic negotiation can assert a true claim. However, it is a point of the notion of metalinguistic negotiation that disputes of this kind constitute disagreements worth having because there is a substantive question about which way of using the relevant expressions is *better* in the context at hand (2013, 19). As Sundell emphasizes in the context of other work on the topic, although the account of metalinguistic negotiation does not answer these questions about which usage is appropriate, it allows for the possibility that a "claim might be true, but true in virtue of referring to an outrageous set of standards" (Sundell 2011, 287). Therefore, in these cases the disagreement would not be faultless. Sundell illustrates this with respect to an example of a dispute involving different standards with respect to which something can be assessed as "tasty":

Given the functional role played by the term 'tasty' irrespective of which precise property it picks out, the standards themselves – scale and threshold alike – can be evaluated as *better* or *worse*. If Alphonse advocates for an inappropriate scale – one where the target flavor is very salty – or for an inappropriate threshold along an ordinary scale – one where a cupcake that tastes like stale sourdough bread is close enough – then he *makes a mistake*, even if he manages to express a true proposition. (2016, 812)

¹⁰¹ Accounting for disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation could also be seen as a further development of *Strategy 2*, that is, giving up the claim that moral disputes between members of different communities constitute genuine moral disagreements and accounting for the sense in which they are incompatible in a different way. This is because it gives up the claim that there is disagreement concerning the contents literally expressed. However, the strategy is substantively revised because it turns out that the sense in which ways of life are incompatible can give rise to a revised notion of disagreement.

As Sundell puts it with respect to a similar example, the account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation allows for the possibility that someone “is objectively mistaken because he advocated for an objectively bad standard” (2017, 102). This is because “standards themselves are evaluable as *better* or *worse*” (2017, 97). Therefore, the account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation vindicates the possibility of faultless disagreement only as a special case: a disagreement is faultless in the special case that both of two sets of standards with respect to which the claims in question are made are equally suitable for the purpose at hand.

Accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation is thus the best strategy to meet the challenge the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement poses for moral group relativists who are already committed to some form of semantic contextualism.¹⁰² Like *Strategy 2*, it is in line with the contextualist semantics for moral judgments that the moral group relativists that I am concerned with already commit to. Like the strategies suggested by Wong and Harman, it goes beyond *Strategy 2* in recovering a notion of genuine moral inter-group disagreement. However, it does so without taking on any additional expressivist commitments about the semantics of moral terms that the moral group relativist is not already committed to. It thus makes it possible to recover the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement that serves as a major motivation for versions of moral group relativism without introducing any additional semantic commitments. However, this solution may be objected to as undermining the point of moral group relativism. Plunkett and Sundell argue that metalinguistic negotiations constitute disagreements worth having by appealing to examples of disputes in contexts that require practical coordination between the disputants, such as regulating the thermostat in a shared office. But it is precisely the point of moral group relativism that coordination concerning moral norms is sometimes only required within and not across different communities. There thus seems to be a tension between this proposed solution to the challenge from disagreement and other tenets of moral relativism.

There are two possible replies to this objection. For one, while Plunkett and Sundell seem to have in mind mainly contexts that require coordination, metalinguistic negotiations need not be restricted to the pragmatic point of coordination. In fact, disagreeing with someone via the mechanism of metalinguistic negotiation can have different pragmatic points.

¹⁰² Both Rovane and Wong frame their semantic analyses of moral judgments in terms of different characters of moral expressions rather than different contents due to context-sensitive characters. However, because Plunkett and Sundell develop the notion of metalinguistic negotiations with respect to both disputes involving different characters and disputes involving different contents, they can adopt an account of disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiations nonetheless.

This is made explicit by Sundell in the context of an application of the idea of metalinguistic negotiation to aesthetic disagreements:

Sometimes it's important to us that our tastes *differ* from those around us, or from a particular segment of those around us, or even that some difference in taste exists in general. But this observation is congenial to the more general point. We care about how similar or different we are in our tastes and aesthetic standards. (Sundell 2017, 91)

It seems plausible that in cases in which members of different communities actually engage in a moral dispute, there will be some pragmatic point to this dispute, whether it is coordination or just a desire to express one's own point of view on the subject matter. However, because the term "negotiation" seems to have the idea of coordination built in, it seems inappropriate in cases in which the pragmatic point of a metalinguistic negotiation is not coordination. Therefore, it is important to note that Plunkett and Sundell introduce "metalinguistic negotiation" as a technical term in order to pick out metalinguistic disputes in which there is a disagreement about how the context ought to be rather than what it is in fact like. The more fundamental reply to the objection is to point out that the notion of metalinguistic negotiation constitutes an account of disagreement as a state rather than an activity. It therefore does not depend on the fact that there is a linguistic exchange expressing the disagreement at all. Rather, it accounts for the phenomenon of inter-group disagreement in terms of a conflict between the contents accepted by the members of different communities, where these contents are metalinguistic, that is, they concern the appropriate use of linguistic expressions. Thus, if a disagreement of this kind gets expressed at all, then there will be a pragmatic point to this exchange, even if it does not consist in coordination. But even if it does not get expressed, there is a disagreement that can be accounted for. Accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation is thus the best strategy to meet the challenge disagreement poses from the point of view of the moral relativists I focus on. This concludes my discussion of the challenge moral disagreement poses with respect to the metaethical commitments involved in moral relativism. In the next section, I will turn to a further set of questions the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises in the context of discussions of moral relativism.

2.4. Moral Disagreement, Tolerance, Critique, and Confidence

In addition to metaethical questions, the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises first-order ethical questions about how we should treat others given moral conflict; that is, it raises questions for moral relativism conceived as a metaethical position as well as moral relativism understood as a practical stance.¹⁰³ As Gowans puts it, the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises theoretical as well as practical questions: “In addition to the theoretical question whether moral disagreements threaten objectivity, there is the practical question how we should act with respect to those with whom we disagree” (Gowans 2000, 33). These questions fall into two broad categories. As Wong puts it, considerations of moral conflict “can prompt us to look inward at our own commitments, and also outward at others who do not share our commitments, or at least not all of them” (Wong 2006, 228). From the “outward-looking” perspective, moral disagreement raises the questions whether moral relativism mandates a tolerant stance towards the moral practices of communities other than one’s own and whether it undermines the possibility of criticizing these practices. From the “inward-looking” perspective, it presents a challenge to the relativist’s confidence in their own moral views. While the problems moral disagreement raises for relativism conceived as a metaethical position can be understood as concerning the relation between the relativist’s metaethical commitments to *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry*, the problems moral disagreement raises for moral relativism conceived as a practical stance concern the relation between these metaethical commitments and the relativist’s first-order normative commitments. In this section, I will discuss moral relativism’s implications with respect to the question of tolerance, the possibility of criticism, and confidence in one’s own moral commitments.

¹⁰³ While moral relativism is best understood as a metaethical position, it is sometimes understood as a first-order normative position (see Chapter 1.3.). As such, it is taken to provide practical guidance by addressing the latter sort of questions. Even when relativism is seen first and foremost as a metaethical position, it might still be taken to have consequences for practical questions. Having first-order normative implications is not entirely uncommon for metaethical positions. As Melissa Barry points out with respect to Kantian and Humean versions of constructivism that follow a constitutivist line of argument “what are characterized as conceptual intuitions about the normative are taken to have direct normative implications” (Barry 2018, 398). In a similar vein, Street has pointed out that on a constructivist view, “metaethics and normative ethics collapse into one another” (Street 2010, 364). According to Blackburn, it is even distinctive of relativism that it takes metaethical points to have first-order normative significance: “Relativism has traditionally two main forms: first as a theory *within* ethics, and second as a theory *about* the whole territory of ethics. But most importantly, it also labels the attempt to derive ethical conclusions from metaethical reflections: to derive conclusions within ethics from thoughts about our nature as practical agents” (Blackburn 1998, 280).

2.4.1. Moral Relativism and Tolerance

Moral relativism is often associated with tolerance. It is especially the relativist's commitment to *Symmetry* that seems to call for toleration. After all, if different and conflicting moral systems or practices are on a par at least in some respect, shouldn't this be reason to tolerate them? According to Rainer Forst:

The term "toleration" – from the Latin *tolerare*: to put up with, countenance or suffer – generally refers to the conditional acceptance of or non-interference with beliefs, actions or practices that one considers to be wrong but still "tolerable," such that they should not be prohibited or constrained. (Forst 2017)¹⁰⁴

Tolerance has close connections to disagreement because, according to Forst, "[t]he promise of toleration is that co-existence in disagreement is possible" (2013, 1). It is distinctive of tolerance that it "does *not* resolve, but merely contains and defuses, the dispute in which it is invoked" (2013, 1). Of course, not all kinds of disagreements call for tolerance. Some disagreements ought to be resolved rather than accommodated.¹⁰⁵ However, in situations in which disagreements are particularly hard to resolve, tolerance becomes a vital option. This is often the case if strong value commitments are involved in the disagreement.¹⁰⁶ One can distinguish tolerance as a state policy, such as, for example, tolerating religious minorities, from tolerance as a personal stance or virtue. Forst refers to the former as tolerance from a "vertical" and to the latter as tolerance from a "horizontal" perspective (2013, 6). While moral relativism has interesting connections to the political realm, it is first and foremost concerned with morality and hence with a "horizontal" notion of tolerance.¹⁰⁷ While tolerance is often considered a virtue, as Forst points out, it is not only contested what tolerance amounts to, but whether it is "*something good at all*" (2013, 2): "[F]or some it is a sign of respect for others, or even of esteem for what is alien or foreign, for others it is an attitude of indifference, ignorance and isolation" (2013, 3).

Tolerance contains an "objection component," according to which "the tolerated convictions or practices are regarded as false or condemned as bad in a substantive normative sense" (2013, 18), as well as an "acceptance component," "which specifies that the tolerated convictions and practices are condemned as false or bad, yet not so false or bad that other,

¹⁰⁴ I follow Forst in using "toleration" and "tolerance" interchangeably.

¹⁰⁵ The question exactly what kind of conflict calls for toleration is one of the questions raised by the concept that a theory of toleration has to answer (see 2013, 1).

¹⁰⁶ For a long time, in the Western tradition, tolerance was almost exclusively discussed in connection with religious diversity (see e.g. Locke 1983).

¹⁰⁷ For an account of the complex relation between moral relativism and political liberalism, see Graham Long's "Relativism in Contemporary Liberal Philosophy" (Long 2011).

positive reasons do not speak for tolerating them” (2013, 20). It is important to note that the acceptance component of toleration does not undermine or cancel out the objection component. Rather, the objection component “retains its force” (2013, 20f). Forst further distinguishes a “rejection component” which determines “the limits of toleration,” that is, the threshold above which the reasons for rejection trump the reasons for acceptance (see 2013, 23). The objection component serves to distinguish tolerance from other attitudes that are often associated with tolerance, but are in fact different, such as “indifference (the absence of a negative or positive valuation)” or “affirmation (the presence of a positive valuation)” (2013, 18). Whether toleration necessarily has to imply an element of objection or “forbearance” is a contested matter.¹⁰⁸ I follow Forst in understanding toleration as involving some kind of forbearance because I think this is the notion of tolerance that is at issue in discussions of relativism. While the relativist’s own moral commitments provide a reason for objection because they can be incompatible with the moral commitments of others, their commitment to *Symmetry* seems to provide reason for acceptance. Because toleration requires objection as well as acceptance, in particular in cases in which the reasons for objection and the reasons for acceptance are of the same kind, this can result in a paradoxical situation for the agent trying to exhibit tolerance. Forst describes a situation in which both the reasons for objection and the reasons for rejection are moral reasons as leading to what has been called “the paradox of moral toleration,” in which the paradox-inducing structure of toleration “is exacerbated into the question of *how it can be morally right or even obligatory to tolerate what is morally wrong or bad*” (2013, 21). According to Forst, the structure of the concept of toleration is thus “in many respects paradoxical” (2013, 5). A philosophical conception of tolerance needs to spell out exactly how these different elements interact in the judgment of the tolerant person.

Although the relativist’s commitment to *Symmetry prima facie* seems to provide justification for tolerance, the connection between moral relativism and tolerance is not as straightforward as it might seem.¹⁰⁹ Philosophers often criticize quick arguments from relativistic commitments on the level of metaethics to a first-order normative mandate of

¹⁰⁸ In recent work on toleration and the liberal tradition, Peter Balint distinguishes between what he calls the “orthodox” understanding of toleration, on which toleration includes an element of objection and is thus a kind of “forbearance,” from a more permissive conception, on which toleration is compatible with indifference (Balint 2017, Chapter 1). He takes this more permissive understanding to be in line with ordinary use.

¹⁰⁹ Geoffrey Harrison puts forward a general challenge to the idea that there is any relation between relativism and tolerance based on a strict distinction between relativism as a metaethical position, which is tied to the perspective of an observer and normative ethics, which can only be conducted from the perspective of participants. He concludes that “[t]here is nothing that the relativist, qua relativist, can say either for or against tolerance from a moral point of view” (Harrison 1976, 132). Against this Wong submits that “an observer’s premises may be relevant to a participant within the context of his or her ethical viewpoint” (Wong 1984, 180).

tolerance. Gowans, for example, discusses an argument of this kind, which states that “because disagreements undermine objectivity we ought to tolerate those with whom we disagree” (Gowans 2000, 33). He ascribes this argument to anthropologists and notes that “[p]hilosophers are nearly unanimous in rejecting this inference as invalid” (2000, 33). The problem is that tolerance is itself a moral norm and that according to moral relativism as a metaethical position, moral norms are valid only relative to the practices of particular communities. There is thus at least a *prima facie* tension between the relativist’s commitment to *Dependence* and the claim that because relativism is true, tolerance should be respected as a norm in *all* communities. This tension comes out clearly in Williams’s criticism of what he calls “vulgar relativism,” that is, “the view which combines a relativistic account of the meaning or content of ethical terms with a non-relativistic principle of toleration” (Williams 1975, 226). Williams calls this kind of relativism “the anthropologist’s heresy” and describes it as “possibly the most absurd view to have been advanced even in moral philosophy” (1993, 20). He takes the argument for tolerance implied by this form of relativism to collapse into inconsistency because it relies on the claim that “right” and “wrong” are to be understood in a relativized way as one of its premises, and calls for a non-relativized notion of “right” and “wrong” in its conclusion that it is wrong to be intolerant (1993, 20).

Particular ways of combining tolerance with relativism can thus raise problems of coherence because some arguments for tolerance seem to undermine the relativist’s metaethical commitments. In addition, the notion of tolerance itself raises problems of coherence that have to do with its paradoxical structure. However, this does not show that no arguments from relativism to tolerance that avoid incoherence are available. In fact, some of the moral relativists I focus on take their views of morality to have consequences for the question of tolerance, in the sense that someone who accepts the view would have reason to be tolerant. Harman, for example, argues that agents who accept his conventionalist account of morality would have reason to tolerate others who they disagree with, although not without limits. While the relativist’s own first-order normative commitments account for the objection involved in tolerance, their metaethical commitments lead them to accept the other’s point of view nevertheless. As Harman stresses, his relativism can also account for the idea that some views ought to be rejected, rather than tolerated, such as, for example, the view of a criminal who does not subscribe to any conventional morality (Harman 2000c, 76). His version of moral relativism is thus able to account for the role of objection, acceptance, and rejection involved in toleration (2000c, 75f, see also 1996, 57–59). In addition, Wong’s claim that given the ubiquity and persistence of moral disagreement, any adequate morality will contain

the value of “accommodation” can be understood as an argument for tolerance (Wong 2006, 64f). However, other moral relativists stress that tolerance does not really make sense on a relativist view of morality. According to Rovane, tolerance is better associated with Unimundialism than Multimundialism because it assumes that we take the ones we are tolerant towards to be mistaken (Rovane 2013, 240). As Rovane argues in an earlier paper, although tolerance is usually associated with relativism, different combinations are possible. For example, an absolutist can be tolerant because they value self-determination; a relativist can be intolerant because they want to stamp out deviant standpoints. Nonetheless, they differ with respect to the considerations they can appeal to in order to justify their practical stance (2002, 271). Thus, while the relativist’s metaethical commitments provide some reason to endorse a tolerant stance towards the moral commitments of members of other communities, relativism does not necessarily lead to a justification of tolerance. It does, however, affect possible justifications of tolerance.¹¹⁰

2.4.2. Moral Relativism and the Possibility of “Socially External” Criticism

Another question the phenomenon of moral conflict raises for moral relativism concerns the possibility of criticism. With respect to the social location of the critic, one can distinguish “socially internal” from “socially external” critique. While in cases of socially internal critique, the critic is part of the community that is criticized; in cases of socially external critique, the critic is not part of the community that is criticized.¹¹¹ Socially external criticism raises a question for moral relativism: is criticism of moral practices other than one’s own possible from the perspective of a moral relativist? Critics of relativism often assume that the relativist’s metaethical commitments undermine this possibility. It is in particular the relativist’s commitment to *Dependence* that seems to provide reason to suspend judgment with respect to the moral practices of other communities. By contrast, it seems that the relativist’s first-order normative commitments will give them reason to criticize practices that clash with these commitments. With respect to the kind of standard a critic appeals to, one can further distinguish between “normatively internal” and “normatively external” forms of

¹¹⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that relativism is not necessary for tolerance either. As Forst points out, there can be a wide range of different justifications of tolerance, based on religious, pragmatic political, epistemological or moral reasons (Forst 2013, 3). While tolerance matters as a possible response to “irresolvable” disagreements, these disagreements need not be irresolvable in the metaphysical sense that is at stake in arguments for relativism. It suffices if they remain persistently unresolved. Although he does not describe his account as epistemological, but as a “Kantian conception of toleration which has an *autonomous moral* foundation” (2013, 8), epistemological considerations, more specifically, “reflection on the finitude of human reason” (2013, 4), play an important role for Forst’s argument for toleration. Similar epistemological considerations ground Rawls’s argument for a reasonable pluralism based on the “burdens of judgment” (Rawls 1993, 54–58).

¹¹¹ I will discuss the topic of socially internal criticism in Chapter 3.

criticism (cf. e.g. Jaeggi 2018a, 177–89).¹¹² While in cases of normatively internal criticism, the standard of criticism is located *within* the object of criticism; in cases of external criticism, the standard is located outside the object of criticism (2018a, 177). For the case of critique of the practices of a community from a moral point of view, this means that normatively internal criticism relies on moral norms that are part of the way of life that is criticized. As Jaeggi points out with critical reference to Michael Walzer, these different senses of internal and external criticism, socially and normatively, can come apart:

One can conceive of someone who occupies a social location outside of the community nevertheless bringing the community’s own normative principles to bear in her criticism. Conversely, one can also imagine a socially bound critic bringing externally derived normative criteria to bear against her own community without thereby distancing herself from it entirely. (2018a, 356, n6)

For normatively internal critique to have a point, it cannot be the case that the practices of the community that is criticized already fully conform to the standard the critic appeals to. Rather, normatively internal critique is only possible in cases in which there is some discrepancy between a norm that is accepted by a community – for example, an ideal that is routinely avowed as part of their explicit self-understanding – but yet deviated from in practice. As Jaeggi puts it, the practices of a community can be measured against “ideals, which are already contained, but not realized, in the community in question” (2018a, 179). Normatively internal criticism has a range of what Jaeggi calls “practical and pragmatic” as well as “systematic” advantages (2018a, 183). Criticism that is internal in this sense has the systematic advantage that the problem of justifying the standard in question does not arise because everyone involved, the critic as well as the criticized, already subscribes to the relevant standards. At the same time, it has the practical or pragmatic advantage that it can be assumed that the criticized will be motivated to align their practices with their own normative ideals. However, normatively internal criticism also has its limits. For one, it is “conservative” in a structural sense: it aims at the restitution of the full force of a norm over a practice (2018a, 187).¹¹³ However, when practices start to deviate from (formerly) accepted standards, it can be an open question whether the practice or the norm ought to be changed (2018a, 186). Moreover, internal criticism cannot demand a genuine change of the standards accepted by a community. The limits of internal criticism become evident when it confronts a community of

¹¹² As Jaeggi points out, internal criticism has been advocated, for example, by Michael Walzer (see Walzer 1987). The point of Jaeggi’s discussion is to contrast both internal and external criticism with a third form, “immanent” criticism, which she favors (see Jaeggi 2018a, Chapter 6).

¹¹³ Jaeggi stresses that this is not necessarily equivalent to “conservative” in a political sense (2018a, 187, 2018a, 357, n12).

cynics or a community that openly accepts horrendous standards and complies with them (2018a, 187).

Normatively external criticism goes beyond these limits. While in cases of normatively internal criticism, the standards the critic applies to a practice derive from the way of life that is criticized, in cases of normatively external criticism they need not be constrained by the object criticized in any way. The standards of criticism can either be the critic's own standards or standards the critic takes to hold absolutely (2018a, 177). Normatively external criticism is not subject to the limitations of normatively internal criticism, but it faces the problem of justifying the standard of criticism. The comparison of normatively internal and external criticism helps clarify in what sense criticizing practices other than one's own from a moral point presents a challenge for the moral relativist. For one, it shows that the relativist's metaethical commitment to *Dependence* is not in tension with all forms of criticism. There is no reason the relativist should not be able to criticize another community when they can rely on standards accepted by this community. Normatively internal criticism is thus available to the relativist.¹¹⁴ However, because the relativist's own first-order normative commitments will not always coincide with the moral norms accepted by a different community, this mode of criticism will not always be available. This raises the question whether the relativist is able to criticize other communities in the mode of external criticism. In principle, external criticism is available to the relativist as well. However, the relativist cannot claim that these standards of criticism hold absolutely because this would be in tension with their metaethical commitments according to which no moral norms hold absolutely. While the relativist can criticize others by relying on their own first-order normative commitments, this might indeed seem inappropriate given their metaethical commitment to *Dependence*.¹¹⁵ It seems that either way, criticizing others in an external mode will land the relativist in some form of incoherence.¹¹⁶

That criticizing others based on standards that do not apply to them is inappropriate is, in fact, a point many moral relativists emphasize. Harman's discussion of what he calls "inner judgments" can, for example, be understood in this light. According to Harman, it would be "odd" to make "inner judgments," that is, judgments that someone ought to do something, morally speaking, with respect to subjects who are "beyond the pale," that is, "beyond the

¹¹⁴ Jaeggi also associates this mode of criticism with relativism (2018a, 174).

¹¹⁵ Since no problem of coherence arises when relativism is combined with criticizing other communities in a normatively internal mode, the charge that relativism undermines the possibility of criticism seems to presuppose that criticism is understood in terms of normatively external criticism.

¹¹⁶ Nevertheless, moral relativists may still engage in this form of external criticism for strategic reasons (cf. Harman 1975, 8; Velleman 2015, 92).

motivational reach of the relevant moral considerations” (Harman 1975, 8, see also Chapter 1.2.1.). This can be understood as acknowledging that, on a relativist view of morality, the possibility to criticize others in a normatively external mode is limited.¹¹⁷ Williams’s distinction between notional and real confrontations can be read as making a similar point. As criticism is or entails a kind of appraisal, it loses its point in the case of notional confrontations (see Chapter 1.2.2.). Rovane’s formulation of relativism can be seen as entailing an extreme version of this point. Rovane discusses both Unimundialism and Multimundialism as different “regulative ideals” leading to different practical stances. She describes the Multimundialist stance as “normatively disengaged” (Rovane 2013, 212). On this view, members of different communities are epistemically and normatively isolated from one another. As Rovane puts it, we have “nothing to teach, and nothing to learn from” (2013, 10) someone who holds a belief that is normatively insulated from our beliefs (see also Chapter 1.2.3.). According to Velleman, like the possibility of disagreeing with members of different communities, the possibility of criticizing them is undermined by the obstacle of a lack of a shared taxonomy of action-types. Velleman takes it to be “odd” to condemn the practices of others in one’s own terms (Velleman 2015, 73). He takes the reluctance to apply one’s own categories and standards to others to be “the root of relativism” (2015, 27). Velleman emphasizes that even if we do understand the taxonomy of action-types of a different community, it would be odd to evaluate an instance of their action-types based on our different taxonomy. It would, however, be possible to evaluate the action relative to an actual alternative, that is, a different possible action that is part of the same taxonomy (2015, 74). This would correspond to normatively internal rather than external criticism. In different passages, however, Velleman does allow for the possibility that we react with strong disapproval to other moralities. In the context of the question whether we can recognize different moralities he mentions the possibility that we find the norms of others appalling: “[W]ays of life, by their very nature, tend to be recognizably moral, however horrifically or appallingly so” (2015, 96). This illustrates the tension between the moral relativist’s first-order commitments that may give rise to external criticism and the moral relativist’s metaethical commitments that seem to render such criticism inappropriate. Wong emphasizes that there is a variety of different ways relativists might react to moral difference and that appropriate attitudes might have to be “more complex than complete endorsement or rejection” (Wong 2006, 83). According to him, we always judge others based on our own standards, but the evaluation can range from being completely accepting to completely

¹¹⁷ However, Harman emphasizes that other negative judgments, such as, for example, that those who are beyond the pale are “evil,” can be made without oddity (1975, 4–7, see also Chapter 1.2.1.).

rejecting or be considerably more nuanced (2006, 105). Wong points out that the metaethical perspective of relativism allows for acceptance of other true moralities but does not mandate it. Other moralities can be rejected from a first-order normative point of view, for example, because they violate a value one takes to be of particular importance (2006, 83). While many practices can be criticized based on norms that will be part of all adequate moralities, “[t]here will be cases where we want to condemn an action or policy or practice of another society, but where no basis for condemnation is present in what constitutes an adequate morality in that society” (2006, 93).

To engage with the question of criticism more fully, we have to consider not only whether the relativist can criticize others, but also whether they can learn from the criticism of members of other communities.¹¹⁸ Wong identifies the charge that “[r]elativism makes constructive discourse between different moral traditions impossible” (2006, 76) as one of the main objections all versions of moral relativism have to confront. What underlies this charge is the assumption that “[i]t is only when we see other moralities as competing with ours with respect to capturing *the* moral truth that we are led to ask what truth in these other moralities we ought to recognize and incorporate in our own viewpoints” (2006, 110). However, the relativist need not assume this. Different reasons for engaging with others and more indirect ways of learning from them are at least conceivable. As Wong and Velleman emphasize, learning from others is possible on a relativist view, but it cannot always take the form of mere copying (Wong 2006, 240; Velleman 2015, 99). Thus, while the possibility of a certain kind of criticism that can be described as socially and normatively external indeed presents a challenge for moral relativism, the relativist can go some way to respond to this challenge, by pointing to other ways of engaging with others that are compatible with relativism.¹¹⁹

2.4.3. Moral Relativism and Confidence

Is it possible for a moral relativist to remain confident in their own moral commitments? Critics of relativism often argue that the relativist’s metaethical commitments must undermine their moral confidence. This charge can be traced back to a tension between the relativist’s commitment to *Exclusiveness* and *Symmetry*. On the one hand, relativism requires that it is at least possible that one’s own views conflict with those of others. On the other hand, it requires that the different moral systems or practices involved in this conflict can be on a par nevertheless. But if the relativist takes the views of others to be equally justified as their own,

¹¹⁸ This is closely connected to the possibility of “unlearning” certain aspects of one’s own taken for granted perspective that Allen emphasizes (see Allen 2016, 209f).

¹¹⁹ I will return to the question of the possibility of criticism of communities other than one’s own in Chapter 5.4.

why do they hold on to their own commitments rather than adopting those of others? This question can appear especially striking in cases of moral conflict. In facing the problem of moral confidence, the relativist can point out that the situation is only misleadingly construed as a situation of choice. In fact, we are deeply influenced by our moral commitments and this does not change even if we realize their contingent nature. This point is emphasized by Wong, who recognizes the claim that “[r]elativism undermines confidence in one’s moral commitments” (Wong 2006, 76) as one of the objections all versions of relativism face. In response to this challenge, Wong stresses that it is often simply not a live option for us to go over to another morality. Roughly: without an identity, we would not be able to choose between different alternative forms of life and given our identity, the choice is already made: “The argument, then, is that our commitments are so deeply rooted in who we are that recognition of the contingency of our moral identities need not undermine them” (2006, 108). While this argument provides an answer to the question why the relativist does not change their view as matter of fact, it does not address the worry that in continuing to commit to a particular set of moral norms while recognizing that others are equally justified, the relativist incurs a kind of practical incoherence. Raz raises a similar worry with respect to the value pluralism he takes to be part of multiculturalism:

Of course, pluralists can step back from their personal commitments and appreciate in the abstract the value of other ways of life and their attendant virtues. But this acknowledgement coexists with, and cannot replace, the feelings of rejection and dismissiveness towards what one knows is in itself valuable. Tension is an inevitable concomitant of accepting the truth of value pluralism. And it is a tension without stability, without a definite resting-point of reconciliation of the two perspectives, the one recognizing the validity of competing values and the one hostile to them. There is no point of equilibrium, no single balance which is correct and could prevail to bring the two perspectives together. One is forever moving from one to the other from time to time. (Raz 1994, 180; quoted at Wong 2006, 233)

Wong contrasts this pessimistic verdict with the Ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi’s more positive account of a similar split of perspectives. Zhuangzi gives two arguments against the existence of a single true morality: the first is the well-known skeptical argument that there is no non-circular argumentative strategy available to dispel doubt that is cast on one’s own point of view; the second argument is that there is something of value in perspectives other than one’s own. However, Wong points out that, in spite of these skeptical arguments he employs, Zhuangzi is not a skeptic for he also recommends a way of life – his “engaged perspective.” This leads to a “dual perspective” view, which Wong embraces. Contrary to Raz’s picture, the two different perspectives do not stand in an unstable tension but interact in

a fruitful way. The “detached perspective,” from which the skeptical arguments are put forward, can broaden and correct the engaged perspective in an ongoing, flexible and open-ended process. The relativist can maintain a coherent position by switching between an engaged perspective, from which only their own view is correct, and a detached perspective, from which they can acknowledge that the views of others might be equally correct (Wong 2006, 234–40; see also Kusch 2017). In a different context, Wong also notes that challenges to confidence in our moral commitments may well be justified (Wong 2006, 266f). Thus, in so far as the split of perspectives does serve to challenge our confidence, this need not be a bad thing.¹²⁰

Velleman discusses a question that is closely related to the question of whether moral relativism undermines confidence in one’s own moral commitments: whether moral relativism undermines “moral seriousness,” or rather, whether it makes moral seriousness “absurd” (Velleman 2015, 119–27):

In the eyes of many philosophers, moral seriousness requires the conviction that what we call morality is not merely *our* morality, not just a set of *mores* peculiar to our culture or community. If these philosophers are right, then moral relativism implies that our lives are absurd, given our inability to abandon moral seriousness. (2015, 126)

In framing the problem of the purported tension between the relativist’s confidence in their own first-order commitments and their metaethical commitments in terms of the question whether moral relativism renders our moral seriousness absurd, Velleman relies on Nagel’s discussion of absurdity, which sets out with the following characterization of the way “absurd” is used in ordinary contexts:

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality: someone gives a complicated speech in support of a motion that has already been passed; a notorious criminal is made president of a major philanthropic foundation; you declare your love over the telephone to a recorded announcement; as you are being knighted, your pants fall down. (Nagel 1971, 718)

Nagel argues that life itself is absurd because there is a “collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt” (1971, 718), which is analogous to the

¹²⁰ While Harman and Rovane do not discuss the question of moral confidence, Williams discusses it in a context only loosely related to the topic of relativism. He introduces moral confidence as the third option beyond moral certainty – based on the idea of moral knowledge – and moral decisionism as one reaction to the lack of knowledge (Williams 1985, 169f). He sees confidence as a social and psychological phenomenon independent of moral objectivism (1985, 173). His discussion is of interest for confidence in the context of moral relativism because he insists that it is possible to be confident about one’s values without assuming that they are objective.

kind of discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality illustrated by the examples. Against this, Velleman argues that the situations described by Nagel are ridiculous rather than absurd and that Nagel's characterization of the absurd is better understood as locating the relevant clash that causes absurdity not between pretension or aspiration and reality, but between two possible points of view available to us (Velleman 2015, 119–21): "Thus, absurdity lies not where the pretension involved in taking things seriously collides with the reality of their arbitrariness; it lies rather in our seeing the collision and continuing to take things seriously all the same" (2015, 121). This is why our seriousness can seem absurd rather than ridiculous: "Taking our arbitrary pursuits so seriously would be ridiculous if not for the fact that we know they are arbitrary, so that our seriousness is absurd instead" (2015, 122). Nagel describes the viewpoint that collides with the point of view from which we take our pursuits seriously as a point of view from which they seem to be "arbitrary" or "open to doubt." However, Velleman argues that he is better understood as claiming not that they are perceived as arbitrary, but rather as particular and specific (2015, 124). Velleman associates absolutism about value with the aim of transcending this specificity (2015, 125). This explains why, from the point of view of absolutism, relativism makes life seem absurd. However, Velleman argues that moral relativism is compatible with moral seriousness because "a belief in the possibility of progress in morality" (2015, 127) is sufficient for moral seriousness. This highlights another motivation for moral relativists to account for the possibility of moral progress. On Velleman's view, moral relativism is compatible with this kind of belief.¹²¹ Thus, moral relativism need not be incompatible with confidence in one's own moral commitments, although it does rule out certain kinds of confidence associated with absolutist metaethical commitments.

In this chapter, I have discussed some important questions the phenomenon of moral disagreement raises in the context of moral relativism. I have argued that, while considerations of moral inter-group disagreement provide an important but inconclusive source of motivation for moral relativism, at the same time, accounting for the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement presents a challenge to the coherence of the view. I have argued that the notion of metalinguistic negotiation can help the relativist meet that challenge in a way that is compatible with their semantic commitments. I have also argued that relativism as a metaethical position has important implications for certain first-order normative issues raised by the phenomenon of moral conflict, namely, whether one should tolerate the beliefs of others, whether justified critique of practices other than one's own is

¹²¹ I will discuss his argument for this in detail in Chapter 4.

possible, and what degree of confidence one should have in one's own beliefs. I have suggested that moral relativism provides some motivation for tolerance, that only certain kinds of criticism of other communities are available to the relativist, and that being a relativist need not necessarily undermine one's confidence in one's own moral beliefs. I will return to these questions after I develop my argument according to which moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress and reconsider them in light of the implications of this argument (see Chapter 5.4.). In the next chapter, I will take a step towards the main question of my dissertation, namely, whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress, by looking at the implications moral relativism has for thinking about phenomena of social change and their relation to moral progress.

3. Moral Relativism and Social Change

Moral group relativists are interested in the moral norms that are part of communities' actual practices. That such norms change over time is evident from history. At least for many, it is also evident from their own experience over the course of their lifetime or accessible through conversation with elders, engaging with cultural artefacts such as books and movies from different times, etc.¹²² As von Wright's analysis of progress as consisting of two distinct components – a descriptive or factual component of change and an evaluative component of goodness (see Chapter 1.4.) – shows, the notion of progress involves the notion of change. Whether and how moral relativists can account for morally relevant social change thus affects in how far they can account for the possibility of moral progress. The argument that moral relativists cannot account for moral progress draws on the claim that – given certain assumptions about the kind of change involved in progress – relativists cannot account for the evaluative component of the notion of progress (see Chapter 1.4.). The basic idea is that relativism does not allow for a suitable standard with respect to which progress could be, so to speak, “measured.” It seems at least *prima facie* that the prospects for moral relativists to account for the possibility of morally relevant change in ways of life are much better than the prospects for moral relativists to account for the possibility of a given change being for the better or worse. However, not only do moral relativists hardly ever discuss the question of social change, they face difficulties in accounting for the possibility of certain kinds of morally relevant changes in ways of life.

In this chapter, I will analyze whether and in what way moral relativists can account for morally relevant changes in the way of life of communities. I will begin by discussing some consequences of the fact that, on a relativist view, change in the moral norms accepted by a community is seen as part of social change more generally (3.1.). Then, I will argue that moral relativists face difficulties in accounting for the possibility of a certain kind of morally relevant social change because of assumptions about communities they tend to make (3.2.). Subsequently, I will point out a further problematic consequence of the assumptions moral relativists tend to make about communities (3.3.). Finally, I will explore whether moral relativists can avoid making these assumptions and draw conclusions for the question of whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress (3.4.).

¹²² Moody-Adams provides an argument for why communities that are able to sustain their way of life – or, as she puts it, their culture – have to be open at least to the possibility of change. According to her, in light of change in material circumstances, “the survival of a culture over time depends on the ability of individuals who share a culture to modify, reshape, and sometimes even reject particular cultural practices” (Moody-Adams 2002, 70).

3.1. Moral Change and Social Change

Moral group relativism establishes a close connection between the practices of a community and the moral norms that bind its members. This leads to a close connection between phenomena of social change more generally and phenomena of morally relevant change in ways of life that has consequences for how moral relativists can conceive of moral progress. Raz highlights some of these consequences in a paper on “Moral Change and Social Relativism,” in which he argues that there is a special relationship between what he calls “social relativism” and what he calls “moral change.” Raz characterizes social relativism as the view that “the morality (the moral doctrines and principles) which is binding or valid for a person is a function of the moral practices of his or her society” (Raz 1999, 163). Thus, what Raz calls social relativism is a form of moral group relativism. Raz further specifies that by “moral change” he means not “a person or a society changing their moral views or practices” (1999, 166), but rather that morality itself changes, in the sense that what is morally required changes and not just in a way that can be explained by applying an “unchanged morality” (1999, 166) to changing circumstances. That is, by “moral change” Raz does not mean change in the moral norms accepted by a community, but rather change in what is morally right or wrong for a community. Raz argues that because of the close relationship between social practices and what is morally right or wrong, “social relativists” are committed to the possibility of moral change in the stronger sense of “change in what is morally right or wrong for a community”: “Social relativism can be sustained only if moral change is possible. We know that social practices can (and do) change. If, as social relativism claims, morality is a function of social practices, then morality can (and does) change as well” (1999, 166).¹²³

Raz’s reasoning serves to illustrate why accounting for the possibility of moral progress presents a challenge for moral relativists. It does so only under the assumption that progress involves a genuine change in the moral norms accepted by a community, but not when progress is understood, for example, in terms of increased compliance with these norms. This is because it seems that, in order to account for a change in the moral norms accepted by a community as progressive or regressive, the relativist would have to appeal to moral norms that are valid independently of any given way of life. However, according to the relativist,

¹²³ Raz goes on to argue against social relativism based on this commitment to the possibility of moral change. His argument is based on the idea that morality has to be intelligible and that a change in moral practices can only be intelligible if it is justified with respect to an unchanging moral principle that can explain the change (1999). This argument is supposed to show that genuine moral change is impossible and that, therefore, social relativism is untenable. However, Raz has since revised his position to argue that normative change in general and moral change in particular are possible because, while changes need to be explained, this explanation need not take the form of subsumption under a pre-existing principle (2017). This undermines his previous argument against relativism.

there are no such moral norms (see Chapter 1.4.). Raz's reasoning brings out a relevant difference between moral relativism and non-relativist positions in metaethics with respect to the case of progress involving change in the moral norms accepted by a community. Non-relativists can conceive of the actual beliefs and practices of communities as in principle independent of what is morally right or wrong. This allows them to understand progress in terms of a change of these beliefs and practices so that they better approximate what is morally required. On a relativist view, however, things are more complicated because what is morally right or wrong ultimately depends on the actual practices of a community. That is to say, on a relativist view, change in the moral norms accepted by a community leads to change in what is morally right or wrong for them. It is thus ultimately in virtue of the relativist's commitment to *Dependence* that accounting for moral progress as involving change in the moral norms inherent in the way of life of a community presents a problem for moral relativists.

However, as Raz has also pointed out, moral group relativists are not necessarily committed to a crude version of conventionalism, according to which whatever a community takes to be correct is correct for them. Rather, the relativist is only committed to the weaker claim that what is morally right or wrong depends on the practices of a community in some way. As Raz puts it, moral group relativism commits to the claim that moral correctness for an agent is *a function of* the practices of their group, but not necessarily to the claim that this function is identity (1999, 163f). This more nuanced understanding of *Dependence* gives the relativist some leeway to distinguish between what a community takes to be correct and what is correct "for them" (see also Chapter 1.1.). Wong, for example, understands the truth-conditions of moral judgments in terms of the moral norms accepted by a community corrected by constraints on adequate moralities (Wong 2006, 71, see also Chapter 1.2.5.). This introduces a difference between a community's actual practices and what (their) morality requires, that is, a difference between the moral norms accepted by a community and what is morally right or wrong for them. Such a version of relativism can make sense of the idea that practices better approximate what is morally required in a way that is similar to the non-relativist account. Can the relativist rely on this distinction in order to account for moral change in the norms accepted by a community as progressive or regressive?

While relativists can rely on this strategy, in order to give a satisfactory account of moral progress along these lines, they would have to incur additional assumptions. As Raz points out, in order to avoid the possibility that change in practices can affect what is morally right or wrong entirely, they would have to construe *Dependence* in a way that specifies what

is morally correct for a community once and for all with respect to some “primordial stage of development” (Raz 1999, 166) of the practices of that community. What is morally correct will then be independent of later developments. He points out that while this preserves one of the intuitions behind relativism, namely “that members of different societies are subject to different moral principles” (1999, 166), it gives up on a different central intuition, namely, “that the moral principles which apply to a person reflect his social environment” (1999, 167). That is, such a version of relativism would vindicate the idea that what is morally right or wrong differs for different communities, but not that it is sensitive to changes in their way of life. This would amount to a peculiar version of moral group relativism. Accounting for moral progress in this way would thus come at a serious cost for moral relativists.

Raz’s argument raises a question all philosophical accounts of progress face, namely, the question how radical the component of change in a conception of progress can be. On the one hand, it seems that quite drastic changes in moral outlook are not only possible – and perhaps even sometimes desirable – but also might have actually occurred in the course of history. On the other hand, allowing for very radical transformations raises issues about how such changes can be assessed. Roth calls finding the right trade-off between what she calls “objectivity and rationality” and “radical revision of values” the “Goldilocks problem” (Roth 2010, 2012).¹²⁴ The question how radical a change in moral beliefs and practices can be in order to still be intelligible, which is central to Raz’s argument, can be seen as the “subjective side” of the requirement of “objectivity and rationality” figuring in the Goldilocks problem. It arises once the perspective of the agents undergoing the change is considered. Roth argues that while some accounts of moral progress are “too conservative” in vindicating objectivity and rationality at the expense of radical change, others are “too liberal” in vindicating radical change at the expense of objectivity and rationality.

An example for a view Roth locates on the “conservative” end of the spectrum indicated by the Goldilocks problem is Moody-Adams’s conception of moral progress in terms of “semantic depth.”¹²⁵ Drawing on Mark Platts’s version of moral realism – what he calls “ethical intuitionism” (Platts 1988) – Moody-Adams understands moral progress in terms of deepening our understanding of existing moral concepts: “Moral progress in belief involves deepening our grasp of existing moral concepts, while moral progress in practices

¹²⁴ Roth calls this the “Goldilocks problem” because “Goldilocks, of course, often found a bed or a bowl of porridge that was too large or two [sic] small and had difficulty finding things that were ‘just right’” (2010, 154).

¹²⁵ In addition, Roth discusses David Wiggins’s account of progress as another view that is too conservative and Richard Rorty’s account of progress as a view that is too liberal. Roth’s own Dewey-inspired view of progress is supposed to steer a path between these unsatisfactory options. I will discuss Roth’s conception of progress in Chapter 3.4.

involves realizing deepened moral understandings in behavior or social institutions” (Moody-Adams 1999, 168). She distances herself from rival accounts that conceptualize moral progress as involving more radical types of change on the model of Kuhnian paradigm shifts. In particular, she rejects the idea that moral progress could involve *new* moral concepts or ideas (1999, 170f).¹²⁶ Moody-Adams’s conception of moral progress in terms of semantic depth is closely related to another prominent conception of moral progress on the model of the “expanding circle,” according to which moral progress consists in a continuous widening of the circle of those who are of moral concern. This model has been most prominently defended by Peter Singer (see e.g. Singer 2011, 111–24). Moody-Adams ascribes a similar understanding of moral progress to Martha Nussbaum and Richard Rorty (Moody-Adams 2017, 154). According to her, it is one of the central tasks of constructive moral inquiry “to show us when and how we must sometimes enlarge the class of things – entities, actions, institutions, or states of affairs – to which some fundamental moral concept applies” (1999, 174). What both the conception of progress as deepening our grasp of moral concepts and the model of the expanding circle have in common is that the question of identifying a suitable standard of progress does not really arise. A better understanding of the same moral concepts and an application of the same moral norms to a wider circle of morally relevant subjects can be understood as an improvement with reference to the relevant moral concepts and norms themselves. Moreover, a transition along these lines will likely constitute an intelligible improvement from the point of view of someone who is competent with these concepts and norms.¹²⁷ Thus, accounting for progress on such a model has advantages regarding the question of intelligibility as well as the question how to justify a standard of progress. This makes it interesting from the point of view of the relativist specifying what is morally right or wrong for a community once and for all with respect to some “primordial stage of development.” If change in moral norms can always be explained in terms of a better realization of the same set of norms, it becomes more likely that what is morally right or wrong could be specified with respect to a primordial stage of development.

¹²⁶ In a more recent paper Moody-Adams does, however, acknowledge the crucial role new non-moral concepts can play in moral progress (2017, 159).

¹²⁷ Jaeggi provides a parallel assessment of the distinctive advantages of this kind of conception of progress. As Jaeggi argues, understanding moral progress on this model, that is, as “a matter of reinterpreting, realizing, or rightfully attributing already existing principles” (Jaeggi 2018c, 22), has distinctive advantages. On the one hand, “[i]t is not at all evident that such a thing as a total innovative transformation – that is, an invention of *radically* new practices and principles unconnected to the ones that are overcome – could even be conceivable at all” (2018c, 22). On the other hand, “to conceive of moral progress as a deepening of already existing principles has the indisputable advantage that the problem of the evaluative standards – ‘Why should these changes count as progress?’ – doesn’t even come up” (2018c, 22).

It is, however, unlikely that all episodes of morally relevant social change can be plausibly understood on this model. Philip Kitcher, for example, discusses the transition between the “*lex talionis*,” according to which justice sometimes required that someone other than the perpetrator be harmed – because it could demand not only “an eye for an eye,” but also “a son for a son” or “a daughter for a daughter” – to more modern forms of law, in which punishment may only harm the perpetrator, as an instance of a discontinuous kind of change. He takes this case to constitute a counter-example, in particular, to the “expanding-circle” model of progress:

The transition does not begin with a class of people initially protected by an ethical precept and another class of people not so protected, anyone is vulnerable to harm, provided he or she stands in a particular relationship to the crime – being the son or the daughter of someone who killed the son or daughter of another person; after the transition, anyone is vulnerable to harm if he or she stands in a *different* particular relation to the crime (being the doer of the deed). No circle is expanded; one circle is replaced by another. (Kitcher 2011, 215)¹²⁸

Examples like this show that a plausible account of progress must allow for more radical kinds of change, which cannot be adequately grasped on the model of expanding the circle of moral concern or deepening our understanding of an antecedently fixed meaning of moral concepts. While Kitcher’s case is presented as a counter-example to the model of the expanding circle in particular, it also casts doubt on the view of progress in terms of deepening the grasp of the meaning of moral concepts. This has consequences for moral relativism because it makes the idea that moral relativists can fix what is morally right or wrong with respect to a “primordial stage of development” less plausible.

Another question all philosophical accounts of moral progress face, which has to do with the intelligibility of episodes of change, concerns the role of moral agents. It seems that understanding moral norms as part of the practices of communities that make up their way of life leaves room for what Rovane calls “directed social change,” that is, conscious attempts to alter the moral norms accepted by one’s community. Rovane introduces this term in a passage in which she concedes that her version of moral relativism cannot account for this kind of change. She considers this as a possible basis for resistance to her view and, in particular, to the underlying idea that morals are the unintended products of culture and history, but rejects it as a reason for objection:

¹²⁸ Jaeggi also claims that it is “more than doubtful that all moral improvements really adhere to this pattern of moral progress” (Jaeggi 2018c, 22) and refers to Kitcher’s example (2018c, 39, n14).

It seems to me that the most important sources of resistance to this strongest case for Multimundialism lie in the contention that it underestimates what scope there is for *directed* social change, and that it therefore underestimates the pointfulness of certain forms of moral and political inquiry whose goal it would be to identify the best courses for such directed efforts. It should be clear that this contention does not amount to an objection to my main argument in this section, which is that Multimundialism follows from the picture on which morals are products of history and culture – for it is really an objection to the picture itself, on the ground that the forces of history and culture do not lie beyond our intentional control, and that it is therefore up to us to shape our social conditions to accord with our moral views rather than vice versa. (Rovane 2013, 246f)

While it is plausible enough that history cannot be brought under anyone's "intentional control," this does not mean that human beings cannot do anything whatsoever to try to change their way of life. Therefore, moral relativism, understood as the view that what is morally right or wrong depends on historical and cultural context, is in principle compatible with the possibility of directed social change. In contrast to Rovane, who embraces the view that directed social change is impossible as an implication of her version of moral relativism, I take it to be a requirement for versions of moral relativism to be able to account for the possibility of directed social change. This is because attempts at directed social change are a part of moral life. In the context of the question whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress, being able to account for the possibility of directed social change is particularly important because the conscious attempts of members of a community to change the moral beliefs and practices of their group can be an important cause for change in the moral norms accepted by a community. However, while the intentional actions of individuals matter for change in the moral norms accepted by a community, it does not seem plausible to assume that moral agents can change the beliefs and practices prevalent in their community at will. This can be explained with respect to the twofold character of ways of life that Jaeggi emphasizes with respect to her characterization of the closely related notion "form of life" in terms of "ensembles of practices." This rendering of forms or ways of life brings out that, on the one hand, because ways of life are constituted by a nexus of social practices, they depend on the actions of the individuals sustaining the relevant practices. Therefore, ways of life are, at least in principle, malleable. They can be altered and even cease to exist. On the other hand, however, it is impossible for an individual to change their way of life at will. Jaeggi refers to this relative stability of practices as the "inertia" of forms of life. This view, according to which ways of life are at once "given" and "made", can be seen as a middle ground position with respect to the question whether directed social change is

possible: there is room for intentional action in order to seek change, but at the same time, trying to bring about change intentionally can prove to be very difficult (Jaeggi 2018a, Chapter 2).

Moreover, as studies of important instances of moral progress show, while morally important episodes of social change, including directed social change, involve moral argument, moral debate is not the only factor causing morally relevant change in the beliefs and practices of a community. As, for example, Kwame Anthony Appiah points out, the study of “moral revolutions” can reveal the decisive force of factors other than moral argument:

I noticed almost immediately that the disparate cases I looked at – the collapse of the duel, the abandonment of footbinding, the end of Atlantic slavery – had some unexpected features in common. One was that arguments against each of these practices were well known and clearly made a good deal before they came to an end. Not only were the arguments already there, they were made in terms that we – in other cultures or other times – can recognize and understand. Whatever happened when these immoral practices ceased, it wasn't, so it seemed to me, that people were bowled over by new moral arguments. Dueling was always murderous and irrational; footbinding was always painfully crippling; slavery was always an assault on the humanity of the slave. (Appiah 2010, xii)

Jaeggi suggests that understanding moral change and progress as part of more encompassing social transformations makes it possible to understand moral progress as neither completely “endogenous,” that is, based only on considerations internal to the moral sphere, such as moral deliberation and argument, nor purely “exogenous,” that is, determined by factors beyond the domain of morality (Jaeggi 2018c, 23).¹²⁹ There is thus room for the role of social struggle in morally relevant social change; yet, the resulting conception of social change and progress is not overly “voluntarist” (2018b, 195).

The fact that moral relativists conceive of change in moral norms as part of potentially more encompassing kinds of social change thus has several consequences for the question of whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of change in moral norms and moral progress. For one, ways of life change and, therefore, the moral norms accepted by a community change as well. As Raz shows, because of the relativist's commitment to *Dependence*, change in a community's moral beliefs and practices is closely connected to “moral change” in the sense that what is morally right or wrong changes. This helps to illustrate further why accounting for the possibility of moral progress as involving a genuine

¹²⁹ The idea that morality as an ideology does not have “its own history”; that is, that it does not have a dynamic of its own, is part of a deterministic understanding of historical materialism (2018c, 26). Jaeggi rejects this kind of view, but sees the claim that moral progress can sometimes be connected to episodes of more encompassing kinds of social change as part of a defensible revised version of materialism (2018b, 195).

change in the norms accepted by a community constitutes a challenge for moral relativists. Moral relativists could try to avoid this challenge by severing the relation between change in the actual practices of communities and what is morally correct for them. However, this would amount to a strange version of moral relativism, which vindicates the claim that what is morally right or wrong differs with different communities but gives up on the claim that changes in context can affect what is morally right or wrong. Moreover, examples of radically discontinuous morally relevant social change, like Kitcher's example of the shift from the *lex talionis* to more modern forms of punishment, make the view that what is morally right or wrong could be specified with respect to a "primordial state of development" implausible. In addition, understanding change in moral norms as a form of social change makes it possible to allow for the possibility of directed social change, that is, intentional efforts at changing the moral norms accepted by a community, without assuming that members of communities can change their way of life at will. Moreover, it makes it possible to conceive of change in the moral norms of a community as affected by moral argument, but also by other factors involving change in other aspects of a community's way of life. However, as I will argue in the next section, in spite of this, moral relativists face obstacles in accounting for certain kinds of morally relevant change in ways of life, in particular what, following Rovane, I have called "directed social change."

3.2. Moral Relativism and the “Hypertraditional Society”

Because moral relativists understand moral norms as dispersed throughout a whole way of life, regulating diverse and complex social practices, they are in principle well placed to give a plausible account of morally relevant change in the way of life of different communities. However, in fact, moral relativists rarely address the question of change in ways of life.¹³⁰ One reason for this is that moral relativists tend to focus on questions arising from a synchronic perspective, such as, how to deal with members of other communities given moral conflict and how to remain confident in one’s own commitments.¹³¹ Questions arising from a diachronic perspective, such as the question of morally relevant change in practices, by contrast, remain largely unaddressed. This kind of negligence of the question of change need not be a problem. *Prima facie*, it seems like moral relativists could easily supply an account of morally relevant change in ways of life if necessary. However, the focus on questions arising from a synchronic perspective is not the only barrier for moral relativists to account for morally relevant change in the practices of a community. In addition, moral relativists often make assumptions about communities that make it difficult to account for the possibility of morally relevant social change, in particular, directed social change.

This is because in order to formulate their position as a plausible explanation of actual moral inter-group conflicts, moral relativists must engage in a certain kind of idealization. Moral relativists commit to *Plurality*, that is, the claim that there are (or at least could be) different communities living according to different moral norms (see Chapter 1.1.). *Plurality* presupposes that it is possible to distinguish communities from one another. In order to facilitate this, moral relativists tend to assume that communities can be clearly individuated; that is, they tend to implicitly assume that for any individual, it can be clearly determined whether they belong to a given community and that any given individual belongs to one and only one community. The assumption that communities are in this sense well-defined is in turn supported by a notion of communities as self-contained and isolated from one another. Although this is rarely discussed explicitly, the notion of different communities that emerges

¹³⁰ Harman is somewhat of an exception as he discusses the possibility of change in moral agreements through “re-negotiation.” I will discuss this aspect of his view in Chapter 4.4.2.

¹³¹ I discuss how moral relativists deal with these questions in detail in Chapter 2. Williams presents an exception to the rule that moral relativists assume a synchronic perspective when discussing moral relativism. He distinguishes diachronic and synchronic variation of “systems of beliefs” (Williams 1975, 220) and develops his distinction of “notional” and “real” confrontations between systems of beliefs with respect to historical examples. Many confrontations with the belief systems of groups of people living in the distant past, such as the outlooks of “a Greek Bronze Age chief, or a mediaeval Samurai” (1975, 224), are notional confrontations for anyone living nowadays. However, although Williams does address questions arising from a diachronic perspective in some sense, he only addresses the question of appraisal as it appears from a diachronic perspective, but not the question of change in “systems of beliefs” over time.

portrays them as territorially separated. This comes out particularly clearly in the context of Rovane's version of relativism as "Multimundialism," which pictures members of different communities as inhabiting different "worlds" and maintains that they have "nothing to teach, and nothing to learn" (Rovane 2013, 10) from one another.

In addition, moral relativists commit to *Exclusiveness*, that is, the claim that the moral norms inherent in the practices of different communities are, in a certain sense, incompatible (see Chapter 1.1.). Therefore, moral relativists have to assume that communities are sufficiently distinct from one another. In order to emphasize this difference, moral relativists often rely on a contrast between members of the same community, which are portrayed as very similar to each other, and members of different communities, which are portrayed as very different from each other. That is, moral relativists tend to emphasize conflict *between* different moral communities and downplay conflict *within* moral communities. Another way to put this point is to say that they focus on inter-group disagreement, that is, disagreement between members of different groups, at the expense of intra-group disagreement, that is, disagreement between members of the same group.¹³² The ensuing view portrays moral communities as *internally homogenous*, in the sense that there is agreement on moral matters between members of one and the same community. An example is Velleman's discussion of patterns of admiration, in which he draws on the fact that different communities admire different people in order to undermine the idea that admiration is a matter of who is objectively admirable. In this context, he claims that "communities *converge within themselves* but *diverge from one another* with respect to whom they admire" (Velleman 2015, 88, my emphasis, see also 2015, 90).

Moral group relativists thus often assume that moral communities are *well-defined*, *self-contained*, and *internally homogenous*. These assumptions, in turn, support each other. For example, if communities have clear boundaries and there is little exchange and contact between communities, it is more likely that they will end up being internally homogenous. Moral relativists, therefore, often picture communities in a way that likens them to what Williams has called a "hypertraditional society." Williams introduces the term "hypertraditional society" in the context of a discussion of the role of thick ethical concepts as follows:

Let us assume, artificially, that we are dealing with a society that is maximally homogenous and minimally given to general reflection; its members simply, all of them, use certain ethical

¹³² I discuss how moral relativists deal with the question of inter-group disagreement in detail in Chapter 2.

concepts of this sort [i.e. thick ethical concepts, K.S.]. (We may call it the ‘hypertraditional’ society.) (Williams 1985, 142)¹³³

A similar observation is made by Moody-Adams, who takes it to be “a fundamental shortcoming of standard relativist views” that they tend “to concentrate on the *differences* between cultures at the expense of facts about cultural overlap, continuity, and similarity” (Moody-Adams 2002, 64). Moody-Adams claims that moral relativists rely on assumptions made by leading anthropologists of the twentieth century, such as E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, and Margaret Mead (2002, 4). These assumptions concern the notion of a “culture,” which Moody-Adams characterizes as “the way of life of a social group” (2002, 225, n2, see also 2002, 15).¹³⁴ According to Moody-Adams, traditional anthropologists rely on the following assumptions: “that cultures are internally integrated wholes, that cultures are fundamentally self-contained and isolable sets of practices and beliefs, and that cultural influence on belief and action must be understood deterministically” (2002, 21). She argues that moral relativists have to share these assumptions because metaethical relativism is premised on what Moody-Adams calls “descriptive cultural relativism”:

Descriptive cultural relativism is the claim that differences in the moral practices of diverse social groups generate “ultimate” or “fundamental” moral disputes, disputes that are neither reducible to non-moral disagreement nor susceptible of rational resolution – disputes, that is, that are in principle irresolvable. (2002, 15)

Moody-Adams claims that even versions of moral relativism that do not make explicit reference to anthropological results, such as Harman’s, implicitly rely on this claim (2002, 18–22).¹³⁵

Moody-Adams also points out how the assumption that cultures are “self-contained and isolable” is supported by the *synchronic* focus of many moral relativists. On the one hand, the idea is supported by discounting inter-connections between cultures in the course of history “that have produced the kind of overlap and continuity between cultures that always blur cultural boundaries” (2002, 66). On the other hand, the idea is supported by discounting the fact that cultures themselves evolve over time and thus have “complex *internal* histories” (2002, 68, see also 2002, 79). The assumption that communities are isolated is particularly

¹³³ I will discuss Williams’s view of thick concepts in Chapter 4.4.3.

¹³⁴ Moody-Adams recognizes that anthropologists no longer rely on the assumptions about cultures that she criticizes (2002, 53f). Her criticism is thus not meant to apply to contemporary anthropology.

¹³⁵ I will assess Moody-Adams’s claims about the relationship between what she calls descriptive cultural relativism and metaethical relativism in section 3.4. For now, it is only important to see why she takes her criticism of traditional anthropology to have any purchase on relativism.

problematic in light of the fact that there have been important interconnections between many actual communities in the course of history and, as Moody-Adams points out: “Not all of the relevant cultural exchanges have been voluntary or deliberate. Some have resulted from large-scale social, political, and economic disruptions: colonization, conquest, and slavery and the expansion of economic trade” (2002, 67). In addition, Moody-Adams offers a possible explanation for why communities are often imagined as internally homogenous in the context of discussions of relativism by appealing to the implicit assumption that “enculturation” – “the process of being educated into a way of life” (2002, 21) – is deterministic. That is, moral relativists often implicitly assume that the way agents are brought up determines what they take to be morally right without leaving any room for individual deviation or critical reflection. If enculturation completely determines the moral beliefs of members of a community, then it is not surprising that they will agree.

The assumption that communities are internally homogenous, clearly delineated, and self-contained, which underlies many versions of moral relativism, conflicts with our empirical evidence about communities. No group is completely homogenous and without internal conflict, and the relationship between a moral agent and their tradition is more complex than simple conformity and agreement. Furthermore, the boundaries of communities are often unclear and membership might be a matter of degree or subject to change. It is in many cases possible for one individual agent to be a member of more than one community. In addition, actual communities are rarely ever completely isolated from one another. In the context of anthropology, this complexity leads to the problem of the authoritativeness of testimony. To illustrate this, Moody-Adams appeals to an article called “Why Cultural Anthropology Needs the Psychiatrist,” first published in 1938, in which the renowned linguist and anthropologist Edward Sapir reflects on the phenomenon of individual deviation (Moody-Adams 2002, 46f). Against the background of a traditional understanding of anthropology as being little concerned with the individual, but instead aiming at “conclusive statements which would hold for a given society as such” (Sapir 1984, 569), he reports the following experience: “I remember being rather shocked than pleased when in my student days I came across such statements in J. O. Dorsey’s ‘Omaha Sociology’ as ‘Two Crows denies this.’” (1984, 569). Sapir further describes the problematic passages as follows:

Apparently Two Crows, a perfectly good and authoritative Indian, could presume to rule out of court the very existence of a custom or attitude or belief vouched for by some other Indian, equally good and authoritative. Unless one wishes to dismiss the implicit problem raised by contradictory statements by assuming that Dorsey, the anthropologist, misunderstood one, or

both, of his informants, one would have to pause for a while and ponder the meaning of the statement that “Two Crows denies this.” (1984, 570)

Sapir looks for explanations of the deviant testimony in the personal experience of Two Crows and concludes that Two Crows, though in disagreement with other members of his community, was not wrong (1984, 573f). Based on this, he advocates a different understanding of anthropology, on which it is concerned with the individual and proceeds in the “opposite direction.” It takes as its starting points not general statements about a culture, but “what a given number of human beings accustomed to live with each other actually think and do” (1984, 574).¹³⁶ Commenting on Sapir’s treatment of this episode, Moody-Adams draws a different conclusion. According to her, the cultural complexity that is epitomized in deviant testimony presents a serious challenge to traditional anthropology because it points to the phenomenon of “social differentiation.” “Social differentiation” refers to the fact that there are different social positions in a community, which offer different perspectives on a shared way of life:

[E]ven in traditional societies a person occupies more than one social role, and the social institutions that define these roles serve as varied paths by which culturally shaped patterns of belief and behavior are transmitted. These paths for the transmission of culture ultimately generate a wider variety of “positions” or perspectives, both inside and outside any culture, from which it is possible to reflect on the elements of that culture. [...] The universality of social differentiation simply renders implausible the idea that there might be a single integrated and consistent “internal point of view” on any culture. In any society – simply by virtue of social differentiation and its historical effects – there are always multiple and distinct ways of being a cultural “insider”. (Moody-Adams 2002, 68)

Examples for differences that are relevant in this respect include differences in gender, but also differences in material well-being, political or religious authority, and even age (2002, 68). The phenomenon of social differentiation undermines the idea that there is a single integrated perspective “from within” on a culture. There are always different “insider” standpoints due to the different social roles and positions that exist in all societies, even traditional ones. For the anthropologist, this leads to the following problem: given that different members of a community might produce different testimony about their shared way of life, how to decide who is authoritative? This has led to heated debate about the value of ethnographic studies that rely on the testimony of members of one social group and discount

¹³⁶ The article concerns the relationship between anthropology and psychiatry because, according to Sapir: “This mode of thinking is, of course, essentially psychiatric” (1984, 574). Therefore, psychiatric methods can help the anthropologist. However, in conclusion Sapir also points out that he does not think psychiatry in its current state can fulfill this task, but rather a possible future development of it (1984, 576f).

the testimony of other social groups (2002, 47–49). Moody-Adams takes this to be a problem not only for traditional anthropology, but also for descriptive cultural relativism, which relies on a similar understanding of culture. This is because descriptive cultural relativism depends on the possibility of drawing a clear-cut contrast between different cultures:

The moral practices of real human communities – unlike the ideal moral systems constructed by moral philosophers, often in an effort to reconstruct rationally a given set of moral practices – exhibit a fundamentally non-integrated complexity that renders them resistant to the kinds of judgments that must figure in the descriptive relativist’s contrasts. (2002, 44)

There are thus principled reasons why conceiving of communities along the lines of what Williams calls the “hypertraditional society” conflicts with our evidence about what communities are actually like.¹³⁷ However, moral relativists are generally aware of the fact that the relevant assumptions are false. As, for example, Velleman points out, communities are not well-defined and cannot be clearly individuated. Rather, they have “vague and porous boundaries” (Velleman 2015, 1, n2). Moreover, it is not the case that individuals belong to “one and only one community” (2015, 76, n2). All of these assumptions are strictly speaking false, but, according to Velleman, idealizations that are justified insofar as they help theorize (2015, 1, n2, 2015, 55, n2, 2015, 76, n2). Williams too does not take the hypertraditional society he envisages to be realistic. In the context of his discussion of the possibility of ethical knowledge, he writes:

In many traditional societies themselves there is some degree of reflective questioning and criticism, and this is an important fact. It is for the sake of the argument, to separate the issues, that I have been using the idea of the hypertraditional society where there is no reflection. (Williams 1985, 146)

However, even though the relevant assumptions have the status of idealizations, they can be problematic nevertheless. This is because idealizations are not innocuous. They can be problematic in case they abstract away from facts that are relevant to the topic at hand.¹³⁸ Arguably, this is the case once we turn our attention towards the topic of morally relevant social change. Conceiving of different communities on the model of what Williams calls the “hypertraditional” society obscures features of the situation that are relevant to accounting for

¹³⁷ While conflicts over the moral norms inherent in the practices shared by communities are a feature of contemporary social experience, it is sometimes argued that this is specific to the conditions of modernity. This has to do with what Moody-Adams calls an “assumption of the allegedly ‘superior’ reflectiveness of modern as opposed to traditional societies” (2002, 85). However, Moody-Adams’s considerations about social differentiation make plausible that conflict is a pervasive feature of the moral life of any community with a certain degree of complexity.

¹³⁸ That idealizations can be problematic in this way is a theme of feminist critique of metaethics (Srinivasan 2018; Holroyd 2013).

certain kinds of social change. In particular, the assumptions moral relativists tend to make about communities make it difficult to account for the possibility of directed social change. This is because for directed social change to be possible, members of communities must be able to distance themselves from the norms generally accepted by their community and critically reflect on them. This kind of criticism would, in turn, likely lead to conflict between members of the same community, that is, to moral intra-group, rather than moral inter-group disagreements. On a relativist view, there is typically limited room for these phenomena of deviation, heterogeneity, and “socially internal criticism,” in the sense that agents criticize the practice of their own communities. Rather, moral relativists focus on the question of whether criticism of the practices of communities other than one’s own is possible (see Chapter 2.4.2.). They thus abstract away from features of the situation that are necessary in order to account for the phenomenon of directed social change. The mechanisms of social differentiation that Moody-Adams discusses undermine this assumption of homogeneity. Social differentiation plays an important role in explaining internal heterogeneity, deviation, and internal conflict. It helps explain why members of a community that share a way of life will never be completely homogenous and why internal conflict and criticism are pervasive features of moral life. The phenomena Moody-Adams highlights in her discussion of cultures are thus exactly the kind of phenomena that can help explain the possibility of directed social change, which can play an important role with respect to the possibility of moral progress.

To conclude, moral relativists tend to assume that communities are internally homogenous, clearly delineated, and self-contained. These assumptions are not only in conflict with empirical evidence about what communities are like; they make it difficult for moral relativists to account for a certain kind of change in ways of life. Because they abstract away from internal complexities, moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of directed social change, which depends on the possibility of critical reflection, socially internal criticism and internal conflict. That is, the idealizations relativists tend to make obscure potential fault lines that can help explain why there is change in moral norms in general and why it sometimes occurs as a result of directed social change. Accounts of morally relevant change in the practices of communities are, thus, not only absent from discussions of moral relativism; but many versions of moral relativism in fact face serious difficulties in accounting for an important kind of morally relevant change in ways of life. This has consequences for whether and in what way they can account for the possibility of moral progress. Before I turn to the question whether moral relativists need to make these assumptions about communities, in the next section, I will examine the consequences of these assumptions in more detail.

3.3. On Siding with the Abuser

Moral relativists tend to assume that communities are clearly delineated, mutually isolated, and internally homogenous. Although moral relativists know that these assumptions are strictly speaking false, these idealizations cause difficulties when it comes to explaining morally relevant change in the practices of communities, in particular, directed social change. The problem with these assumptions is thus not necessarily that they are empirically implausible but that they undermine the moral relativist's ability to account for a certain kind of morally relevant social change. In addition, they can lead to problematic consequences. These consequences can be illustrated with respect to a discussion of the ancient Japanese practice of "*tsujigiri*," which Mary Midgley, who introduces the example, describes as follows:

There is, it seems, a verb in classical Japanese which means 'to try out one's sword on a chance wayfarer'. (The word is *tsujigiri*, literally 'crossroads-cut'.) A samurai sword had to be tried out because, if it was to work properly, it had to slice through someone at a single blow, from the shoulder to the opposite flank. Otherwise, the warrior bungled his stroke. This could injure his honour, offend his ancestors, and even let down his emperor. So tests were needed, and wayfarers had to be expended. Any wayfarer would do – provided, of course, that he was not another Samurai. (Midgley 1983, 69f)

Midgley introduces this example in the context of a discussion of a position she calls "moral isolationism," which "consists in simply denying that we can ever understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgements about it" (1983, 69). In the course of her discussion, Midgley considers how a "moral isolationist" would react to the drastic example of *tsujigiri*. She takes him to present an argument along the lines of the following:

He will try to fill in the background, to make me understand the custom, by explaining the exalted ideals of discipline and devotion which produced it. He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally. He may well suggest that this is a healthier attitude than our own obsession with security. He may add, too, that the wayfarers did not seriously mind being bisected, that in principle they accepted the whole arrangement. (1983, 72f)

Importantly, the moral isolationist's answer, as Midgley imagines it, includes the idea of consent, that is, the idea that the practice of *tsujigiri* is accepted by all members of the relevant community, even by those who suffer its severe costs. Midgley's point is that in reacting in this way, the moral isolationist implicitly assumes – contrary to what he claims – that *it is* possible to understand and judge across cultural borders. In particular, she points out

that, in relying on the notion of consent, the isolationist already applies his own standards to the practice of a different community:

It is suggested that sudden bisection is quite in order, *provided* that it takes place between consenting adults. I cannot now discuss how conclusive this justification is. What I am pointing out is simply that it can only work if we believe that *consent* can make such a transaction respectable – and this is a thoroughly modern and Western idea. It would probably never occur to the Samurai; if it did, it would surprise him very much. (1983, 73)

The significance of the notion of consent in Midgley’s discussion is thus that it is a standard associated with the context from which the practice of *tsujigiri* is evaluated by the imagined moral isolationist, but that is presumably foreign to the context in which it was practiced.

In her commentary on Midgley’s discussion, Moody-Adams provides a slightly different reading of the role consent plays in the example. She takes the point of Midgley’s discussion to be a challenge to “relativist assumptions about moral uniformity” (Moody-Adams 2002, 81). Moody-Adams submits that a “relativist of distance” will give a similar response to the example as the “moral isolationist” Midgley is concerned with.¹³⁹ She expects them to take criticism to be inappropriate because it amounts to a challenge of “the integrity of uniform cultural approval of the practice” (2002, 81). Moody-Adams reads Midgley as arguing against the plausibility of this appeal to uniform approval:

But, as Midgley suggests, the assumption that there was uniform cultural approval of the practice requires a further, problematic assumption: that endangered passersby would have generally *consented* to be sacrificed to the ritual [...]. Midgley wisely urges her readers to consider whether this is a plausible result. Contemporary readers may lack sufficient evidence to license a determinate claim on the matter, yet the familiar human distaste for unnecessary suffering suggests that their perspective would have created “cultural space” in medieval Japan for internal criticism of samurai practices. (2002, 81f)¹⁴⁰

What Moody-Adams thus finds striking about the perceived answer of the moral isolationist or “relativist of distance” is not that – contrary to what they hold explicitly – it shows that understanding and evaluating the practices of other communities is possible. Rather, she emphasizes that by assuming that even a practice that obviously afflicts great harm on some

¹³⁹ As Williams’s “relativism of distance” is primarily about the point of appraisal of practices other than one’s own, it has a lot in common with the position Midgley calls “isolationism.” I discuss the relation between moral relativism and the possibility of criticism in Chapter 2.4.2.

¹⁴⁰ Moody-Adams submits that Midgley asks the reader to consider the plausibility of consent in the case of *tsujigiri*. However, the only thing Midgley says that comes close to this is the following: “It is our standard. In applying it, too, we are likely to make another typically Western demand. We shall ask for good factual evidence that the wayfarers actually do have this *rather surprising* taste – that they are willing to be bisected” (Midgley 1983, 73, my emphasis).

members of a community will be unanimously accepted by all of its members, their answer obliterates the internal complexity of cultures. By contrast, she takes it to be much more likely that the perspective of those suffering from the practice of *tsujigiri* would create space for socially internal criticism, that is, criticism of a practice by members of the community that practices it. Moody-Adams thus gives a slightly different interpretation of the example than the one initially suggested by Midgley. Her point is not about the possibility of understanding and evaluating a given community “from the outside,” but about the internal structure of communities. Moody-Adams points out that the answer of the moral isolationist or relativist of distance assumes a kind of internal homogeneity that no community actually has. This connects to her discussion of social differentiation as leading to differences in perspective within one community. Her interpretation of the example highlights a further aspect of this notion: social differentiation is not only due to different roles and positions within a community, but can also be linked to relations of social inequality. As Moody-Adams points out, there are agents at the margin of any given society who have a specific point of view:

[E]very society in some way confines some persons or groups to its margins, creating what I call “internal outsiders.” Slave societies are one obvious and extreme example. But persons may be consigned to the social margins in a variety of ways: by virtue of economic status, gender, physical appearance, behavior, sexual preference, or age. (2002, 68)

The perspective of these “internal outsiders” is of specific importance because, according to Moody-Adams, it enables socially internal criticism. The reason that practices like *tsujigiri*, which afflict great harm on parts of a community, will likely be criticized by members of the community that practices it is not only social differentiation in general, but a special kind of social differentiation that has to do with social inequality.

The relevant kind of social inequality can be understood in terms of unequal social power relations. In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowledge*, Miranda Fricker characterizes social power as “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions” (Fricker 2007, 13).¹⁴¹ What Fricker calls “identity power,” that is, operations of power that significantly depend on “shared imaginative conceptions of social identity” (2007, 14), plays a particularly important role for relations of social inequality in a community. When identity power is at work, agents can control others in virtue of the social type they are, either “actively” by acting in certain ways or “passively,” just in virtue of exemplifying the relevant social type. Alternatively, identity power can work purely “structurally,” constraining

¹⁴¹ I will discuss Fricker’s analysis of kinds of epistemic injustice, in particular hermeneutical injustice, in detail in Chapter 5.3.

how agents interact without one of them exercising “agential” power over the other (2007, 9–17). These kinds of difference in social position give rise to a particular kind of social differentiation: the perspective of more powerful members of a community differs from that of less powerful members. This kind of social differentiation can help explain the possibility of internal criticism and directed social change. The point emphasized by Midgley’s example and Moody-Adams’s discussion of it is, thus, not only that generalizations about what norms are shared by a given community are difficult to make because communities are not in fact clearly delineated and internally homogenous. The problem is also that by abstracting away from this kind of internal complexities in theorizing, the moral relativist obscures an important aspect of communal life, namely, internal differences in social status and, therefore, power.

Fricker emphasizes this point in the context of a discussion of different “styles of moral relativism” (2013). She observes that moral relativism is often motivated as the best explanation of moral difference and interprets Midgley’s discussion of the example of *tsujigiri* and Moody-Adams’s comment on it as undermining this kind of argument:

[T]here is a tendency to read moral relativism off the surface of foreign moral practices. However, this tendency is dangerous, for ‘moral practices’ – in the straightforward sense of what goes on apparently within the bounds of the morality of a given culture – can be a matter merely of what certain types can get away with, and others have resigned themselves to, rather than what the collective endorses as morally permissible, let alone good. (2013, 794)

Fricker submits the worry that “assuming that the existence of a certain bloody practice on the part of the Samurai warriors in medieval Japan signals the moral acceptability of that practice in medieval Japan [...] may amount to little more than a way of *siding with the abuser* (2013, 794, my emphasis). That is, in assuming that whatever is in fact practiced in a community without open contestation is acceptable to all the members of a community the moral relativist might end up siding with privileged viewpoints within a community.

The point of Moody-Adams’s discussion is that the appeal to consent in Midgley’s example attempts to reestablish a homogeneity that no actual moral community has. While it is implausible to assume that there is complete agreement between members of a community; it is much more plausible to assume that the suffering the practice afflicts on some members of a community will create space for the internal criticism of this practice. In addition to this, Fricker points to the worry that, in abstracting away from the internal complexities of communities, moral relativists will not only fail to give an accurate account, but that they will

in fact “side with the abuser.”¹⁴² That is, in trying to reconstruct the shared way of life of a community in a unified and coherent way, they might affirm the perspective of a dominant group and neglect the perspective of a group that is disadvantaged. Although the disadvantaged might not always be in a position to openly contest what is going on, it is likely that their position affords them a perspective on the shared way of life from which opposition becomes possible. Abstracting away from heterogeneity and unequal participation thus obscures possible sources of criticism and dissent. As Fricker notes: “Real, evolving moral cultures are never disconnected from the dissenting voices of those on the losing end, however muffled some of them might be” (2013, 795).

Sonia Sikka makes a similar observation. As Sikka puts it, what is absent from the notion of a “culture” as it is appealed to in the context of versions of moral group relativism, is a sensitivity to the effect unequal power relations have on the development and transmission of ways of life. She points out that this issue is distinct from the question whether cultures are internally homogenous and clearly individuable. It is possible for members of a culture to be more or less univocal about certain norms, while the norms in question were at the same time developed and passed on under conditions of social exclusion (Sikka 2012, 56). As Sikka emphasizes, versions of moral relativism that do not make room for the possibility that the norms communities actually developed are subject to the effects of unequal power relations “are not only missing a component; they are positively distorting” (2012, 58). This supports the view that idealizations, even if they are consciously made, can have problematic consequences. In order to address the problem that she identifies for moral relativism, Sikka suggests distinguishing between those norms inherent in a culture that are part of “ideology” from those that deserve the label “moral.” While norms that are part of ideology might appear to be moral norms, they in fact serve the interests of the powerful. Sikka’s view amounts to a restricted version of moral relativism, on which while the ways of life of different communities determine what is morally right, they are subject to significant constraints. In the background of her discussion is a distinction between two different uses of the term “moral.” On the one hand, the term “moral” can be used in a “sociological” sense to pick out a certain subset of the norms actually developed by a community, which have to do with such things as cooperation and character ideals. This is the way “moral” is used most often in the context of discussions of moral relativism. On the other hand, the term “moral”

¹⁴² A similar remark is made by Scanlon: “It seems that those who defend relativism generally focus on how moral requirements could give agents reason to act, while those who oppose it focus on how these requirements could ensure that the victims of these actions have reason to accept their results (a characterization of the motives of anti-relativists that might have made Nietzsche smile, even though he did not consider himself a relativist)” (Scanlon 1998, 406, n11).

can be used in an “evaluative” sense to refer only to those norms and ideals that are recognizable as moral and that one takes to be morally unobjectionable. This is how Sikka uses the term. While I will continue to use “moral” in the sociological sense common in discussions of moral relativism, I agree with Sikka that it is likely that unequal power relations shape the moral norms and character ideals prevalent in a community at least to some extent. It is therefore possible that norms that count as genuine moral norms on the account of morality given as part of a relativist metaethics will contain distortions of the kind Sikka discusses.¹⁴³

Moral relativism is often perceived as a radical position that destabilizes confidence in our moral commitments by pointing to the contingencies underlying our moral beliefs. In contrast to this image of relativism, it follows from the above discussion that moral relativism has what one might call “structurally conservative” consequences. Jaeggi characterizes normatively internal criticism as structurally, but not necessarily politically conservative (see Chapter 2.4.2.). In a similar way, moral relativism is structurally conservative because it focuses on the moral norms in fact developed by communities and takes these norms to determine what is morally right or wrong. Moral relativism therefore privileges the behavior and pattern of evaluation currently dominant in a community.¹⁴⁴ This is perhaps also the reason why in the Introduction to *How We Get Along*, Velleman writes:

Among the few and tentative practical implications that can be derived from my brand of metaethics, some have surprised even me, and not always pleasantly. For example, I find myself committed to taking a more conservative attitude toward conventional morality than I am accustomed to take. I’d like to think that my willingness to entertain this attitude is a sign of intellectual honesty. It may just be a sign of age. (Velleman 2009, 4)¹⁴⁵

The example of the practice of *tsujigiri* – a practice that has grave consequences for some members of a community – thus serves to illustrate different points. While Midgley originally introduces the example in order to argue against the moral isolationist’s conviction that we cannot understand and evaluate practices of distant communities, Moody-Adams and Fricker draw slightly different conclusions. They read the example and Midgley’s discussion of it as undermining the kind of assumptions about communities that moral relativists tend to make, in particular the assumption that communities are internally homogenous. Moody-Adams and

¹⁴³ I will return to Sikka’s discussion of ideology in Chapter 5.4.

¹⁴⁴ Whether this kind of conservative attitude towards conventional morality that is an implication of moral relativism coincides with what is called politically “conservative” in a given context depends on the details of the case at hand.

¹⁴⁵ The situation is further complicated by the fact that Velleman does not identify his position as leading to relativism in the context of this book (see 2009, 162–64). I will discuss this issue in Chapter 4.

Fricker emphasize that, in light of harmful practices, this assumption of homogeneity can serve to mask important differences in perspective, in particular differences due to unequal social power relations. Focusing on the patterns of behavior and evaluation that are dominant in a given community at the expense of individuals and sub-groups that deviate from this perspective can serve to reinforce this dominant perspective. As Fricker points out, the assumption of intra-group uniformity can thus lead to an inadvertent allegiance between relativists and socially privileged groups within communities. The assumptions moral relativists tend to make about communities are thus problematic for a variety of reasons. Given the multiplicity of perspectives on a shared way of life generated by different positions in a community that Moody-Adams emphasizes, these assumptions lead to an inaccurate portrayal of communities that undermines resources to account for the possibility of change in moral practices, in particular directed social change that is the result of internal criticism and intra-group conflict. In addition, they can lead the relativist to inadvertently “side with the abuser.” In order to avoid these problematic consequences and to get the kind of complexities into view that can explain the possibility of directed social change, moral relativists need to abandon these assumptions about communities. In the next section, I will turn to the question whether moral relativists can hold on to their main commitments without relying on these problematic assumptions.

3.4. Moral Progress and the Dynamics of Social Change

While I agree with Moody-Adams that many moral relativists tend – to a greater or lesser extent – to assume that communities are clearly delineated, mutually isolated, and internally homogenous, and that they have reason to do so having to do with their commitment to *Plurality* and *Exclusiveness*, it remains an open question whether these assumptions are indeed necessary for moral relativism. Do we have to give up relativism together with these admittedly problematic assumptions? Moody-Adams’s criticism of the methodological assumptions of anthropology is supposed to undermine an argument for moral relativism, which is based on what she calls descriptive cultural relativism (see Chapter 3.2.). On this view, empirical observation shows that there are “ultimate” or “fundamental” moral disagreements between members of different communities, that is, disagreements that are in principle irresolvable. According to Moody-Adams, descriptive cultural relativism “is best treated as a descriptive claim because it purports to state an observable fact” (Moody-Adams 2002, 15). However, it is hard to see how the claim that moral disputes are irresolvable, rather than unresolved, could be based on empirical observation in the first place. Therefore, the relativist’s argument based on actual differences in moral views has to be much weaker; it has to take the form of an “inference to the best explanation” (see Chapter 2.1.). One possible argument for relativism is thus to try to establish relativism as the “best explanation” of the empirically observable fact that there are moral disputes which have not been resolved. This argument is not conclusive because different rival explanations for the fact of moral difference are available. Moody-Adams’s argument does not undermine the basis of this argument, as she does not deny that *there are* serious moral disputes: “My challenge to descriptive cultural relativism is not a denial that differences in the moral practices and beliefs of different cultures may generate *serious* moral disagreements” (2002, 16). Therefore, relativists need not rely on what Moody-Adams calls descriptive cultural relativism.

The second line of argument Moody-Adams develops against the relativist tries to show not only that there are important differences within communities, but also that there are important similarities across communities. According to Moody-Adams, this shows that “serious moral disagreements – if they are genuinely moral disagreements – will always be disagreements in the secondary ‘details’ of morality, not in the ultimate or fundamental principles and beliefs” (2002, 16). She further holds that “it would not be possible even to recognize some dispute as a *moral* disagreement if ‘ultimate’ or ‘fundamental’ moral disagreement were really occurring” (2002, 16). However, relativists are not committed to the claim that there is “radical difference” between different communities; that is, they are not

committed to the claim that different communities share nothing in common (see Chapter 1.1.). To the contrary, the relativist has to allow that there is something the moral norms of different communities have in common and that makes them moral norms.¹⁴⁶

While Moody-Adams's criticisms make plausible that the assumptions that underlie what she calls descriptive cultural relativism do not hold up to critical scrutiny, it does not show that relativism has to be given up together with these assumptions. As Moody-Adams admits, adopting the more complex view of cultures that she advocates does not make it impossible to distinguish between different cultures: "To be sure, a penetrable boundary is still a boundary; I do not deny that the concept of identifiable cultures makes sense" (2002, 67). As mentioned above, moral relativists often treat the assumption that communities are clearly delineated, isolated and internally homogenous as part of a simplifying idealization (Chapter 3.1.). Moreover, they commit to these assumptions to different extents. Wong, for example, emphasizes the pervasiveness of conflict concerning morality, between as well as within traditions of moral thought. This is how he argues for the value of "accommodation" as a constraint on all moralities:

Given the inevitability of serious disagreement within all kinds of moral traditions that have any degree of complexity, a particular sort of ethical value becomes especially important for the stability and integrity of these traditions and societies. Let me call this value "accommodation." To have this value is to be committed to supporting noncoercive and constructive relations with others although they have ethical beliefs that conflict with one's own. (Wong 2006, 64)

In a similar vein, Williams writes with respect to his idea of a hypertraditional society:

In any case, it is artificial to treat these matters as if they always involved two clearly self-contained cultures. A fully individuable culture is at best a rare thing. Cultures, subcultures, fragments of cultures, constantly meet one another and exchange and modify practices and attitudes. (Williams 1985, 158)¹⁴⁷

Thus, there are at least some moral relativists who work with a more complex idea of communities. This shows that, although Moody-Adams is right in pointing out that relativists rely on problematic assumptions about communities, a more nuanced understanding of moral communities is compatible with moral relativism. Acknowledging that communities are

¹⁴⁶ I will return to this point in Chapter 4.3.

¹⁴⁷ Moody-Adams challenges whether Williams thinks of the hypertraditional society only in terms of an idealization: "At one point Williams assumes – in his words 'artificially' – the possibility of a 'hypertraditional' society that is 'maximally homogenous and minimally given to general reflection' (Williams 1985, 142-148). But in discussing the relativism of distance, he often blurs the line between a philosopher's artifice and historical reality" (Moody-Adams 2002, 231, n18).

internally complex and stand in complicated relationships of exchange, leading to similarities as well as differences, does not rule out the main idea behind relativism, according to which what is morally right or wrong depends on the practices of different communities. However, it does make the resulting picture of different communities more complicated. Versions of moral relativism that accept a more complicated and, therefore, more realistic view of communities and their ways of life are thus at least in principle possible.

That moral group relativism is compatible with a more nuanced understanding of communities matters for the question whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. Adopting a more complex notion of a community's shared way of life allows the relativist to account for internal deviation and conflict as a reason for morally relevant change in the way of life of different communities, such as directed social change. While accounting for these "dynamics of social change" is not by itself sufficient to account for the possibility of moral progress, it can contribute to such an account. This can be illustrated with respect to Roth's discussion of what she calls an "evolutionary" conception of moral progress. One reason why accounting for moral progress presents a challenge for moral relativists is that moral progress is often conceptualized in terms of what Roth calls "utopian" conceptions of progress, according to which progress consists in the approximation of an ideal end-state. Utopian conceptions of moral progress are incompatible with the commitments of moral relativism, in particular, with their commitment to *Plurality*, according to which there are different moral communities that live according to different practices. On a relativist view, there is no reason why we should expect this to change in the course of progress (see Chapter 1.4.). Roth introduces "evolutionary" conceptions of moral progress as an alternative to utopian conceptions that is based on Kuhn's work in the philosophy of science:

An alternative picture of progress [...] is the evolutionary view, which we are familiar with in philosophy of science in Kuhn's work. Applying Kuhn's view to the ethical domain, we can imagine a conception of progress which involves radical moral transformations occurring in times of crisis. (Roth 2012, 385)

It is important to clarify in what sense Roth's notion of progress, which she develops with reference to Kuhn, can be described as "evolutionary." One way to understand the notion of an "evolutionary conception of progress" is as referring to a conception of what would constitute moral progress that is based on considerations about biological evolution. However, conceptions of moral progress of this kind face serious difficulties. As, for example, Dale Jamieson has pointed out, while it is plausible that evolution sets the parameters for the developments of morality, it is implausible that it determines or ought to determine the

content of morality. A notion of moral progress on which progress would be understood as any change enhancing biological fitness would, for example, be squarely at odds with our intuitive understanding of moral progress (Jamieson 2002, 321). This understanding of an evolutionary conception of moral progress is thus not very promising. It might even conjure up images of failed attempts to derive moral conclusions from biological premises, such as “social Darwinism,” “which appropriated the theory of evolution by natural selection to support unrestricted laissez-faire [capitalism, K.S.] at home and colonialism abroad” (Paul 2003, 292), as well as more recent attempts, which end up justifying social inequality and oppression based on biological claims about physiological and psychological differences between humans (see Wilson 2010b, 282).¹⁴⁸

On Roth’s understanding, evolutionary conceptions of moral progress have little to do with attempts to determine the content of morality by appeals to the evolutionary history of humanity. By contrast, the notion refers to conceptions of moral progress that rely on an analogy between the development of organisms through evolution and morally relevant social change. This is also the sense in which Kuhn’s notion of scientific progress can be described as “evolutionary.” However, precisely because it allows for radical transformations between different scientific paradigms occurring in times of crisis, it is controversial whether Kuhn’s account of scientific development vindicates scientific progress (see Chapter 1.4.). Roth also notes this:

[K]uhn’s picture is often accused of failing to sufficiently explain the objectivity and rationality of science; specifically, critics object that he cannot account for the progressiveness of science across paradigm shifts. Thus progress on Kuhn’s view is often thought to be secured only in local form – relative to a particular paradigm. (Roth 2012, 386)

Because the criteria for assessing scientific work change with a change of paradigm, it is not obvious how a change of paradigms can constitute scientific progress. Nevertheless, Kuhn is convinced that a satisfactory account of science must explain the progressiveness of science because of the “inextricable connections between our notions of science and of progress” (Kuhn 2012, 160): we associate science with progressiveness, and whether an activity counts

¹⁴⁸ As Diane B. Paul points out, the meaning of “social Darwinism” is “muddied” (Paul 2003, 232) for a variety of reasons. First of all, Darwin’s theory of evolution has been used as an argumentative resource for a variety of political groups, such as “laissez-faire” capitalists, as well as liberals, anarchists and socialists. While laissez-faire capitalists relied on an individualistic reading of the struggle for survival in the *Origin of Species*, supporting ideas of unrestricted competition and selection of the fittest within a society, socialists have relied on a collectivist reading, emphasizing the value of collaboration within a population (see 2003, 228f). Moreover, it is not completely clear what Darwin’s theory of evolution amounted to at different stages of its development, and whether “social Darwinists” relied on a specifically Darwinian understanding of evolution, as “Darwinism” was sometimes used to refer to theories of evolution in general (2003, 233). However, according to Paul, “social Darwinism” is most commonly used to refer to the combination of views mentioned above.

as scientific often depends on whether it is progressive. In order to account for scientific progress through paradigm shifts, Kuhn starts by explaining that the transition to the new paradigm has to appear as progress to the scientists. However, he submits: “Inevitably those remarks will suggest that the member of a mature scientific community is, like the typical character of Orwell’s *1984*, the victim of a history rewritten by the powers that be” (2012, 166). Against this impression, he emphasizes that, while the decision for a new paradigm ultimately depends on the consensus of a community – the community of scientists – this community has special characteristics. He concludes by pointing out that the notion of progress resulting from his account of scientific development is fairly different from the idea traditionally associated with scientific progress as an ever better approximation of the truth about an independent reality of nature: “In the sciences there need not be progress of another sort. We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth” (2012, 169).

The notion of scientific progress that Kuhn rejects conceptualizes progress in terms of an approximation of the truth. It thus corresponds to what Roth calls a “utopian” conception of progress in terms of an ideal end-state. This state would be reached once scientists have a true theory about all aspects of the world. Although it is unlikely that this state will ever be reached, it functions as a “regulative ideal” for the conception of progress in terms of an approach to truth. Kuhn’s discussion of scientific development presents an alternative to this picture of progress. His idea of scientific progress through scientific revolutions is based on an analogy between scientific development and Darwinian theory of evolution. The key aspect of this analogy, which Kuhn emphasizes, is that, just as Darwinian evolution, the resulting notion of scientific development is non-teleological:

The developmental process described in this essay has been a process of evolution *from* primitive beginnings – a process whose successive stages are characterized by an increasingly detailed and refined understanding of nature. But nothing that has been or will be said makes it a process of evolution *toward* anything. (2012, 169f)¹⁴⁹

On this alternative view, progress is not conceptualized in terms of an approximation of an ideal, but in terms of overcoming specific crises. Rather than getting us closer towards a specific goal, such as truth, progress gets us away from falsehood or failure. While utopian conceptions of progress are incompatible with the relativist’s key commitments, for example,

¹⁴⁹ Kuhn submits that it was this aspect of Darwin’s theory, the denial of a goal or plan, that lead to anxiety among contemporaries, rather than species change or the descent of man from apes, which were by then common ideas of pre-Darwinian evolutionary theory (2012, 170f).

to *Plurality*, evolutionary conceptions of progress such as Kuhn's are compatible with relativism.

Drawing on John Dewey's work in ethics, Roth develops a corresponding evolutionary conception of ethical progress. She conceptualizes progress in terms of "problem-resolving" and points out that this view is based "on a more general model of epistemic improvement" (Roth 2012, 387). A problem in the relevant sense arises "when we experience trouble, difficulty, or conflict – when there is disharmony amongst our empirical beliefs, our values, and the world" (2012, 391). This is in keeping with pragmatist philosophy, according to which we engage in inquiry in general and ethical inquiry in particular "when we experience a lack or a need" (2012, 391). The parallel to Kuhn is apparent. A problem in Roth's sense can be understood as analogous to a crisis that can afflict a paradigm if too many anomalies, that is, observations that cannot be explained in terms of the paradigm, occur. On the resulting "evolutionary" account of ethical progress, ethical progress is a local phenomenon that occurs when a particular problem is resolved.

Roth takes this account of progress to fare better with respect to what she calls the "Goldilocks problem" – the problem that conceptions of progress have to account for "rationality and objectivity" and the possibility of "radical revision of values" at the same time – than rival views (see Chapter 3.1.). However, it is not immediately clear how the notion of progress in terms of "problem-resolving" can deliver on this promise. As Roth notes, the notion of a problem as a tension between our values, empirical beliefs, and a recalcitrant experience is bound to a particular perspective. Both the question of how to describe a problem and how to assess a possible solution depend on relevant background assumptions and are thus subject to debate (2012, 392–97). In order to address the objection that problems could be resolved in morally abhorrent ways, Roth suggests the following two conditions on resolutions: "first, that a way of overcoming a problem counts as a real solution (and hence as progressive) only if it does not create more serious or intractable problems, and second, that what can count as a problem-solution depends importantly on background values" (2012, 394). However, while the idea that what can count as a suitable solution depends on the background values that give rise to a problem serves to rule out abhorrent proposals, it introduces another worry. In order to make good on the "radical revision of values" side of the "Goldilocks problem," Roth does not commit to the claim that these background values are exempt from revision. But this raises the question "what determines whether in a given case of problem-solving we should re-affirm values, revise them, or reject them" (2012, 396). I take it that this is why Roth says that an objection that is similar to the

claim that Kuhn cannot account for progress through paradigm-shifts applies to her evolutionary account of progress as well (2012, 386). In response to this problem, Roth appeals to the idea of understanding certain transitions as a “learning process” (2012, 401) and the idea of achieving a kind of coherence that is not only epistemic, but also practical and emotional (2012, 402f). However, she ultimately concedes that these additional assumptions cannot rule out the indeterminacy associated with what counts as an adequate solution to a particular problem (2012, 405f). Therefore, it seems that Roth’s evolutionary conception of ethical progress fails with respect to one side of the Goldilocks problem. While it can account for “radical revision of values,” it fails to account for the “rationality and objectivity” of progress. While Roth’s evolutionary conception of progress is thus very interesting from the perspective of moral relativists, because it gives an attractive account of moral progress that is not incompatible with moral relativism, it does not suffice in order to vindicate the possibility of moral progress.

To conclude, although I agree with Moody-Adams that moral group relativists tend to make problematic assumptions about moral communities, I do not think that moral relativism ultimately depends on these assumptions. Adopting a more nuanced and complex understanding of communities allows the relativist to account for intra-group disagreements that can potentially lead to morally relevant social change, in particular directed social change. In order to explain the possibility of conscious efforts to change the moral beliefs and practices prevalent in a community, moral relativists need to rely on a conception of communities that allows for internal complexities and conflict. This, in turn, would allow the moral relativist to go some way towards an “evolutionary” conception of progress by giving an account of the dynamics of morally relevant social change. While utopian accounts of progress, on which progress is understood in terms of an ever better approximation of an independent goal, are incompatible with the commitments of moral relativism, “evolutionary” conceptions of moral progress constitute an option for relativists to account for moral progress. According to evolutionary conceptions of progress, progress is the result of the resolution of specific crises. This corresponds to Kuhn’s conception of scientific progress through paradigm shifts. Following the analogy, moral conflict between members of the same community can be characterized as a crisis caused by “anomalies,” such as incongruities between different aspects of the shared set of moral norms and an agent’s or a group of agents’ experience, which is resolved when the paradigm gets amended or replaced.

In this chapter, I have explored whether moral relativists can account for morally relevant changes in the way of life of communities. As von Wright’s definition of progress in

terms of two components – change and goodness – makes evident, this is important for my overall argument because it bears on the question whether, and in what way, moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress (see Chapter 1.4.). In order to account for the possibility of moral progress, moral relativists have to both provide an account of the possibility of change in the moral norms accepted by a community and a standard with respect to which changes of this kind can be evaluated as being for the better or worse. I have argued that, although moral relativists are in principle well placed to give a plausible account of morally relevant social change, in fact, they rarely address the topic and face obstacles in doing so. This is because of simplifying assumptions about communities they tend to make. While moral relativists are generally aware that these assumptions are strictly speaking false and treat them as idealizations, they are nevertheless problematic. Because they obscure internal complexities, the resulting image of communities makes it difficult to account for phenomena of morally relevant social change, such as directed social change. In addition, in making these assumptions, moral relativists risk to inadvertently take sides with the privileged members of communities. However, in contrast to Moody-Adams, I have argued that moral relativism does not ultimately depend on these problematic assumptions about communities and that, at least in principle, moral relativism is compatible with a more complex image of communities. This has bearing on the question whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress because it allows the relativist to give a partial account of moral progress in terms of the “dynamics of social change.” However, as my discussion of Roth’s position showed, giving a detailed account of the dynamics of change is not sufficient in order to vindicate a notion of progress. What is needed in addition is a kind of standard for when an instance of social change constitutes moral progress. In the next chapter, I will turn to the question whether moral relativism is compatible with such a standard.

4. Moral Relativism and a Standard of Moral Progress

Moral relativists commit to *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry* (see Chapter 1.1.). There is reason to think that these commitments make it impossible for moral relativists to account for the possibility of moral progress. The underlying reasoning relies on the following assumptions about what accounting for the possibility of moral progress would amount to: (1) in order to be able to assess a change as being for the better or worse, a suitable standard is needed; (2) this standard needs to go beyond the moral norms of different communities; (3) in order for this standard to go beyond the moral norms of different communities, it has to be independent of and external to the concrete practices that are to be assessed. These requirements seem incompatible with the moral relativist's metaethical commitments, according to which there is no such standard. In fact, the required standard sounds a lot like the absolute moral norms that the relativist denies exist. In addition, it is sometimes assumed that progress must be conceived in terms of an ideal end-state. Because they presuppose a single end-state as the goal of progressive development, such conceptions of progress are in tension with the relativist's commitment to *Plurality* (see Chapter 1.4.). In contrast to this, Velleman argues that moral relativists *can* account for the possibility of moral progress. His argument can be understood as claiming not only that it is possible for moral relativists to account for moral progress, but that all versions of moral relativism that take a certain form – including his own version – already implicitly contain the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress.

In this chapter, I will reconstruct and analyze Velleman's argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. I will begin by showing how the claim that moral relativists can account for moral progress follows from Velleman's view of moral relativism (4.1.). Then, I will discuss Velleman's conception of morality and moral progress in more detail by drawing on some of his earlier work (4.2.). Subsequently, I will consider the question whether a view that can account for moral progress should be considered a version of relativism and what this implies for how to understand moral relativism (4.3.). Finally, I will show what Velleman's argument implies for the versions of moral relativism developed by Harman, Williams, Rovane, and Wong and draw some conclusions about the scope of Velleman's argument (4.4.).

4.1. Velleman on Moral Relativism and Moral Progress

That it *is* possible for moral relativists to account for the possibility of moral progress is a consequence of Velleman's view of moral relativism as he develops it in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism* (Velleman 2015). Velleman presents this view in two parts. In a first step, he develops what he takes to be the outline of the form a relativist metaethical theory should take; in a second step, he spells out the details of one particular version of moral relativism. Correspondingly, his argument that moral relativists can account for moral progress can be put in terms of the outline of the form a relativist metaethics, according to Velleman, should take or in terms of the more specific version of moral relativism he suggests.¹⁵⁰ Velleman's discussion focuses on practical reasons. He assumes that "morality obligates its subjects by being rationally binding on them – more specifically, by generating complete and compelling reasons for them to act, or to hold practical attitudes such as desires or intentions" (2015, 79, see also Chapter 1.2.4.). On his view, a moral relativist has to account for the possibility that the same facts can constitute different moral reasons for members of different communities. According to Velleman, relativists have to provide an account of moral reasons which allows for such variation.¹⁵¹ At the same time, Velleman argues that the relativist should not go as far as allowing that different communities reason in accord with different relationships between reasons and what they are reasons for because this would amount to stipulating different methods of practical reasoning. If the relativist were to claim that members of different communities reason according to different methods of practical reasoning, the question of validity they try to answer would recur on a different level. They would face the question: what makes all these different ways of practical reasoning normatively binding? It follows that a relativist metaethical theory that takes the form that Velleman suggests has to provide *one* account of what constitutes reasons for all communities, which at the same time allows that the same facts constitute different reasons for members of different communities (2015, 80). That is to say, Velleman bases his version of moral relativism on an account of practical reason that is not relativistic.¹⁵²

In order to spell out how it is possible to give one account of what constitutes reasons that allows for variation, Velleman relies on an analogy between gravity and normativity (2015, 81–83). While material objects have physical weight due to gravity, reasons weigh in

¹⁵⁰ In fact, in the short section "The possibility of progress," which contains Velleman's argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress in quite condensed form, he does both (2015, 97).

¹⁵¹ This is also why the relativist cannot take the notion of a reason as primitive. They cannot be "non-reductionists" about reasons (see Chapter 1.2.4.).

¹⁵² Velleman's view could therefore be challenged based on the idea that absolutism about practical reason is implausible. However, I am not going to follow this line of reasoning here.

favor of certain actions or attitudes due to a force called normativity. Just as material objects have a specific physical weight (or any physical weight at all) only relative to a specific gravitational frame of reference, considerations of facts have a specific normative weight as reasons (or any normative weight at all) only relative to a normative frame of reference or “perspective” or “point of view” (2015, 81). Just as the force of gravity determines the physical weight of an object, the force of normativity determines the weight of a consideration as a reason (2015, 82). Being heavy is having the tendency to fall, that is, to accelerate downwards; but what counts as “downwards” is determined by the gravitational field (2015, 81). Just as gravitational frames of reference determine what counts as “downwards,” normative frames of reference determine what counts as “to be adopted,” the direction in which reasons militate (2015, 82). It is important to note the order of constitution suggested by this analogy:

The force of gravity does not draw things in a direction that is antecedently constituted as *down*; rather, a direction is constituted as *down* by the force of gravity, which guides things towards massive objects such as Earth. If the analogy between normativity and gravity holds, then we should not expect normativity to draw us in the direction of what is antecedently constituted as *to be adopted*; rather what is *to be adopted* will be constituted by the force of normativity, which draws us toward – well, toward whatever plays the role of Earth in the practical realm. (2015, 83)¹⁵³

For moral relativists, the force of normativity has to have something to do with the *mores* of different communities, that is, with their way of life (2015, 83).¹⁵⁴ This is why in the Introduction to *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman describes it as the task of moral relativists to explain “how *mores* can have moral force and moral subject matter” (2015, 1). How exactly *mores* feature in constituting the normative force of reasons can be spelled out in different ways in the context of different versions of moral relativism.

As Velleman points out, this understanding of moral relativism suffices to show that moral relativists *can* account for the possibility of moral progress. Because what constitutes

¹⁵³ As Velleman makes explicit in the context of Chapter II, “Morality Here and There,” the claim that moral guidance is perspectival alone is not specific to relativism. According to Velleman, “even an absolutist, who believes in universal moral norms, must acknowledge that they can provide practical guidance only by way of their first-personal instances” (2015, 30). What distinguishes relativists from absolutists, then, is their view on “the order of determination between the moral status of an action-type and practical guidance about it” (2015, 30). While absolutists assume that practical guidance is determined by the independent moral status of an action-type, relativists hold that what is right or wrong is ultimately determined by practical guidance. However, assuming the latter order of constitution is compatible with the claim that the only difference between practical perspectives lies in the circumstances they face. This would still not suffice for a position to count as relativism. By contrast, relativists have to allow for a kind of variation between different perspectives that goes beyond the variation explicable by differences in circumstances (2015, 30).

¹⁵⁴ The term “way of life” is first mentioned on page 89 as an alternative to “*mores*.”

reasons is the same “normative force” in every perspective, it affords a parameter with respect to which progress (and regress) can be understood:

[A]s I said at the outset, a relativist has to characterize a single relation that reasons bear to actions or practical attitudes, lest he end up with deliberative *mores* whose normativity needs to be explained. The guiding force mediated by that relation will be a single normative force, the same force in every perspective, perspective-dependent only as to its direction. Such a force will unavoidably provide a necessarily ubiquitous parameter in relation to which ways of life can be more or less advanced. (2015, 97)¹⁵⁵

The idea behind this argument is that relativists have to give an account of moral reasons that explains their normative force, while at the same time allowing for the possibility that the same set of facts can constitute different reasons for members of different communities. While the resulting account of reasons has to allow for the relevant kind of variation, it still makes claims about what constitutes reasons that hold for all communities. Because this account of the normative force of reasons, according to Velleman, establishes a standard to assess change as progressive or regressive, it affords a standard that is present in all relevant contexts.¹⁵⁶

In addition to this general outline of the form a relativist metaethics should take, Velleman develops a more specific version of moral relativism, which fits this outline. He describes it as based on what he calls “speculative sociology” because it makes assumptions about what *mores* are like (2015, 83). In developing this version of moral relativism, Velleman starts from the following assumption: “Human beings have a practical need and a psychological drive to live together with other people – not just in proximity to them but in personal interaction with them“ (2015, 84). This has the immediate consequence that we have to be able to interpret each other. Mutual interpretation requires both the capacity to interpret others and to be interpretable oneself. In order to be able to meet this requirement, we have to act in accordance with what Velleman calls “charity” and “generosity.” According to the norm of charity, which Velleman adopts from Davidson, “in order to interpret other people, you have to narrow down the range of possible interpretations by assuming that they believe what is true and desire what is good by your lights” (2015, 84). What Velleman calls “generosity” is the corresponding norm according to which in order to be interpretable, you have to act in ways that others can understand:

¹⁵⁵ I will discuss what Velleman means by “necessarily ubiquitous” in Chapter 4.3.

¹⁵⁶ In the passage quoted above, the argument focuses on a standard with respect to which different ways of life can be compared as “more or less advanced,” rather than a standard with respect to which changes in one way of life can be evaluated. However, the same standard can be used in order to evaluate changes within one way of life. I focus on this consequence of the argument.

Because you need to be interpreted as well as to interpret, however, you need to exercise more than charity. Even as you extend charity to others by assuming that they believe and desire what you do, you must rise to their charity by satisfying their corresponding assumption, thus making yourself susceptible to their interpretation. They will try to understand you by assuming that you believe and desire as they do, and you must gratefully comply, so as to make yourself understood. (2015, 85)

While charity is a norm that applies to agents as interpreters, generosity is a norm that applies to agents as targets of interpretations. Together, the norms of charity and generosity support convergence on shared *mores* or ways of life, that is, on shared “ways of thinking, feeling, and acting” (2015, 85). This allows Velleman to spell out the analogy between gravity and normativity, which he introduced in order to explain how the same facts could constitute different reasons for different communities, in more detail:

What plays the role of Earth in our evaluative universe is personal interaction with co-members of our community, which is made possible by mutual interpretability, which is made possible by convergence on ordinary attitudes. The community’s evaluative frame of reference is established by the drive toward sociality plus the shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting to which members of the community are thereby drawn. Other communities have their own evaluative frames of reference, established by the same force drawing them toward other ways of thinking, feeling, and acting, whichever are theirs. Hence reasons are relative to a community – specifically, to the community’s *mores*, or shared way of life. (2015, 89)

Together with the drive towards social interaction, which leads to the requirement of intelligibility, a community’s shared way of life establishes their frame of reference, that is, the perspective from which reasons have normative force. According to Velleman, our practices of justification bear this out: reasons for attitudes as well as actions are considerations in light of which these attitudes and actions become interpretable. But what makes actions and attitudes interpretable depends on a community’s shared way of life. Therefore, attitudes are often justified “by showing that they are ordinary, for ourselves and for those in our social vicinity” (2015, 87) and actions are justified by appealing to these attitudes (2015, 91).¹⁵⁷ However, there are many exceptions to this general pattern as interpretation is a holistic matter. As Velleman repeatedly emphasizes, convergence on shared

¹⁵⁷ Velleman points out that the order of constitution postulated by this account of justification and the normative force of reasons more generally might be considered counterintuitive: “One might think: The drive that constitutes the force of reasons should be the drive toward doing what ought to be done and feeling what ought to be felt, not a drive toward some arbitrary aim like mutual interpretability. I say: Mutual interpretability is not an arbitrary aim in relation to the force of reasons. Actions and reactions are interpreted in light of reasons for adopting them. Whatever force makes one responsive to reasons makes one responsive to the very considerations that figure in interpretation. One might think: Okay, but considerations figure in interpretation because they are reasons, not vice versa. I say: Yes, vice versa; that’s the best account of the phenomena” (Velleman 2015, 89).

ways of thinking, feeling, and acting will never be complete and there is room for individual deviation based on eccentricities or incentives to be inscrutable on a specific occasion. Nevertheless, the room for deviations of these kinds is limited by the requirements of intelligibility (2015, 85–91). This has to do with the fact that the drive towards interaction with other people can also be described as “a drive to function as a person among other persons, indeed simply to *be* a person, insofar as sociality is essential to personhood or personhood is a social status” (2015, 84). Remaining intelligible is thus important in order to be recognized as a person. In this respect, Velleman compares social interaction to a “Turing Test” for computers¹⁵⁸:

Whenever you interact with others, it’s as if you are on the computer’s end of a classic Turing Test, trying to gain and maintain recognition from the person on the other end of the line. In the Turing Test, the computer must avoid being relegated to the status of a machine; in real life, you must avoid being relegated to the status of mentally ill or deficient, or just too weird to bother with. No matter what in particular is at stake in a particular interaction, your eligibility for social interaction in general is also at stake: the interaction can always be broken off on the grounds that you are not a qualified interactant. In order for your qualifications to be acknowledged, you not only have to demonstrate an ability to interpret the other person; you also have to make yourself interpretable as a person. (2015, 84)¹⁵⁹

The account of the normative force of reasons given explains the force of *moral* reasons, because, according to Velleman, all ways of life are “recognizably moral,” that is, they will contain at least some norms that we can recognize as moral norms. He gives two reasons for this. One is that “[t]he eligible points of convergence are constrained by human nature” (2015, 94):

There are some attitudes on which we humans cannot help but converge. They include an aversion to pain, separation, and frustration; an inclination toward pleasure, connection, and the fluid exercise of skill; the inborn and automatic fight-or-flight response; an interest in the

¹⁵⁸ In Chapter II, “Virtual Selves,” Velleman also relies on the idea of the Turing Test to spell out what is specific about human agency (2015, 19–21). He argues that, both online as well as in real life, agents are engaging in “self-presentation for the purpose of social interaction” (2015, 20) and thus have to unify their behavior with their character in order to be believable.

¹⁵⁹ In Chapter IV, “Doables,” Velleman argues that, because conceptions of action-types are part of shared ways of life, different communities differ with respect to what is doable. In this context, he offers another reason why the possibility of individual deviation is limited: “Individuals can sometimes invent new things to do, but invention is the exception rather than the rule. [...] It is not just a shortage of time or energy or imagination that prevents an individual agent from venturing outside the predefined range of doables. The shared ontology facilitates mutual understanding and cooperation” (2015, 57).

human face and form; an initial dislike of snakes, spiders, blood, and the dark; plus an array of physiological appetites. (2015, 94)¹⁶⁰

The second reason is that coordination favors pro-social arrangements: “Shared ways of life arise from the need for mutual interpretability, which requires co-ordination, which favors mutually beneficial arrangements; and so ways of life, by their very nature, tend to be recognizably moral, however horrifically or appallingly so” (2015, 96). There is thus reason to assume that all ways of life are recognizably moral having to do with human nature and the conditions under which convergence is possible.¹⁶¹

According to Velleman, any metaethical theory that takes the form he suggests entails a criterion of moral progress. Because the specific version of moral relativism he develops takes this form, it entails a criterion of moral progress as well. According to this criterion, any change in the way of life of a community that contributes to what Velleman calls “mutual intelligibility,” that is, the capacity of members of a community to interpret and understand themselves and each other, is progressive:

I say that the necessarily ubiquitous parameter is mutual interpretability, which is a prerequisite for social life. The standard of comparison for practical perspectives is thus the degree to which they facilitate mutual interpretability. How well have members of a community managed to converge on reasons for acting and reacting? How well do these reasons help them to understand themselves as the kinds of creatures they are, endowed with a somewhat fixed nature as human beings? How well, in other words, have the members of a community managed to develop a shared way of human life?

The idea is that there is something that ways of life characteristically *do*. Members of a community, any community, develop a way of life for its doing that thing. Some ways of life

¹⁶⁰ In Chapter VI, “Sociality and Solitude,” Velleman spells out in more detail why the fact that eligible points of convergence are constrained by human nature should count as a reason for ways of life to be recognizably moral. According to this line of reasoning, there are many different ways of valuing personhood – which Velleman understands as constituted by “objective self-awareness,” that is, a conception of oneself as “a member of the objective order” (2015, 103) – that are part of human nature rather than culture-bound. These include “[e]njoying both solitude and companionship, suffering from loneliness, being wowed by a beloved, feeling the buzz of mutual arousal” (2015, 117). If left to their own devices, humans are thus likely to converge on ways of life that are hospitable to these different ways of valuing personhood and such ways of life are, in turn, likely to be recognizably moral.

¹⁶¹ As, for example, Maria Kronfeldner has pointed out, appeals to human nature have a long and complicated history and face serious obstacles. In particular, Kronfeldner argues that appeals to human nature that specify a *content* of human nature face at least three challenges. According to the “dehumanization challenge,” appeals to the content of human nature lack objectivity and are often made in order to exclude specific groups as less or not human; according to the “Darwinian challenge,” there is no human nature in the sense of an essence; and according to the “developmentalist challenge,” no clear distinction can be made between nature and “nurture,” that is, environmental impact (Kronfeldner 2018, xviii–xix). While I cannot go into detail here, I want to point out that I do not think that Velleman’s argument ultimately depends on the assumptions he makes about the *content* of human nature.

do it better than others. Those ways of life are more advanced, in other words, with respect to a necessarily ubiquitous social aim. (2015, 97)

The crucial idea behind this argument can be put in terms of ways of life serving a certain *function*: since all ways of life serve the same function, they are subject to a common standard of evaluation. This is why, in a footnote, Velleman describes his position as a “functionalist” view, which shares a lot in common with Wong’s pluralistic relativism (2015, 97, n23). According to Wong’s version of moral relativism, morality serves the function of “interpersonal” and “intra-personal” coordination (see Chapter 1.2.5.).¹⁶² Functionalist views of morality imply a criterion of moral progress: any change that allows a system of moral norms to better fulfill its function will be assessed as progressive. Analogously, any change in a system of moral norms that diminishes its capacity to fulfill this function, or even any tendency that obstructs the possibility of functional improvement, will be assessed as regressive. According to Velleman’s view of morality, it is the function of ways of life, which include moral norms, to make members of a community intelligible to themselves and one another. On this view, any change in the way of life of a community that allows it to better fulfill this function constitutes moral progress.

Velleman states his argument that moral relativists can account for moral progress on two different levels of generality: in terms of the outline of the form a relativist metaethics should take and in terms of Velleman’s version of a relativist metaethics of this form. According to the argument in terms of the outline, moral relativists have to give an account of the normative force of moral reasons that allows for the possibility that the same facts can constitute different reasons for members of different communities. This can be achieved by providing an account of normativity as generated by a frame of reference. It is this account of normativity, which holds for all relevant frames of reference, that establishes a standard of progress. According to the argument in terms of Velleman’s specific version of moral relativism, what constitutes the relevant frames of reference is the drive to interact with members of one’s community. Human beings need to interact, but in order for this to be possible, they need to understand each other. They thus converge on a shared way of life, that is, on shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Together with the drive to interaction, this shared way of life constitutes their frame of reference. The criterion of progress established by this account of normativity is *intelligibility*. In addition, the argument can be stated in terms of

¹⁶² I will discuss the consequences this similarity has for Wong’s version of moral relativism with respect to the question of moral progress in section 4.4.1. Other examples of such a view of morality that suggest a different function include the views of Philip Kitcher and Catherine Wilson, who builds on an earlier version of Kitcher’s view (Kitcher 2011; Wilson 2010a, 104f). Neither of them present their version of a functionalist account of morality as a form of relativism.

functionalist views of morality. According to the argument in terms of a functionalist view of morality, an account of the normative force of moral norms can be given by specifying a function morality has to fulfill. However, specifying a function morality has to fulfill that holds for all systems of moral norms at the same time establishes a standard of progress. This is because, on a functionalist view of morality, any change that allows the set of moral norms of a community to better fulfill its function constitutes progress. The argument in terms of functionalist views of morality is at an intermediate level of generality. It is more specific than the argument in terms of the outline of the form a relativist metaethics, according to Velleman, should take and less specific than in terms of Velleman's version of moral relativism, which can be understood as one specific functionalist view of morality. Velleman's argument is surprising because, at the outset, there is reason to believe that moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of moral progress. Arguments that moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of moral progress rely on the assumption that a suitable standard of moral progress would have to go beyond the moral norms of different communities and thus be independent of and external to the practices to be assessed. Velleman's argument shows that moral relativism as a metaethical position can provide a standard that goes beyond the moral norms of different communities yet does not appeal to absolute moral norms. Rather, it appeals to a standard that is implicit in the account of the local validity of moral norms. While this standard guides the ways of life of different communities, it is not external to or independent of their practices. In the next section, I will analyze intelligibility as a standard of moral progress in more detail by drawing on some of Velleman's earlier work.

4.2. Intelligibility as a Standard of Moral Progress

Intelligibility plays a crucial role for the relativist metaethics Velleman develops in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, but it also plays a crucial role in much of Velleman's earlier work, which is not explicitly developed as a form of relativism. This work, in particular, *How We Get Along*, constitutes an important background for Velleman's version of moral relativism. While the view developed in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism* can be understood as independent of the assumptions made in *How We Get Along* and, in spite of some differences between the metaethical outlooks developed in these two texts, there is also a lot of overlap. Looking at the role intelligibility plays in *How We Get Along* can therefore provide a deeper understanding of the role it plays in Velleman's version of moral relativism.

In *How We Get Along*, Velleman develops a metaethical outlook that is based on his account of agency.¹⁶³ According to this account, agents reason practically and act much like improvisational actors – they come up with something that would *make sense* to do, given what they know about their character and their circumstances. The only difference is that, rather than enacting a specific character, agents enact their own character. The relevant notion of “making sense” is not normative but cognitive and the relevant kind of understanding is “folk psychological,” that is, it explains the action in terms of motives and dispositions ascribed to the character (Velleman 2009, 12–16).¹⁶⁴ Thus, when acting – rather than just behaving – the agent is drawing on two different “sources of motivation”: “the first-order dispositions that belong to him as the character, and the higher-order motive to make sense by enacting them” (2009, 15). Because they are endowed with theoretical reason and objective self-awareness, that is, awareness of themselves as being an object that can be understood by others (and themselves), the agent functions as their own audience and can try to make sense *of themselves* by making sense *to themselves* (2009, 17). According to Velleman, this “process of improvisational self-enactment constitutes practical reasoning, the process of choosing an action on the basis of reasons” (2009, 18). The reasons relevant in this process of

¹⁶³ This account of agency is developed in similar ways in earlier work (Velleman 1989, 2000, 2006). An assessment of this view as an account of agency would have to discuss its implications for central questions of philosophy of action, such as what an intention is and how to understand agent-based causation. These questions are beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, my discussion is restricted to the metaethical position that follows from Velleman's account of agency and its implications for moral relativism and moral progress.

¹⁶⁴ This story is complicated in Chapter 7, in which Velleman distinguishes a narrative and a causal-psychological mode of making sense. Psychological intelligibility remains the more basic notion, as story-telling requires causal-psychological explanation, but not vice versa (2009, 185). Ideally, both modes of making sense cohere and jointly contribute to the intelligibility of the agent's course of action, but they can, at least potentially, pull in different directions. Moreover, since narrative intelligibility is not a necessary aim of agency, different agents might strive for it to different degrees, thereby embodying slightly different kinds of agency (2009, 203f).

choosing an action are simply features of character and circumstances that are especially salient to understanding the action. Considerations of these features weigh in favor of a particular action, insofar as they contribute to an overall understanding of the action. An analogous account is given for valuing: just as behaving becomes acting when it is guided by reasons, that is, considerations of what would make sense for the agent to do, reacting becomes valuing when it is guided by reasons, that is, considerations of what would make sense for the agent to feel (2009, 40).¹⁶⁵

On this view, it is rational to act in ways that are supported by reasons in light of which they make sense and irrational to fail to do so. A characteristic way to fail to act rationally is thus to act “inauthentically,” that is, based on a false understanding of oneself. This happens when we decide to do something based on features that we take ourselves to have but that we do not actually instantiate (2009, 26). This can be either because we have incentives for self-deception (2009, 60f) or unintentionally (2009, 90). When it is unintentional, it can be hard to correct our inauthentic self-understanding because – given that we will succeed in carrying out the intended action under some description in spite of our misunderstanding – we will continue to interpret our actions in ways that support our false self-conception (2009, 90–92).¹⁶⁶ Yet, if everything goes right, we will end up acting authentically, that is, based on a self-conception that we actually instantiate. Acting under a false self-conception, however, does not necessarily lead to inauthentic behavior that “frustrates practical reasoning” (2009, 26). In case the agent is able to rise up to their own initially false self-conception and thereby make it true, acting on a false self-conception can be important. This is because sometimes changes to the way an agent is can be rational, for example, because it allows the agent to achieve more coherence between their attitudes: “Keep in mind that self-understanding is not simply a matter of making sense *of* oneself as one is; it is also a matter of making sense *to* oneself, perhaps by being otherwise” (2009,

¹⁶⁵ This account of reasons has a lot in common with the account given in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*: reasons are ultimately considerations in light of which attitudes and actions are interpretable. However, while the focus in *How We Get Along* is on self-understanding, in *Foundations of Moral Relativism*, it is on being interpretable to the members of one’s community. Nevertheless, understanding oneself plays a special role as a limiting case in *Foundations for Moral Relativism* as well, which comes out in the following discussion of the limits of unintelligibility: “[T]here will be cases in which a subject has strong motives for being uninterpretable to co-members of his community – that is, for lying or keeping secrets or simply being inscrutable. Despite his drive toward interpretability to co-members of the community, such motives will give the subject reason for being in some respect uninterpretable to them, lest he become uninterpretable to the minimal community consisting of himself. The subject himself is, as it were, the core of his own normative Earth” (2015, 91).

¹⁶⁶ Trying to weed out elements of inauthentic pretense is one of the tasks Velleman ascribes to the detached mental process that observes an agent’s actions as well as their self-interpretation, as it were, from a distance, which we call the “conscience” (2009, 92–94).

32).¹⁶⁷ This helps to reply to an objection to his view that Velleman anticipates. According to this objection, an agent's "admitted vices" (2009, 31) can count as reasons for action. Therefore, it would, for example, be rational for an agent to procrastinate because they are lazy. Velleman's response is that, if someone describes themselves as lazy, this already implies that they disapprove of this characteristic, probably because it conflicts with some of their other goals and dispositions. It would thus be more rational for them to try and change this aspect about themselves than to act based on it (2009, 31f):

Note that in this case, practical reasoning will work in two distinct ways. On the one hand, an alternative self-conception would give him access to better self-understanding, if only he could live up to it; on the other hand, reforming himself in order to live up to that better self-understanding may be something that it makes sense to do. (2009, 33)

It is also possible that, even though changing in a particular way would be rational, it cannot be recognized as rational from where one is. Velleman calls this a "rational dead-end," from which the agent "can see a more rational place to be but no rational way of getting there" (2009, 33). There are thus two different characteristic ways to fail to live up to the requirements of rationality: being inauthentic, that is, acting on a false self-conception, and holding on to a self-conception that is itself irrational.

The metaethical outlook that follows from this account of agency can be put in explicitly constitutivist terms: it states that intelligibility is the constitutive aim – and thereby at the same time the criterion of correctness – of practical reasoning (see 2009, 134). As a version of constitutivism, it attempts to construct the truth of normative claims out of a formal characterization of agency. More specifically, Velleman's view can be understood as a modified version of Kantian constructivism (cf. Chapter 1.3.3.). Appealing to Kant's attempt to ground morality in what is required from the practical point of view as such, Velleman presents the metaethical outlook that follows from this account of agency as a version of the "Kantian strategy." At the same time, Velleman positions himself between Kant, who thought of this as a way to guarantee the objectivity of moral demands, and Williams, who thought that this was not possible.¹⁶⁸ Velleman's version of the Kantian strategy is a bit less ambitious: rather than showing that moral demands are grounded in the practical point of view directly, he argues that practical rationality supports the development of moral norms as

¹⁶⁷ While social psychologists who study this phenomenon of rising up to satisfy one's initially false self-conceptions tend to consider it irrational, Velleman regards it as "the height of rationality" (2009, 92, n4). This possibility of transforming oneself by acting on an initially false self-conception plays an important role for Velleman's account of what it means to be motivated by an ideal, which he describes in terms of behaving in a way that is in some respects irrational for the benefit of becoming more rational in the long run (2002, 101).

¹⁶⁸ Both Kant and Williams are contrasted with Mackie, who thought that the only way to argue for the objectivity of moral demands would be to claim that they are part of "the fabric of the world" (2009, 115–17).

part of a shared way of life indirectly. Intelligibility as the constitutive aim of agency can explain why there are rational pressures towards developing a recognizably moral way of life and why this development constitutes rational progress, but it falls short of grounding moral demands directly in practical rationality. Therefore, Velleman calls it a “Kinda Kantian strategy”:

My Kinda Kantian strategy is to argue that the aim constitutive of agency can be seen to have pushed us in the direction of our moral way of life, and to be pushing us still in directions that are recognizably moral. The strategy thus provides a retrospective commentary on morality as a rational development, a form of rational progress. (2009, 149)

This account leaves room for contingency: “practical reasoning has favored morality without requiring or guaranteeing it” (2009, 149). In the Introduction to *How We Get Along*, Velleman describes the resulting metaethical outlook as rationalist “at one remove” (2009, 2).

In *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman argues that, when left to their own devices, agents who need to converge will tend to converge on social arrangements that are recognizably moral:

There is reason to think that the resulting constellation of attitudes and actions will tend to be pro-social rather than anti-social, in the sense that they will favor mutual benefit over mutual harm. The reason is that our convergence must result from spontaneous, unmanaged coordination, which favors mutually beneficial arrangements. (2015, 95 see also Chapter 4.1.)

The account of agency he gives in *How We Get Along* helps to spell out the claim that the need to coordinate favors cooperative arrangements in more detail. However, the explanation for why ways of life are recognizably moral that can be discerned in Velleman’s discussion of agency in *How We Get Along* is not unified, but combines different strands of argument. This has to do with Velleman’s view of morality. In general, moral group relativists focus on the moral norms actually developed by communities. These norms are often part of complex and diverse social practices. Therefore, moral group relativists tend to understand the moral as comprising different aspects of a shared way of life rather than constituting a distinct and unified domain of life (see Chapter 1.3.). Velleman shares this kind of view of morality. As he points out in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, he takes the moral to be a “family resemblance” concept: “[I] regard moralities as variations on some themes – except that there is no fact of the matter as to which morality states the themes and which ones are variations. They are a family of diverse *mores* bound together (to vary the analogy) by family resemblance” (2015, 3). In *How We Get Along*, he describes the moral as “distributed holographically throughout our lives, in the various ways that our shared practices and values

reflect various rational pressures and the underlying human nature in light of which those pressures have been accommodated” (2009, 154). Therefore, it takes training to recognize the moral as a whole. As Velleman puts it:

In speaking of the moral as a distinct realm of thought and discourse, we trust that others will know what we mean, but in my experience, many people unschooled in philosophy have no idea. The reason, I suspect, is that what we call morality is no more than a family of patterns running through our way of life, held together by no more than family resemblances that only some people have been trained to recognize. (2009, 9)¹⁶⁹

Although the moral is not a unified domain, there are reasons why ways of life contain norms we recognize as moral. Some of these have to do with the account of interaction Velleman gives in *How We Get Along*. Velleman’s conception of agency, developed considering a single agent in isolation – who, as a self-enacting improviser, sometimes serves as his own only audience – has consequences for the relationship between agents, who regard each other as fellow self-enacting improvisers (see 2009, 59–87). When interacting, agents need to make sense of each other and their interaction, assuming that their actions are explicable in similar terms and that each of them acts according to a self-interpretation. Part of interpreting the other is figuring out their self-interpretation (although this need not result in adopting it). Thus, both interactants have a rational interest in arriving at an accurate interpretation of their own action and the action of the other. While contingent first-order aims might count in favor of deceiving oneself and others, the cognitive aim of practical rationality – making sense of what one does – counts in favor of understanding ourselves accurately, but it also counts in favor of others understanding us in the same way as we do. This is because if others understand us in the way we understand ourselves, we avoid having to keep two sets of books. In addition, it helps us understand how they react to us, which, in turn, helps us figuring out intelligible ways to react to them. Practical rationality thus favors developing one shared interpretation of who each of the interactants is and what they are doing (2009, 64f). Practical rationality provides incentives to converge on interpretations of each other, that is, roles and identities, but also on what Velleman calls “scenarios” (2009, 70). Scenarios are conventional patterns of interacting that help to navigate social situations, such as, for example, eating at a restaurant. According to Velleman, “[v]ast stretches of our social life are governed by conventional scenarios of this kind” (2009, 76). These scenarios make up a way of life:

¹⁶⁹ Velleman goes as far as doubting that the moral exists if it is supposed to be a unified whole: “Indeed, I think that morality doesn’t really exist, if by ‘morality’ is meant a single, coherent source of reasons, system of values, or deliberative perspectives” (2009, 154).

The totality of the repertoire [of scenarios, K.S.] shared among us is what might be called our way of life. What I have argued thus far is that rational agency favors participating in a shared way of life, in order to have access to the resources for self-understanding that it affords. Creatures improvising behavior intelligible to themselves are under pressure to develop a way of life, and this pressure emanates from that which makes them rational agents. (2009, 76f)

Because we rely on these shared resources in finding intelligible courses of action, we are “dependent on socially developed practices for the realization of our rational autonomy, at least when interacting with others” (2009, 79).¹⁷⁰ These considerations help explain why ways of life are recognizably moral. On the one hand, there are rational incentives against deception, which push us in the direction of meeting a general requirement of “transparency” that is often associated with morality.¹⁷¹ On the other hand, there is a generic cooperative interaction underlying any kind of interaction, even hostile ones:

The attitude outlined here [the attitude of one agent towards another agent, K.S.] has a moral coloration – to my eye, at least. It appears to be tinged with shades of reciprocity and respect.

What lends the attitude its moral coloration, I think, is the recognition that no matter what occasion-specific transaction you and I may enter into, there will always be an additional, generic transaction on which it rides. (2009, 86)

Two further reasons for ways of life to end up recognizably moral derive from Velleman’s account of valuing as well as his account of the conscience. Because valuing is reacting guided by reasons, that is, considerations of what would make sense to feel, there is pressure to value characteristics consistently, according to perceived kinds, responding to recognizable regularities. This also means that there is an incentive not to make exceptions for oneself (2009, 45–47). These tendencies lead agents to develop “values that are universal, in the sense that interests moral philosophers” (2009, 46).¹⁷² In addition, Velleman describes agents as developing a “conscience” that gives rise to the moral emotions of guilt and shame (2009, 94–100). The conscience regards the agent from a perspective from which a specific kind of questions becomes salient “such as who he purports to be, how he purports to live, whether

¹⁷⁰ While there is an obvious parallel between “ways of life” as a shared repertoire of scenarios and the *mores* in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, a difference between the metaethical outlooks developed in these two texts becomes evident at this point: while in *How We Get Along*, being intelligible to others is only required by practical rationality because it is instrumental to the aim of self-understanding, in *Foundations for Moral Relativism* being interpretable to others is as important as being interpretable to oneself.

¹⁷¹ This resonates with Velleman’s interpretation of the Categorical Imperative as the requirement to consider only those reasons authoritative whose validity could be “common knowledge” as a helpful idealization of social interaction (2009, 165–78).

¹⁷² In particular, Velleman argues that agents locked in a blood feud act irrationally because they have one theory of human psychology, according to which humans are susceptible to deterrence, and another way to understand themselves, according to which they are not deterred. That is, they make special exceptions for explaining their own behavior (2009, 47f).

his self-enactments are authentic, and whether they could serve as contributions to joint improvisation” (2009, 104). Thus, the conscience monitors both, if the agent is being authentic and whether they are the kind of character suitable for interaction, that is, for joint improvisation. As Velleman concludes:

These arguments suggest – no more than suggest – a rough configuration that our dealings together would acquire from practical reasoning in the very long run [...]. I think that we can see in this configuration some familiar features of morality: universality, transparency, mutuality. What we can’t discern, from our philosophical perspective, is any particular moral principles or commandments or code. (2009, 151)

Velleman’s discussion of the consequences of his view of agency for interaction thus helps to further elucidate how considerations of intelligibility can ensure that ways of life are recognizably moral. At the same time, it shows how intelligibility works as a criterion of moral progress. In fact, as becomes clear in these passages, these two roles of intelligibility are closely related: ways of life are recognizably moral because they have developed in a way that is subject to certain rational pressures. Developing them further in accord with these rational pressures is what would constitute moral progress:

In my view, however, we have practices at all partly because of needing to make sense to ourselves while living with others who have the same need, and the criterion of success for modifying our practices is whether we thereby manage to make more sense – that is, whether the resulting way of life is more intelligible and better enables us to find intelligible courses of action. (2009, 80)

Velleman further elucidates the resulting view of moral progress by discussing an example of a kind of change that would constitute a paradigmatic instance of progress on his view:

It is a common observation that over the course of history, societies have tended to dispense with various distinctions among persons, where they have proved dispensable, and that this tendency represents a form of social progress. We find that we no longer need distinct versions of our situational scenarios for cases in which the participants are of different genders, races, castes, or nationalities. [...]

I want to say that the tendency to dispense with dispensable distinctions in the design of our socially shared scenarios represents progress that is specifically rational – progress according to the objective standard set by the constitutive aim of agency, the standard of intelligibility. (2009, 81)

One reason that a change of the kind described – dispensing with dispensable distinctions – constitutes a paradigmatic case of rational progress on Velleman’s view is because of the role

that generalization plays in his account of explanation. According to Velleman, “[t]he fundamental form of understanding is generalization” (2009, 63). Therefore, “the simpler an explanation, the greater the resulting comprehension” (2009, 63).¹⁷³ Dispensing with distinctions that we can dispense with thus constitutes a paradigmatic instance of progress, on Velleman’s view, but how can we tell whether a distinction is dispensable? While Velleman’s view offers no principled way to do so *a priori*, considerations of (in)authenticity can provide a criterion after the fact: “The answer [to the question how do we tell whether we can dispense with a distinction, K.S.] is that some revisions in our way of life would leave us with scenarios that we cannot enact, or cannot enact *authentically*” (2009, 82, my emphasis). Because there is no way to tell *a priori* which emendations to a shared way of life will help to act in more intelligible ways, when it comes to making progress, practical reasoning becomes “an experimental discipline” (2009, 83): “Figuring out how to live is a process of trial and error, in which the trials are what Mill called experiments in living” (2009, 83).

While there are important differences between the metaethical outlook developed in *How We Get Along* and the metaethical outlook developed in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, seeing Velleman’s version of moral relativism against the background of his metaethical constitutivism can help to understand why and how intelligibility functions as a criterion of moral progress. However, at the same time, the more encompassing account given in *How We Get Along* might invite objections that the metaethical outlook developed in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism* can avoid. For one, the view developed in *How We Get Along* is presented as a version of constitutivism. It attempts to construct normative conclusions about what reasons an agent has from a formal analysis of agency (see Chapter 1.3.3.). Constitutivism is an ambitious project that is met with a number of objections. Critics argue that constitutivists must either fail to justify normative conclusions or can do so only because they already implicitly rely on normative assumptions. If constitutivists have to rely on normative assumptions, this would raise the question about the status of these assumptions, which cannot depend on the procedure of construction. Because the status of these assumptions would have to be explained in another way, this would undermine the claim that constructivism is a distinct metaethical position.

The most prominent objection along the lines that constitutivism fails to justify normative conclusions is due to David Enoch. Enoch argues that showing what is constitutive

¹⁷³ Making sense is, however, a holistic matter, subject to different criteria: “To be sure, simplicity is only one of several competing desiderata in an explanation. The best explanation of a phenomenon combines simplicity with empirical adequacy (describing the phenomenon correctly), fruitfulness (explaining as many phenomena as possible), and theoretical unity (cohering with explanations of other phenomena), as well as other virtues” (2009, 63).

of action does not suffice to establish a normative criterion that applies to action because it is always possible to refuse to be an agent. The skeptic could retort as follows: “I am perfectly happy being a shmagent – a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency) of self-constitution” (Enoch 2006, 179).¹⁷⁴ According to Enoch, in order to meet this challenge, the constitutivist would have to supply an additional reason for why we should want to be agents. Enoch argues that the relevant reason could only be supplied by moral realism and that their position would thus collapse into moral realism (see 2006, 187). Velleman’s answer to this anticipated challenge is to point out that having an aim establishes a criterion of correctness and having the aim of intelligibility is inescapable for us, in two senses. On the one hand, it is naturally inescapable for us as human beings, endowed with theoretical reason and objective self-awareness; on the other hand, it is constitutively inescapable for us as agents because trying to make sense is constitutive of being an agent. Asking why we should try to make sense is to reveal that one already has this aim (Velleman 2009, 135–38).

I think that the force of Enoch’s challenge depends on the assumption that the authority of moral norms could never depend on possibly contingent facts about human beings and thus on adopting a certain kind of moral realism already at the outset. It therefore begs the question against any kind of metaethical constructivism. However, I will not be able to settle these questions here. Instead, I want to emphasize that Velleman’s argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress does not depend on constitutivist assumptions. Based on Velleman’s discussion in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, this argument can already be formulated on three different levels of generality. It can be stated either in terms of the general form any metaethical theory, according to Velleman, should assume, or in terms of what Velleman calls a “functionalist view” of morality, or in terms of Velleman’s specific metaethical theory, according to which the function of ways of life, which include moral norms, is intelligibility (see Chapter 4.1.). Putting the argument in terms of Velleman’s version of constitutivism represents another version of the argument. While this version of the argument provides a deeper understanding of how intelligibility can serve as a criterion of moral progress, it depends on additional controversial assumptions that are not necessary to formulate the argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. This argument can be stated based on the assumptions Velleman makes in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism* alone.

¹⁷⁴ While this formulation shows that Enoch is replying to Korsgaard’s version of constitutivism, which takes self-constitution to be the constitutive aim of agency, an analogous challenge can be formulated with respect to other versions of constitutivism.

There he claims that facilitating mutual intelligibility is the function of ways of life that explains why they are recognizably moral.¹⁷⁵

While versions of what Velleman calls a “functionalist view” of morality are structurally similar to versions of constitutivism in that they use a characteristic feature as a normative criterion, they are not subject to the same objections. The claim that something serves a specific function is in general weaker than the claim that serving a function or having an aim is constitutive of its being that thing. However, this does not mean that functionalist accounts of morality do not face any objections. Wong, for example, considers the contention that it commits a “naturalistic fallacy” as an objection to his functionalist view of morality:

How can the observation that, as a sociological matter of fact, moralities have the function of regulating and promoting social cooperation support the normative criterion that adequate moralities must contain duties that further this function? Am I not, the objection goes, trying to derive an ‘ought’ from an ‘is’? (Wong 2006, 45f)

In replying to this challenge, Wong denies that his investigation has a purely factual starting point. He appeals to Rawls’s idea of achieving a “reflective equilibrium” by going back and forth between judgments about particular cases and more general principles and revising them to achieve coherence (see Rawls 1999, 18). Wong describes his investigation of different systems of moral norms as based on this method. He claims that the idea of morality fulfilling a function helps to establish reflective equilibrium “within different systems of moral beliefs to be found across different cultures” (Wong 2006, 46). The idea is that based on his own normative assumptions and what he knows about different moral systems, Wong arrives at his metaethical outlook by going back and forth between his own considered judgments on different levels of generality and revising them in order to achieve coherence. This also shows that functionalist accounts of morality are not committed to the demanding project of constitutivists.

A remaining set of objections concerns not the form of this kind of functionalist view, but its content, that is, the specific function suggested. With respect to this, I want to note that the criterion of intelligibility does not demand that agents always behave the same way, irrespective of context, or that they always tell everyone what they are thinking even if doing so would be impolite. Rather, the criterion allows for complexities that are necessary in order for humans to get along authentically, such as, for example, norms of politeness and privacy

¹⁷⁵ In the course of his argument that change in moral norms needs to be intelligible (see Chapter 3.1.), Raz appeals to a similar understanding of morality: “An oversimple, yet fundamentally correct, answer to this question [must morality be intelligible?, K.S.] is that morality *is* intelligible, for its role is to enable people to comprehend themselves and their world” (Raz 1999, 172).

as well as the ability to adjust to the subtleties of different contexts of interaction. That is, the claim that practical rationality favors “transparency” does not mean that a maximally transparent way of life would be the most intelligible. Thus, while Velleman’s argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress depends on some metaethical assumptions that are controversial, it can be stated without relying on the constitutivism that is in the background of the view. In the next section, I will turn to the question of whether the argument undermines the status of Velleman’s view as a version of moral relativism.

4.3. Is This Really Relativism?

At the outset, the moral relativist's metaethical commitments seem to be in tension with accounting for the possibility of moral progress (see Chapter 1.4.). Therefore, one might question whether a view of morality that implies a conception of moral progress – such as Velleman's own view and, according to his argument, any version of moral relativism that follows his outline for a relativist metaethics – should really be called a version of *relativism*. This question is perhaps emphasized by the fact that, in spite of the similarities with the metaethical outlook he develops in Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman does not present the metaethical outlook that follows from his analysis of agency in *How We Get Along* as a version of moral relativism. By contrast, he explicitly denies that the metaethical outlook developed there is a form of relativism: “My view of practical reason accounts for some of the phenomena that make moral relativism tempting, and yet it doesn't ultimately succumb to the temptation. It explains the considerable degree of contingency of morality without conceding that anything goes” (Velleman 2009, 162, see also 2009, 164). Despite this, the view Velleman develops in *How We Get Along* can be understood as a version of relativism as well because, as he points out, it leads to the expectation of “a large degree of rationally contingent variation, because very different ways of acting and reacting may be equally intelligible and authentic” (2009, 163). This is a version of moral relativism along the lines of Velleman's understanding of relativism in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*. On this view of what moral relativism amounts to, it does not imply the claim that anything goes.

In Chapter V of *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman considers the question “Is This Really Relativism?” himself (2015, 93–99). He considers three different reasons for which one might object to his view counting as a version of relativism:

- 1) According to the “*Similarity Objection*,” Velleman's view of morality is not relativism because he does not claim that the *mores* of other communities will be so different that they seem amoral to us (2015, 94–96);
- 2) According to the “*Asymmetry Objection*,” Velleman's view of morality is not relativism because he allows for evaluative distinctions between different perspectives (2015, 97); and

- 3) According to the “*Universality Objection*,” Velleman’s view of morality is not relativism because he seems to allow for universal norms (2015, 93).¹⁷⁶

The *Similarity Objection* is based on the assumption that moral relativists must claim that the ways of life of communities other than one’s own are so different that one cannot recognize them as moral. This assumption is closely related to the assumption that relativists must claim that different ways of life are “radically different,” that is, that they have nothing in common. However, it is unclear why such a commitment should have to be part of any version of relativism. Relativism is sometimes construed as implying this claim by opponents rather than proponents of the view (see Chapter 1.1.). By contrast, relativism is not only compatible with the idea that different systems or practices share something in common; being able to account for the fact that, in spite of differences, distinct ways of life are all moral is a requirement all versions of moral relativism have to meet. This is because they have to be able to account for the fact that the different systems of norms that they consider are indeed issuing conflicting verdicts about the same subject matter, rather than talking past each other. Therefore, even the moral relativist has to be able to say something about what makes the different systems or practices they consider moral.

A similar point is made by Philippa Foot in the context of her discussion of moral relativism. Foot uses the trenchant example of “clasping the hands three times in an hour” (Foot 1959, 92) to show that it would not be easy to make sense of someone who called this a morally good action. This shows that not just anything can be called morally good – at least not without introducing additional assumptions. In a later article, she refers to this example and draws the following conclusion:

From this it follows that not everything that anyone might want to call a “moral code” should properly be so described. And this shows, incidentally, that hypotheses about “cultural relativism” are not totally independent of moral theory. [...] Nevertheless, it does not look as if a correct account of what it is to have a moral thought, or a moral attitude, or to teach a moral code, will suffice to dismiss relativism out of hand. (2001, 194)

Neither the claim that different moral systems are similar to each other nor the claim that they all share something in common that makes them moral is incompatible with the commitments of moral relativism. If moral systems need not be radically different and in fact have something in common that makes them moral, it is likely that members of a community will be able to recognize the divergent norms of different communities as moral. The *Similarity*

¹⁷⁶ For ease of exposition, I have labelled these objections and changed the order in which they appear in the text to match the order in which I will address them.

Objection therefore fails to show that Velleman's view should not be considered a version of moral relativism.

According to the *Asymmetry Objection*, Velleman's view is not relativism because he allows for evaluative distinctions between different perspectives. This is important because the fact that Velleman's view allows for these evaluative distinctions is, ultimately, what allows him to account for the possibility of moral progress. However, this aspect of his view seems to directly contradict the relativist's commitment to *Symmetry*, according to which different systems or practices are (at least in some sense) on a par. What allows Velleman to ground evaluative distinctions between different practical perspectives is the way in which he accounts for the normative force of different moral systems. This guarantees that there is a common parameter in every perspective, which can, in turn, serve as a criterion of progress. Velleman's account of normativity is also what motivates the *Universality Objection*, according to which Velleman's view is not relativism because it seems to postulate universal norms, in particular, the norms of interpretation that Velleman calls "charity" and "generosity." Postulating universal norms would clearly be in tension with relativism, contradicting what might be called the most basic commitment underlying relativism: a rejection of absolutism. The *Asymmetry Objection* is thus closely related to the *Universality Objection*. In order to defend his version of relativism against the *Universality Objection*, Velleman introduces a crucial distinction between "universal" and "ubiquitous" norms. While he grants that it might seem as if he had "allowed [his] evaluative universe to fall under universal purposes and principles" (2015, 93), he denies that this is in fact so. Drawing on Street's work, he points out that "a norm needn't hold universally in order to hold within every perspective, since it can hold independently within each one" (2015, 93). For example, if there are only two different communities and they come up with the same norm independently, then this norm would be "ubiquitous," but not necessarily "universal," that is, binding independently of the practices of any community. "Ubiquitous norms govern only locally, but they govern locally everywhere, within every perspective" (2015, 93). The difference between universal and ubiquitous norms is that universal norms hold independently of any perspective. Based on this distinction, Velleman claims that, in contrast to what is suggested by the *Universality Objection*, the norms of charity and generosity are not universal, but ubiquitous. Velleman further distinguishes between "ubiquitous" and "necessarily ubiquitous" norms. Charity and generosity, for example, are not only ubiquitous, but necessarily ubiquitous because there are reasons why they govern locally in every perspective:

The fact that these principles are locally operative everywhere is no accident: each normative frame of reference must be established by the drive of its occupants toward sociality, which requires mutual interpretability, which calls for charity on their part as interpreters and generosity on their part as targets of interpretation. (2015, 94)¹⁷⁷

Because human beings have a drive to live together and living together requires intelligibility, the norms that help us attain intelligibility are valid in every perspective and not only as a matter of coincidence. Although they are valid in every perspective, charity and generosity are not universal norms, according to Velleman. That is, they are not valid independent of a given perspective (cf. 2015, 93). Moreover, while there is some connection between intelligibility and morality, the norms that Velleman takes to be necessarily ubiquitous, charity and generosity, are not *moral* norms. They are not what we would intuitively understand by “charity” and “generosity” as moral virtues. Rather “charity” and “generosity” are used metaphorically in order to denote ways of interpreting and making oneself interpretable. These distinctions help elucidate in which sense Velleman remains committed to central tenets of relativism: He denies “that there are universal norms of any kind, and that there are necessarily ubiquitous norms of morality” (2015, 94). Moreover, the ubiquitous norms that are stipulated are justified because they are needed in order to account for the normative force of different moral systems.

Because the *Universality Objection* and the *Asymmetry Objection* are closely connected, Velleman’s response to the latter depends on his response to the former. Based on the distinction between universal and (necessarily) ubiquitous norms, Velleman argues that the fact that his view allows for evaluative distinctions between perspectives does not mean that it is not relativism. Rather, the way in which it allows for such distinctions – based on ubiquitous requirements rather than universal norms – is compatible with it being a version of moral relativism. This is because:

For one thing, the evaluative distinctions that remain are not moral. Communities do not qualify as more or less advanced by falling closer or further from some universal or ubiquitous morality. There is no universal or even ubiquitous morality, and there are no universal norms of any kind. What there are, however, are ubiquitous norms of interpretation and interpretability, which are the fundamental prerequisites of sociality, and it is in relation to these norms that communities can be more or less advanced. They can be more or less advanced, in other words, in terms of the prerequisites of sociality. (2015, 98)

¹⁷⁷ The notion of necessity involved is thus very weak; the “necessarily” in “necessarily ubiquitous” simply indicates that there is a reason why certain norms systematically emerge in all relevant perspectives.

On Velleman's view, there is no universal moral code or set of moral norms which serves as a perspective from which different moral systems can be evaluated. Because his metaethical outlook accounts for the fact that different norms have the force and subject matter of morality in different contexts – while it makes it possible to make evaluative distinctions between different sets of moral norms – there remains a sense in which the moral norms of different communities are on a par. They are on a par in the sense that each way of life contains moral norms that are genuinely valid in their respective context. In addition, the functionalist view of morality that underlies Velleman's version of moral relativism vindicates *Symmetry* in a stronger sense as a special case. In case two different and incompatible ways of life fulfill the function of ways of life equally well, they will be on a par with respect to this standard as well. While there is a clear tension between the moral relativist's purported commitment to *Symmetry* and the kind of standard required in order to account for the possibility of moral progress, Velleman's view makes it possible to retain a qualified version of *Symmetry* and combine it with such a standard. Thus, as Velleman argues, neither the *Universality Objection* nor the *Asymmetry Objection* are reasons to think that his view is not relativism.

While there is a sense in which *Symmetry* can be recovered and all other commitments of relativism remain in place, the resulting view might still seem to be too far from the “spirit of relativism” in order to be accepted as a version of moral relativism. This is because relativism is often portrayed as primarily a rejection of and a rebellion against absolutist assumptions.¹⁷⁸ Against the background of such an understanding of relativism as a revolt, Velleman's view might seem disappointing exactly because, in allowing not only for ubiquitous, but for *necessarily* ubiquitous norms, it re-introduces much of what relativists would presumably oppose. However, there is more to be said in favor of this perhaps less radical version of relativism and this leads back to the question of how moral relativism is to be understood in the first place. What comes into focus at this point is that Velleman's discussion presumes a different understanding of relativism already at the outset. While Velleman agrees that relativists have to deny that there are universal moral norms, he emphasizes that the relativist cannot rest with this negative conclusion. Rather, he also recognizes a positive task the relativist has to fulfill: namely, to explain the local validity of different moral systems. The task thus has two sides. On the one hand, the relativist has to deny that there are universally valid moral norms; but, on the other hand, they have to account

¹⁷⁸ This stance finds expression, for example, in Bloor's definition of relativism as the denial of absolutism and in much of his work on relativism as well as in anthropologist Clifford Geertz's plea for “anti-anti-relativism” (see Bloor 2011, 2007; Geertz 1984).

for the local validity of moral norms. This is evident from the way Velleman phrases the challenge the relativist must meet in the Introduction. The central question he raises in light of moral diversity is: “Can there be plural moralities of merely local validity?” (2015, 1). According to Velleman, the relativist has to fulfill this positive task as well, lest their view collapse into nihilism, that is, the claim that there are no valid moral norms at all: “[M]oral relativism must not only deny the existence of universal morality; it must also assert the existence of local moralities. Otherwise it won’t be relativism; it will just be nihilism” (2015, 76, see also Chapter 1.3.5.).¹⁷⁹ The relativist must thus try to occupy a middle ground between absolutism and nihilism; however, it is contested whether this is possible: “It purports to be distinct from absolutism, on the one hand, and nihilism, on the other; the objection is that there is no third hand between those two” (2015, 28).¹⁸⁰

How difficult it is to secure the space for relativism as a third option between absolutism and nihilism is illustrated by Velleman’s discussion of two ways to account for a plurality of moralities that would not suffice to discharge the challenge. On the one hand, Velleman is clear that there is a way to account for the local validity of norms that will not do for a relativist precisely because it would amount to giving up on relativism: in accounting for the authority of local moral norms, the relativist cannot appeal to a universal moral norm, according to which local moral norms ought to be followed.¹⁸¹ A view of this kind would not amount to relativism, but rather to what Scanlon calls “parametric universalism”:

Any plausible moral view would allow for the fact that actions that are right in one place can be wrong in another place, where people have different expectations, or where different

¹⁷⁹ In Chapter III, “Morality Here and There,” Velleman describes the “nihilist thesis” as claiming “that calling something permissible is an ontological error, like calling someone a witch” (2015, 28) and characterizes the relativist’s position in contrast to nihilism: “The relativist wants to rule out nihilism by saying that there is not just a cultural difference between groups with respect to what they permit but also a normative difference with respect to what is permissible for them – which entails that permissibility is real” (2015, 28).

¹⁸⁰ I have noted above, in connection with the *Similarity Objection*, that even a relativist has to say something about what different moral systems have in common that makes them moral systems. However, according to Velleman, in order to distinguish their view from nihilism, the relativist has to go beyond that: they have to be able not only to say what moral systems have in common that makes them moral systems but to give an account of their local validity.

¹⁸¹ Already in the Introduction to *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman points out that the relevant explanation “cannot invoke a universal obligation to conform to one’s local *mores*, since moral relativism denies the existence of universal obligations” (2015, 1f). In Chapter III, “Morality Here and There,” Velleman elucidates what is at stake by pointing out that the relativistic claim that “[w]hat is morally the thing to do in one cultural context may be different from what is morally the thing to do in another” (2015, 39) can be read in two different ways that can be distinguished in terms of the scope of moral requirements. It can either be understood to say that there is only one moral requirement, according to which one ought to do action A in context X and action B in context Y or to say that there is one moral requirement in context X, according to which one ought to A, and another requirement in context Y, according to which one ought to B. Only on the latter reading is the claim really relativistic (2015, 39). The same point is implicit in Velleman’s comment on the slogan “When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” which is sometimes associated with relativism: “A social requirement like ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do’ may sound relativistic but isn’t. It’s a particular instance of a more fundamental requirement to follow the conventions prevailing wherever one is, and that requirement is universal” (2015, 37).

conditions obtain. Failing to help a person whose car has broken down, for example, would be a serious wrong in a place where someone who is stranded overnight is likely to freeze to death, but not a serious wrong in a safe country with a mild climate. A view that allows for such variations in what is right, by applying a fixed set of substantive moral principles to varying circumstances, is not relativism but rather what I will call “*parametric universalism*.” (Scanlon 1998, 329, my emphasis)¹⁸²

One way to fail to formulate relativism as distinct from both absolutism and nihilism is thus to give an account of the local validity of moral norms along the lines of what Scanlon calls “*parametric universalism*.” On the other hand, Velleman is equally careful to point out that in accounting for the authority of moral norms, the relativist has to go beyond just reporting – as the anthropologist might – what is permitted by a certain group or what is morally permissible according to them (Velleman 2015, 28). Rather, they must account for the fact that some action really is permissible or required for them while something else might be the case for a different group. Thus, according to Velleman, the relativist must give an account of the validity of norms that goes beyond just stating that these norms are as a matter of fact accepted by a certain community.¹⁸³ If a relativist could only account for the social acceptance of local moral norms rather than their status as normatively binding, relativism would amount to what Scanlon calls a “*debunking doctrine*,” “according to which morality is *merely* a matter of social convention” (Scanlon 1998, 333). It would thus collapse into skepticism, understood as the view that the right explanation of our moral practices undermines rather than vindicates the claims morality makes on us (Korsgaard 1996, 13, see also Chapter 1.3.5.). Another way to fail to formulate relativism as a middle ground position between absolutism and nihilism is thus to fail to give a sufficiently vindicating account of the local validity of moral norms. There are, therefore, two characteristic ways of failing to accomplish the positive as well as the negative part of the relativist’s task and securing a middle ground between absolutism and nihilism. On the one hand, the relativist can give an account of the local authority of moral norms that overshoots its goal and end up with an account of the absolute authority of some moral norms thus collapsing into absolutism. On the other hand, the relativist can fail to give a sufficient account of the local authority of moral norms thereby collapsing into skepticism

¹⁸² What Scanlon calls “*parametric universalism*” corresponds to what Boghossian calls “*absolutist relativism*” (Boghossian 2011).

¹⁸³ In the Introduction to *Foundations for Moral Relativism*, Velleman offers one reason why this would be insufficient: the relevant explanations cannot “invoke extrinsic considerations such as a fear of social sanctions or a desire to fit in, since morality binds even those who do not care about these” (2015, 2). That is, the relevant explanation cannot consist in only pointing to fear of social sanctions, not that it can play no role. Pointing to fear of social sanctions is not sufficient because we take morality to be binding for those who do not care about or would not be subject to sanctions for contingent reasons.

or nihilism.¹⁸⁴ Both Velleman and Scanlon point out that, in order for relativism to be a distinct position, relativists have to give a sufficiently robust account of the normative authority of moral norms. Scanlon considers the claim that such an account of the authority of moral norms that holds for all relevant contexts is in tension with a position being relativism, but ultimately rejects this. It is because moral relativism must assume such a unified account that it cannot at the same time make it into a position that is not relativism:

Moral relativism denies that there is a single set of ultimate substantive moral standards by which all actions are to be judged, but it nonetheless presupposes a single normative perspective, from which judgments can be made about which principles (including moral principles) people in various situations have reason to regard as authoritative. Recognizing such a standpoint may seem to represent normative universalism of a kind that is at odds with the spirit of relativism, but this is a mistake. Moral relativism is, after all, a thesis about what people do and do not have reason to do. It therefore cannot be intelligibly asserted without presupposing the possibility that such judgments can coherently be made and defended. (Scanlon 1998, 329)

This helps to understand why Velleman's position should be understood as a version of moral relativism: if moral relativists have to give an account of the local validity of moral norms in order to distinguish their view from nihilism or skepticism, then providing such an account cannot undermine a position's credibility as a form of relativism. Otherwise, there would be no space for a coherent relativism that is distinct from skepticism and nihilism. Relativism would be a pure strawman. However, the same assumptions that allow the relativist to account for the local validity of moral norms, according to Velleman, establish a standard for assessing change as progressive or regressive. There are thus good reasons to think that, although Velleman's view of morality implies a criterion of moral progress, it is still a version of moral relativism. It makes it possible to account for the fact that different moral norms are binding on members of different communities in a way that goes beyond what Scanlon calls "parametric universalism." This is because the content of the moral norms that are binding on members of different communities is determined "bottom up" rather than "top down." It depends on what the agents trying to figure out a way to live together come up with, rather than what a general moral principle implies for specific circumstances. It is at least conceivable that different groups of people would come up with different norms in the same

¹⁸⁴ Velleman describes this situation in terms of a dilemma the relativist faces: "If in calling behavior permissible for the Sherpas, he means 'permitted by the Sherpas' or 'permissible according to the Sherpas', then he fails to rule out the possibility that permissibility is a myth. If he means that the behavior is permissible for the Sherpa to engage in, he fails to rule out the possibility of a universal norm that yields that verdict when applied to their circumstances though not ours" (Velleman 2015, 28).

external circumstances. Therefore, the variation in moral norms Velleman's account allows for goes beyond the kind of variation that is explicable in terms of differences in circumstances. On this view, distinct and potentially conflicting sets of moral norms can be genuinely valid in different contexts. However, while Velleman's argument depends on a view of what moral relativism amounts to that is well motivated; this view is not without alternative. In the next section, I will shed some light on alternative ways of understanding moral relativism by considering the consequences of Velleman's argument for other versions of moral relativism.

4.4. The Consequences of Velleman's Argument

Velleman's argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress can be stated in terms of the outline of the form a relativist metaethics, according to him, should take. Therefore, it can be understood as entailing that not only a particular kind of moral relativism – his own version – has the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress, but that, insofar as they are commensurate with the outline he suggests, other versions of moral relativism should have the resources to do so as well. This suggests that – although moral progress is rarely explicitly discussed by other moral relativists – it is possible to identify resources to account for the possibility of moral progress in other versions of moral relativism as well. According to Velleman's argument, these resources would be connected to their account of the local validity of moral norms. However, looking at the details of the respective versions of moral relativism developed by Harman, Williams, Rovane, and Wong provides a more complicated picture. In this section, I will explore the consequences Velleman's argument has for these versions of moral relativism and draw some conclusions about the scope of the argument.

4.4.1. David Wong's "Pluralistic Relativism" and Moral Progress

According to Wong's view of morality, communities construct systems of moral norms to fulfill the functions of inter-personal and intra-personal coordination, that is, to organize cooperative social arrangements and help individuals to integrate different psychological dispositions (see Chapter 1.2.5.). In *Natural Moralities*, Wong mentions "moral progress" only twice and on neither occasion does he consider the question whether his account of morality implies an account of moral progress. In both passages he takes a deflationist attitude to the idea of moral progress and suggests that his version of relativism is in tension at least with some ideas of what such progress would amount to. In the first of these passages, he explains why, in fact, many modern moralities are taken to have universal scope, in the sense that their norms and principles are understood as applying to everyone rather than just the members of a specific group. According to Wong, this is not a necessary feature of an adequate morality. He conjectures that it developed in order to facilitate cooperation between different groups or, less optimistically, because groups that attempted to dominate other groups needed to gain (at least partial) consent (Wong 2006, 62–64). Wong concludes this explanation with the following remark:

The story I have told of the origin of universalistic, impersonal elements of morality may not seem to confer an exalted status on them. It may seem unsatisfactory to those who believe that

the undistorted application of these elements to increasing numbers of people has constituted much of what one would call moral progress. (2006, 63)

In the second passage, he voices the following warning: “It is presumptuous to assume that others can make moral progress only if they adopt Western liberal values” (2006, 93). Nevertheless, there is reason to suspect that Wong’s version of moral relativism has the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress. This is because, in the course of developing his argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress, Velleman points out a highly relevant similarity between his own view of morality and Wong’s: both of their views can be understood as “functionalist” views of morality; that is, they both assume that moral norms serve a certain function. Functionalist views of morality imply a conception of moral progress: any change that allows a system of moral norms to better fulfill its function constitutes moral progress. According to Wong’s functionalist view of morality, moral norms serve two different functions, inter-personal and intra-personal coordination. It is a constraint on adequate moralities that they manage to balance the different and potentially conflicting requirements that derive from these different functions. As Kitcher, who develops a functionalist account of morality and moral progress that is similar in this respect, points out, stipulating a multiplicity of functions allows for more nuanced judgments about moral progress:

In general, when there are gains and losses with respect to different functions, three possibilities arise: (1) because the balance is significantly greater on one side (the gains are much larger than the losses), the modification is overall progressive (or regressive); (2) although there is no overall verdict, the modification can be partitioned, and some newly introduced elements make progress, while the rest are regressive; (3) the situation is so thoroughly mixed that neither an overall judgment nor a recognition of progressive and regressive aspects is possible. (Kitcher 2011, 260)

It thus seems that – although Wong shows no sign of taking his view to imply a conception of moral progress – we can indeed identify the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress in Wong’s version of moral relativism, along the lines of Velleman’s argument. Wong provides an account for why different moral systems are locally valid and this account, in turn, provides a criterion for assessing change as progressive or regressive, which is present in all relevant contexts. While Wong does not discuss moral progress in any detail, he does make the following remark, which captures the basic idea behind a functionalist understanding of moral progress: “If moralities are those parts of culture that have inter- and intrapersonal coordinating functions, it would not be surprising that they can perform those

functions more or less well” (Wong 2011, 418). However, he does not draw out the consequences this has for the question of progress.

4.4.2. Gilbert Harman’s “Conventionalism” and Moral Progress

According to Harman’s version of moral relativism, moral norms are the upshot of an implicit agreement in conditional intentions that people of various powers and resources reach via a process of often implicit but sometimes explicit “moral bargaining” (see Chapter 1.2.1.). Harman thus gives an account of the validity of moral norms: what makes them binding is that they are the outcome of the relevant kind of agreement. While Harman does not address the question of moral progress explicitly, he devotes a good amount of discussion to the topic of possible changes in the agreements of a community through re-negotiation.¹⁸⁵ Although Harman does not discuss the possibility of moral progress explicitly, Velleman’s argument would lead us to expect that this suffices to establish a criterion of moral progress. However, whether the account of the validity of moral norms that Harman offers leads to a criterion of moral progress is less clear than in the case of Wong. While Harman’s view resembles Wong’s view in the sense that they are both versions of “social constructivism,” Harman’s view does not have the functionalist aspect of Wong’s view that allows the latter to give a straightforward account of the possibility of moral progress.¹⁸⁶ In order to determine whether it does entail a conception of moral progress, Harman’s view needs to be considered in more detail.

Harman takes it to be a major advantage of his view of morality that, in virtue of referring to moral bargaining, it can explain a feature of our moral views that might otherwise seem puzzling: the relative priority of the duty not to harm over the duty to help:

[T]he hypothesis that morality derives from an agreement among people of varying powers and resources provides a plausible explanation. The rich, the poor, the strong, and the weak would all benefit if all were to try to avoid harming one another. So everyone could agree to that arrangement. But the rich and the strong would not benefit from an arrangement whereby everyone would try to do as much as possible to help those in need. The poor and weak would get all of the benefit of this latter arrangement. Since the rich and the strong could foresee that they would be required to do most of the helping and that they would receive little in return,

¹⁸⁵ Because “[s]ignificant renegotiation must occur in the political realm” (Harman 1996, 24), Harman’s view of these kinds of re-negotiations connects morality closely to politics: “Moral arguments can involve not only argument over the consequences of basic demands but also bargaining over the basic demands themselves. Morality is continuous with politics” (2000d, 49).

¹⁸⁶ Except perhaps in the very rudimentary sense that is implicit in statement such as the following: “People come to accept certain rules and values in order to get along with each other” (2000a, 163).

they would be reluctant to agree to a strong principle of mutual aid. A compromise would be likely and a weaker principle would probably be accepted. (Harman 1975, 12f)¹⁸⁷

However, Harman also considers a possible objection to his view based on this explanation of the relative priority of moral norms: namely, that the explanation undermines rather than justifies the moral norms in question:

[I]t might be thought that there is something unjust about agreements whose outcome is affected by the differences in power relationships among the affected parties. It may not seem fair that poor people should have to accept only limited help from wealthy people simply because of the bargaining strength of wealthy people. (1996, 27f)¹⁸⁸

According to the objection, there is something problematic about agreements reached by parties of vastly different powers. However, the claim that moral bargaining can happen between parties of different powers and still result in a binding agreement is what does the work in Harman's explanation of the priority of the duty not to harm over the duty to help.¹⁸⁹ The objection thus threatens to undermine his argument. Now there is a view in the vicinity of Harman's view that could avoid this kind of objection. According to this kind of view, moral norms are the upshots of agreements, but in order to be able to ground the validity of moral norms, the relevant agreement has to be subject to certain constraints, such as, for example, that the agreement is reached between people occupying roughly equal bargaining positions. That Harman does not want to go this way becomes clear in the course of his answer to the objection that power differences invalidate agreements. Moreover, Harman explicitly rejects a closely related view, which he calls "hypothetical contract theory" or "hypothetical agreement theory." According to this kind of view, moral norms are the upshot of a hypothetical agreement that would be reached under somewhat idealized conditions. According to Harman, in claiming that "one ought to act in accordance with the rules that would be accepted under certain ideal conditions rather than the rules that have actually been accepted in the real world" (2000d, 54), these kinds of views confuse "how one should act in an ideal world in

¹⁸⁷ Harman seems to assign great importance to this argument for his view, as he repeats it in various places, ranging from some of the earliest to some of the most recent statements of his view (see 1996, 24f, 2000c, 68f, 2000d, 47, 2015, 862).

¹⁸⁸ In "Moral Relativism Defended," Harman considers a slightly different version of this objection, understood as an objection to implicit agreement theories in general. According to this version of the objection, not all agreements are morally binding, for example, those made under compulsion or those made from a position of unfair disadvantage are not (1975, 16). This is a problem for implicit agreement theories because it seems to imply that there are moral norms which apply to, and are therefore prior to, agreements. Harman provides the same answer to both versions of the objection.

¹⁸⁹ That is to say, Harman does not idealize power inequalities away, but explicitly claims that they do not affect the validity of the norms generated and passed on under these circumstances (cf. Chapter 3.3.).

which everyone followed the best rules, with how one should act in the actual world in which people do not follow those rules” (2000d, 54, see also 2000c, 67).

The answer Harman gives to the objection that power differences invalidate agreements is complex. Because he assumes the truth of the agreement-based account of morality, he takes the objection to reveal an inconsistency between the content of an agreement and the conditions under which it has been reached. This makes it possible that in case the agreement has been reached under conditions that are considered unfair by the agreement itself, the content of the agreement provides resources to rectify this injustice (1975, 16f, 1996, 27–29). In “Moral Relativism Defended,” Harman illustrates this by discussing the example of a society with hereditary slavery in which aspects of the implicit agreement reached by this society speak against the practice of slavery and the resulting incoherence is covered up by a myth. In such a case, the agreement would be defective and would itself provide reasons for changing the agreement (1975, 17f). Harman contrasts this with the case of a society with hereditary slavery in which no such incoherence arises in the first place because no aspect of their agreement speaks against slavery. In this case too, the oppressed group can seek change through moral bargaining. In this context, Harman appeals to the idea that moral reasoning, as a form of practical reasoning, is subject to certain standards. In particular, it strives to attain a kind of “coherence” in attitudes through modifying an agent’s intentions. Harman describes the relevant kind of coherence as “something very like the explanatory coherence which is so important in theoretical reasoning” (1975, 20) and as involving “generality and lack of arbitrariness” (1975, 20). However, coherence is not the only relevant standard. In addition, Harman recognizes “conservatism or inertia” (1975, 20) as well as “an interest in satisfying basic desires or needs” (1975, 20). These standards play a role in Harman’s discussion of the example:

Considerer [sic] again the second hereditary slave society mentioned above. This society was to be one in which no aspects of the moral understanding shared by the masters spoke against slavery. In fact that is unlikely, since there is *some* arbitrariness in the idea that people are to be treated in different ways depending on whether they are born slave or free. Coherence of attitude will no doubt speak at least a little against the system of slavery. The point is that the factors of conservatism and desire might speak more strongly in favor of the *status quo*, so that, all things considered, the slave owners might have no reason to change their understanding.

One thing that distinguishes slaves from animals is that slaves can organize and threaten revolt, whereas animals cannot. Slaves can see to it that both coherence and desire oppose

conservatism, so that it becomes rational for the slave owners to arrive at a new, broader, more coherent understanding, one which includes the slaves.

It should be noted that coherence of attitude provides a constant pressure to widen the consensus and eliminate arbitrary distinctions. (1975, 21)

In this passage, Harman seems to argue that there is at least some reason to believe that the standards of practical reasoning favor a particular outcome: the abolition of slavery. This can be understood as providing resources to account for the possibility of progress, according to which a change is progressive if it is made in accord with constraints on practical reasoning.¹⁹⁰ However, because Harman recognizes different and potentially conflicting standards of practical reasoning, it is unclear whether these considerations suffice to provide a suitable criterion of moral progress.

Harman's discussion of the objection that power differences invalidate agreements in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* suggests that his account is not in fact sufficient to ground a conception of moral progress. In this context, Harman again interprets the idea that agreements reached from different positions of power as potentially leading to a tension within moral agreements: between their content and the way they came about. He considers four different ways to resolve this tension:

- to give up the explanation of the priority of not harming over helping;
- to give up the idea that agreements reached via moral bargaining are valid;
- to give up the idea that disagreements reached under these conditions are unjust;
- and, finally, to modify the agreement so that it becomes closer to one that could be reached under equal conditions (1996, 28f).

Harman takes the former two options to be disadvantageous and focuses on the latter two options, which he considers from the perspective of a possible re-negotiation: if re-negotiation were to occur, the strong would favor giving up the idea that the agreement is unjust, while the weak would favor modifying the agreement. Harman offers no resources based on his account of morality to distinguish between these two different developments. Instead, he points out that an impasse has been reached: "When there is a tension or inconsistency in a set of accepted moral principles, given certain factual assumptions, conflicting positions can be

¹⁹⁰ There is some similarity between these incipient stages of an account of moral progress implicit in Harman's discussion and Velleman's account of moral progress. Both draw on reflections about constraints on practical reasoning. Moreover, in response to a specific proposal based on Street's version of constructivism, Velleman phrases his own account in terms of coherence as the ultimate aim of practical reasoning: "The criterion of correctness that I will propose is a species of coherence, not just for aims but for all other evaluative attitudes and for actions as well. I will argue that this particular criterion is entrenched in the very nature of agency" (Velleman 2009, 126, n12). From the perspective of both accounts, "eliminating arbitrary distinctions" appears to be a particularly paradigmatic example of progressive change.

derived. The resulting dispute can only be resolved when some new, consistent consensus is reached” (1996, 29). Harman concludes by providing some inconclusive consideration in favor of giving up the idea that the agreement is unjust:

In fact, most people do not seem to think that vast differences in power by themselves make an agreement invalid. For example, it is widely thought that contracts made by individuals with large banks and other corporations are often legally and morally binding, despite extreme differences in bargaining power of those involved. So it is possible that there is no real problem here. (1996, 29)

Instead of expanding on the potential to explain that one of the options would constitute progress, Harman ultimately leaves it open to whatever will be the result of moral bargaining.¹⁹¹ Thus, while Harman does have something to say about what makes different moral codes valid – they are the outcome of implicit agreements – it seems that this account of the validity of moral norms cannot serve as the basis for an account of moral progress.

4.4.3. Bernard Williams’s “Relativism of Distance” and Moral Progress

According to Williams’ version of moral relativism, confrontations between different “ethical outlooks” can be “notional” rather than “real,” that is, the participants in one ethical outlook could not adopt the other one without losing their grip on reality. In these situations, appraisal of this other outlook from their point of view becomes pointless (see Chapter 1.2.2.). In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams describes the ways of life to which these ethical outlooks are connected as “a cultural artifact” people “have come to inhabit (though they have not consciously built it)” (Williams 1985, 147). However, Williams does not say much if anything about what makes the norms implicit in an ethical outlook valid, other than, perhaps, that we depend on some ethical outlook for practical guidance. Of course, from Williams’s point of view, this is no oversight: in *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, he is largely concerned with what he sees as various limitations of modern moral philosophy. This general skepticism includes a challenge of the idea that there is an “Archimedean point,” from which ethical considerations could be justified “from the ground up” (1985, 28). While Williams does not doubt that ethical considerations have normative force, he is skeptical about the idea that this force can be vindicated by philosophical theory. Since Williams’s view of relativism does not offer an account of the validity of moral norms, no such account can serve as a

¹⁹¹ Because the discussion in *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* is considerably more recent, the difference between this discussion and the more promising suggestions in “Moral Relativism Defended” might also be interpreted as indicating a shift in Harman’s views on the matter. Alternatively, the difference could be interpreted as being due to a difference between the cases. Because Harman does not discuss the topic of moral progress explicitly, it is difficult to adjudicate between these different possible interpretations.

resource to account for moral progress along the lines of Velleman's argument. Moreover, while Williams does not discuss the topic of moral progress directly, some of the themes he explicitly discusses seem to be in tension at least with certain notions of progress. Williams pays a lot of attention to the diachronic dimension of the variation of different systems of beliefs (see Chapter 3.2.2.). His main examples for notional confrontations are encounters with forms of life of the distant past, such as the ethical outlooks connected to "the life of a Greek Bronze Age chief, or a mediaeval Samurai" (1975, 224). In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams even restricts the possibility of notional confrontations to encounters with temporally, rather than spatially distant forms of life (1985, 163). The idea that it would be inappropriate to pass moral judgment concerning these forms of life undermines a certain conception of historical progress.

Another aspect that is in tension, at least with certain conceptions of what moral progress would amount to, is Williams's account of the significance of a possible convergence in ethical outlook. In *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams argues that judgments involving what he calls "thick concepts" – such as "treachery," "promise," "brutality," "courage" (1985, 129), "coward," "lie," "gratitude" (1985, 140) – present the best candidates for ethical knowledge because they are descriptive as well as evaluative. These concepts are action-guiding, but at the same time, their application is guided by the world. They are specific to particular ways of life and the ethical outlooks that go with them. According to Williams, if thick concepts are applied in line with their criteria of application, the resulting judgments can constitute ethical knowledge. He opposes the idea connected to the ideal of moral objectivity on the model of scientific objectivity that only reflective inquiry could lead to ethical knowledge. This is because reflective inquiry would be conducted in terms of more abstract concepts, such as "right," which, in contrast to thick concepts, are not guided by the world in their application. This leads to the counterintuitive and, as Williams points out, "notably un-Socratic" conclusion that "in ethics, *reflection can destroy knowledge*" (1985, 148). There is thus a disanalogy, on Williams's view, between convergence in science and convergence in ethical outlook: while convergence in science is best explained by scientific activity being guided by the external world, this is not the case when it comes to convergence in ethical outlook (1985, 136). Even if convergence on one ethical outlook would occur, this would not tell us anything about moral objectivity, but rather that, as a matter of contingent fact, ways of life have become uniform. As Rovane points out, Williams's discussion of convergence is in tension with at least certain conceptions of what constitutes progress (Rovane 2016, 279f). In particular, it undermines a certain kind of realist

view of moral progress as analogous to scientific progress, in which the idea of convergence on the truth plays an important role. However, the consequences of Williams's discussion of convergence for the question of moral progress are less straightforward than it might seem. For one, Williams does not ultimately counsel against reflection, but rather concedes that "[e]thical knowledge, though there is such a thing, is not necessarily the best ethical state" (Williams 1985, 168). Moreover, there are conceptions of moral progress that do not depend on the idea of convergence.¹⁹² Nevertheless, while none of these considerations based on Williams's work count decisively against the possibility of moral progress, his moral relativism seems to contain no resources for a positive account of moral progress and there is reason to think that at least certain conceptions of progress are incompatible with it.¹⁹³

4.4.4. Carol Rovane's "Multimundialism" and Moral Progress

While there are some crucial differences between Williams's version of moral relativism and Rovane's "Multimundialism" – perhaps most prominently concerning the question of realism (see Chapter 1.2.3.) – they have similar consequences regarding the question of moral progress. This is because Rovane takes the strongest case for her version of relativism in the moral domain to rest on a picture of morality "on which morals are unintended products of their historical and cultural situatedness" (Rovane 2013, 11), which she adopts from the work of Williams. Like Williams, Rovane provides little that could count as an account of the validity of moral norms. On her view, morals are the products of history and culture, which are, in turn, understood as the unintended by-products of intentional action (2013, 238). Thus, there is little in her view that can be identified in terms of resources for an account of moral progress along the lines of Velleman's argument.¹⁹⁴ In addition, when applied to the diachronic dimension of the variation of forms of life, Rovane's Multimundialism, much like

¹⁹² I will discuss this in detail in Chapter 5.2.

¹⁹³ Another part of Williams's work that might be taken to bear on the question at hand is Williams's discussion of ancient thought in *Shame and Necessity*. There, Williams opposes a specific understanding of the relationship between contemporary culture and the ancient Greeks, which he describes as "progressivist." According to this understanding, ancient Greek culture was ethically inferior or primitive, and later developments, in particular the replacement of the concept "shame" with the concept "guilt," present an ethical improvement (2008, 4f). Williams describes this kind of account as "deeply misleading, both historically and ethically" (2008, 5). However, while Williams's reasoning constitutes a refusal of a particular account of a supposed instance of moral progress, it does not license any conclusions about the possibility of moral progress as such. To the contrary, his claim that "there was progress in the Greek world itself" (2008, 7) seems to implicitly rely on a notion of moral progress.

¹⁹⁴ Because Rovane's version of moral relativism is supposed to be compatible with realism, her view could in principle be combined with a realist account of moral progress. However, this would only provide a limited account of moral progress, as it could not account for the case of "moral change" in Raz's sense of the term. In order to discharge the challenge, Rovane would have to either subscribe to the view that what is morally correct for a community can be specified once and for all with respect to some primordial stage of development, or face the question how she can account for change in the moral norms accepted by a community as progress or regress (see Chapter 3.1.).

Williams's relativism of distance, undermines a certain conception of historical progress. According to Rovane's version of moral relativism, different ways of life are "normatively insulated" from each other; that is, no logical relations hold between judgments made in these different contexts. In the domain of morals, logical relations take the form of a transitive ordering of options faced in moral deliberation (see Chapter 1.2.3.). On a Multimundialist view, ways of life that are separated by great temporal distance will be normatively insulated and thus cannot be meaningfully ranked. Therefore, in a way that is similar to Williams's conception of a notional confrontation, Rovane's conception of normative insularity undermines certain ideas of historical progress. While Rovane does not directly discuss the consequences of her view for the question of moral progress in *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, she does comment on them in a different text on moral relativism and its relationship to recognition. In "Relativism and Recognition," Rovane works out that both opponents and proponents of moral relativism can rely on moral considerations. While opponents of moral relativism point out that the disengaged stance of the Multimundialist "would close off a possibility of community" (2016, 281) thereby working "against human flourishing" (2016, 281), proponents point to the potential costs associated with the Unimundialist refusal to recognize that one's own moral views have only local validity:

[T]he moral concern here is that refusing to recognize this can be a moral mistake, a mistake that has arguably been repeated throughout the long human history of conquest and colonization, in which conquerors and colonizers wrongly assumed that any moral *differences* they encountered must be instances of ignorance and error. (2016, 281)¹⁹⁵

In order to lend support to the claim that the resistance to moral relativism that she associates with the philosophical tradition deriving from the work of Hegel and Marx is itself morally motivated, Rovane raises the question whether Hegel and Marx could be considered Multimundialists. She concludes that they could not have been Multimundialists: although they acknowledge that certain forms of life are not available at certain points in time, their progressivist readings of history depend on the possibility of comparing different forms of life in different historical epochs nevertheless (2016, 276). As mentioned above, Rovane reads Williams's discussion of convergence as opposed to the kind of progressivist understanding of history that she takes to be central to the philosophies of Hegel and Marx (2016, 279f). She takes Williams's view of the significance of convergence in the moral domain to constitute an

¹⁹⁵ In *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, Rovane raises a similar concern with respect to the practical stance associated with Unimundialism: "As is well known, this approach to moral difference has prompted misplaced missionary zeal, misguided efforts at social planning and control, imperial adventures justified as pedagogical projects, and so on" (2013, 269).

argument against progressivist views of history and thereby in favor of moral relativism. According to her, this argument comes into its full force once it is recognized that history cannot be brought directly under our intentional control:

Insofar as that is so, then *it simply isn't appropriate to attempt any comparative moral evaluation of different forms of life*. Why should this *not* be appropriate? Because moral evaluation is pointless if it cannot be action-guiding. Thus, comparative moral evaluation of whole forms of life would be *pointful* only if we could make and unmake them at will—and to suppose that we could would be to suppose that history is indeed under our intentional control. (2016, 283)

This emphasizes a point about the relation between moral relativism and moral progress that is implicit in Rovane's as well as Williams's view of the matter: according to their versions of moral relativism, moral evaluation only has a point if it can offer practical guidance. Judgments about historical progress, however, depend on comparative judgments about different ways of life that are pointless because they cannot be action-guiding.¹⁹⁶

While, like Williams, Rovane does not offer an account of the validity of moral norms that could serve as a criterion of moral progress, there is another aspect of Rovane's discussion of moral relativism that could serve as a resource for an account of moral progress – although she herself does not explore it as such. This is her discussion of the role of personhood. In “Relativism and Recognition,” Rovane argues that the notion of “universal and mutual recognition among all persons of their shared status as persons” (2016, 264) – while it might seem in tension with moral relativism – in fact does not present a reason to oppose moral relativism on moral grounds. This is because both Unimundialism and Multimundialism are connected to practical attitudes that are only meaningfully adopted with respect to another *person*. As well as the engagement associated with Unimundialism, the detachment associated with Multimundialism thus requires recognition and is not in tension with it (2016, 284). In *The Metaphysics and Ethics of Relativism*, Rovane similarly argues that adopting the disengaged stance of the Multimundialist is compatible with recognizing others as persons (2013, 264–66). The notion of personhood, thus, plays a special role in Rovane's account. In contrast to other moral concepts that Rovane construes as “thick concepts” with only local applicability, the concept of personhood is a “universal concept” that holds a

¹⁹⁶ This is closely connected to Rovane's view that what she calls “directed social change” is impossible. While it is plausible enough that it is one of the points of judgments of progress to be action-guiding and that history cannot be brought under anyone's “intentional control,” Rovane's reasoning seems to depend on the implausible assumption that human beings cannot do anything whatsoever to try to change their way of life (see also Chapter 3.1.).

“distinctive moral significance” (2013, 264).¹⁹⁷ Part of its significance is that failing to recognize someone’s status as a person constitutes a specific moral wrong:

It also follows that one way in which a person can *morally wrong* another person is by failing to duly acknowledge their personhood, along with the distinctive moral significance that follows upon it. Historically, this has happened when certain polities have failed to extend certain political rights to members of certain groups (such as when the United States did not grant suffrage, and other rights laid down by the U.S. Constitution, to women and African American slaves). (2013, 264f)

Rovane’s considerations of personhood, which serve to ground her assessment of the withholding of voting rights as a particular kind of moral wrong, seem to establish a standard that transcends particular historical and cultural contexts and that could thus serve as a criterion of moral progress. They provide the resources to account for at least certain changes that can be understood as giving persons due recognition as persons – such as, for example, the granting of previously withheld voting rights – as progressive.¹⁹⁸ However, Rovane does not acknowledge this; and, thus, the consequences of her version of moral relativism for the question whether relativists can account for progress are mostly negative.

4.4.5. The Scope of Velleman’s Argument

Although Velleman does not explicitly claim this, his argument can be understood as implying that any version of moral relativism that has the form that he suggests a relativist metaethics should take will have the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress. While none of the moral relativists discussed in this section explicitly develop an account of moral progress, their views have different implications with respect to the possibility of moral progress. Although Wong does not acknowledge this, his version of moral relativism implies a conception of moral progress. According to his functionalist view of morality, any change that allows a system of moral norms to better fulfill the functions of inter- and intra-personal coordination constitutes progress. This is in line with Velleman’s argument. Wong’s functionalist view of morality is commensurate with the outline of a relativist metaethics

¹⁹⁷ This is because “person” is not a purely moral concept, but also a metaphysical and psychological concept that applies in nonmoral contexts (2013, 266f, n39).

¹⁹⁸ The resulting account of moral progress would be similar to the one that follows from Axel Honneth’s theory of recognition, which Rovane engages with in “Relativism and Recognition.” According to Honneth’s account of recognition, many social struggles follow a pattern: they are motivated by the moral experience of disrespect, that is, violations of expectations of recognition. When these experiences are systematic for a group of people, they can lead to the formation of social movements that seek to articulate their shared experience and, ultimately, to overcome them by establishing more encompassing relations of recognition. The development of societies is interpreted as an idealized sequence of struggles for recognition that leads to an expansion of relationships of recognition and thereby constitute a moral learning process or moral progress (Honneth 1996, 160–70).

suggested by Velleman and his account of the local validity of moral norms simultaneously establishes a criterion of progressive development. Harman presents a more difficult case. While he provides an account of the validity of moral norms as well (being the upshot of an implicit agreement), this account ultimately does not suffice to establish a criterion of moral progress. This is because the criterion of validity cannot be fulfilled to varying degrees and thus cannot ground comparative judgments of any kind. As far as Harman's metaethical view is concerned, any agreement is as good as any other.

Two different conclusions could be drawn at this point. The fact that Harman's version of moral relativism does not contain the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress, although it does offer an account of the validity of different sets of moral norms, could be interpreted as indicating that Velleman's argument needs to be restricted. It is, after all, not the case that any relativist metaethical theory that follows the outline Velleman suggests supplies a criterion of moral progress. This would mean that the argument in terms of the outline of the form any relativist metaethical theory should take does not actually hold up to critical scrutiny and that stronger assumptions need to be made in order for the argument to be valid. Alternatively, the fact that Harman's version of moral relativism does not contain the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress could be interpreted as indicating that it does not, after all, follow the outline Velleman suggests for a relativist metaethical theory. It is possible to argue that Harman's view, according to which moral agreements are valid in spite of being reached under conditions of power inequalities, amounts to what Scanlon calls a "debunking" version of relativism, that is, a view that undermines rather than justifies the authority of moral claims. In any case, Harman's view brings out a further requirement for moral relativists to be able to account for moral progress: not just any account of the validity of moral norms will suffice to entail a criterion of moral progress, but the account of validity needs to supply a criterion that can be met to varying degrees.

With respect to Williams and Rovane, whose version of moral relativism builds on Williams's moral philosophy, the situation is even more complicated. They do not offer an account of the validity of moral norms at all, and while some resources to account for progress can be identified independently in Rovane's account of personhood, both ultimately provide reasons to think that their views are incompatible with an account of moral progress. Because they do not offer an account of the validity of moral norms at all, their views do not follow the outline Velleman suggests for a relativist metaethics. However, from the perspective of Williams's moral philosophy, this is no oversight. While Williams does not

challenge the validity of at least some moral norms that are part of ethical outlooks, he is skeptical about moral philosophy's ability to ground their validity. Nevertheless, Williams's version of moral relativism can be understood as a view that is distinct from skepticism and nihilism because it assumes the (local) validity of moral norms, yet does not imply an explicit account of their authority because it is skeptical about the possibilities of philosophical argument.¹⁹⁹ This shows that relativism can be understood in different ways and whether a version of moral relativism has the resources to account for moral progress depends on the exact way relativism is understood.

In this chapter, I have reconstructed and discussed Velleman's argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. I have distinguished four different versions of this argument. It can be made in terms of the general outline any relativist metaethical theory, according to Velleman, should take, in terms of functionalist views of morality, in terms of Velleman's specific version of a functionalist view of morality, or in terms of the version of constitutivism that is in the background of this version of a functionalist view of morality (see Chapter 4.1. and 4.2.). I have argued that, in spite of implying an account of moral progress, Velleman's view still counts as a version of moral relativism. However, I have also shown that, in spite of Velleman's argument, not all of the versions of moral relativism that I focus on imply the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress. This shows that, while the understanding of what moral relativism amounts to underlying Velleman's view is well motivated, there are other ways to understand moral relativism. Nevertheless, Velleman's version of moral relativism is particularly interesting because it can account for the local validity of moral norms, rather than just stipulating that different sets of moral norms are valid in different contexts. In addition, this account entails a conception of moral progress. In the next chapter, I will argue that the relativist conception of moral progress that follows from this type of view of morality has distinctive advantages over rival conceptions of moral progress.

¹⁹⁹ One of the possible ways to establish an "Archimedean point" from which to justify moral demands that Williams considers and rejects is along the lines of Kant's moral philosophy (Williams 1985, 29). That Williams's understanding of moral relativism differs from Velleman's understanding in this way dovetails with Velleman's description of his own view as a version of the "Kantian strategy" that occupies a middle-ground position between Kant and Williams.

5. Towards a Relativist Conception of Moral Progress

Velleman's argument shows that at least some versions of moral relativism have the resources to account for the possibility of moral progress. This is a surprising result and affects how moral relativism can be understood as well as how moral progress can be understood. The claim that moral relativists cannot account for the possibility of moral progress is often used as a reason to criticize relativism (see Chapter 1.4.). The underlying assumption is that being able to account for the possibility of moral progress is something a metaethical theory should be able to do. However, there are also important critiques of the discourse of progress, which have to do with the history of the notion and the way progress was conceptualized in eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy of history. These critiques cast doubt on the assumption that it is in fact desirable to be committed to a substantive conception of (moral) progress. While they target the discourse of progress in general, they have some – albeit indirect – bearing on how metaethical theories should conceive of moral progress. However, the conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism has distinctive advantages, which make it possible to go some way to responding to these objections. Because these features are due to the conception of moral progress following from a relativist understanding of morality, these advantages provide an indirect *pro tanto* argument in favor of this specific kind of moral relativism, based on considerations about the resulting conception of moral progress.²⁰⁰

In this chapter, I will further develop the conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism and argue that the resulting view of moral progress has distinctive advantages. I will begin by sketching what I take to be the main lines of critique of the discourse of progress (5.1.). Against this background, I will argue that Velleman's relativist conception of moral progress can avoid some of these problems because it makes it possible to conceptualize moral progress “without utopia” (5.2.). Subsequently, I will discuss an example of a paradigmatic kind of moral progress in order to highlight further advantages of Velleman's view (5.3). Finally, I will revisit some of the questions concerning moral disagreement and the possibility of criticism discussed in Chapter 2 in light of this assessment (5.4.).

²⁰⁰ The force of this argument depends on the assumptions that the relevant features are indeed advantages and that they are unique to conceptions of moral progress following from this kind of moral relativism. In what follows, I will try to make both of these assumptions plausible.

5.1. The Critique of the Discourse of Progress

It is important to note that the criticisms of the notion of progress I will be concerned with have not been put forward with contemporary metaethical conceptions of moral progress in mind. Rather, they pertain to the notion of progress as it emerged in Europe in the eighteenth century and shaped a discourse of progress that came to influence politics, social science, and, at least to some extent, everyday life. In the history of philosophy, it is most closely associated with European philosophies of history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. These philosophies of history can be, and have been understood as, epitomizing the modern discourse of progress – both being influenced by, and contributing to it. Therefore, the criticisms I focus on are best understood against the background of the history of the concept of progress and its relation to philosophy of history.

As many commentators point out, the notion of progress is a specifically modern concept that emerged in Europe as a response to a specific historical experience of accelerated change (see e.g. Koselleck 2002; von Wright 1997). Its beginnings can be traced back to the Renaissance, but it is most closely associated both with the period of time, and the tradition of thought, commonly referred to as the Enlightenment. As Reinhart Koselleck puts it, “progress is a modern category whose content of experience and whose surplus of expectation was not available before the eighteenth century” (Koselleck 2002, 219). The experience of accelerated change that the notion of progress is supposed to cope with occurs in a historical context shaped by, among other things, modern science and technology, industrialization and the development of capitalism, and the encounter with other cultures through conquest and colonialism. Von Wright in particular emphasizes the intimate connection between the modern notion of progress and the development of natural science, claiming that “[t]he origin of modern ideas of progress is coincidental with that of modern, empirical, and exact science” (von Wright 1997, 3). Being both “*accumulative* and *transcultural*” (1997, 4), science – mediated through technology – can be understood both as a model for and a cause of progress in other domains. While, as Koselleck remarks, experiences of transformations that are for the better or worse for those involved are to be found “whenever humans are involved in histories” (Koselleck 2002, 221), the modern concept of progress that is shaped in the eighteenth century expresses a very specific understanding of change for the better that is closely connected to a specific understanding of history. Rather than a view of progress as something that happens or fails to happen in the course of history, it is a view of history itself as progressive.

The modern notion of progress relies on an understanding of historical time as linear. According to von Wright, what he calls “the Great Idea of Progress,” “rests upon a *linear* conception of time as a directed succession of events, proceeding from a remote past, through the present, to a distant future” (von Wright 1997, 2). While such an understanding of historical time may seem without alternative today, it can be contrasted with views of history in terms of cycles or worldly decline, which are ascribed to earlier historical periods. Von Wright, for example, points out that the linear view of historical time associated with the modern idea of progress was foreign to ancient and early Christian thought.²⁰¹ According to Koselleck, synonyms of progress were rarely used in Antiquity, and periods of progress were often described as followed by (or contrasted with) periods of decline, leading to a cyclical understanding of historical time, describing a movement between “finite, pregiven possibilities” (Koselleck 2002, 221). If progress is observed, it is only relative and partial and does not lead into a better future (2002, 222). If an overall historical process is described at all, it is described in terms of decline, such as in the late antique self-interpretation according to which the world is in a state of old-age (2002, 223). This understanding of world history in terms of decline was shared by early Christian interpretations of history, which came to dominate in the Middle Ages. These Christian conceptions of history, however, were mediated by a “two world doctrine,” wherein worldly decline was contrasted with a different kind of progress, which is spiritual. This led to a view of history in which worldly demise is opposed to spiritual ascent (2002, 223).

In contrast to this, the modern idea of progress combines a view of historical time as linear with a decidedly optimistic stance of expectation toward the future. It conceives of the future as open, in the sense that genuinely new developments are possible, but at the same time, it is assumed that it will bring improvement rather than demise.²⁰² In this respect, the modern notion of progress can be and has been understood as the “secular heir” of early Christian interpretations of history, as is pointed out, for example, by von Wright: “The idea of progress which had its final breakthrough during the Enlightenment can rightly be regarded as a secularized heir to the Christian salvation story” (von Wright 1997, 5). In a similar vein, Theodor Adorno states that “[t]he aspect of redemption, no matter how secularized, cannot be removed from the concept of progress” (Adorno 2005, 148, see also 2008, 150). While the early Christian understanding of progress mediated by the doctrine of two worlds contrasted

²⁰¹ As Von Wright puts it, the “Great Idea of Progress” is neither part of “our Greco Roman” nor our “Judeo-Christian” legacy (1997, 2).

²⁰² There is at least a possible tension between the idea that the future is open and the idea that it will lead to improvement – in particular in the context of philosophies of history that view progress in terms of a predetermined goal of history.

spiritual progress with worldly demise – thereby obstructing “the interpretation of the earthly future in progressive terms” (Koselleck 2002, 224)²⁰³ – the modern notion of progress inherits the dimension of salvation but transposes it into the course of world history.

Because it is taken to pertain to “history” or “humanity” itself, progress is conceived as all-encompassing in two different senses. On the one hand, it is all-encompassing in the sense that it is “universal”; that is, it pertains to humanity or history itself, rather than to a particular group of people or a particular region of the world – at least in the long run. On the other hand, it is taken to be “total,” in the sense that it pertains to all domains of human life in unison. As Koselleck (who focuses on the German term “*Fortschritt*”) puts it:

Progress (*der Fortschritt*), a term first put forth by Kant, was now a word that neatly and deftly brought the manifold of scientific, technological, and industrial meanings of progress, and finally also those meanings involving social morality and even the totality of history, under a common concept. (2002, 229)

As von Wright points out, modern science plays a particularly important role in this mode of thinking. While science has its own internal standards of progress, it is also taken to contribute to progress external to it, in particular to what von Wright calls “hedonic progress” (von Wright 1997, 6), that is, to making life “easier and more enjoyable” (1997, 6) by means of technological advances. While hedonic progress can be distinguished from what von Wright calls a “moralist” (1997, 7) view of progress, according to which progress consists in the moral betterment of humans, these two notions of progress are sometimes conflated, based on the implicit assumption “that when life becomes easier it will also become more civilized and humane” (1997, 7). According to von Wright, this specific constellation of scientific-technological, hedonic, and moral progress is constitutive of what he calls the “Great Idea of Progress,” which he characterizes as the thought that scientific-technological progress plays an instrumental role in promoting hedonic and moral progress – “the accumulative and linear nature of the first being a warrant of life becoming progressively easier and manners more civilized” (1997, 7).

The assumption that progress is all-encompassing and steady leads to a strong asymmetry between progress and regression that is characteristic of the modern notion of progress. While progress is constant and necessary, regressions can and have to be interpreted

²⁰³ Adorno discusses the conformist consequences of this aspect of the early Christian understanding of history in connection with Augustine’s conception of progress as something “interior”: “*Civitas terrena* and *civitas dei* are held to be invisible realms, and no one can say who among the living belongs to the one or the other; that decision is made by the secret election to grace, the same divine will that moves history in accordance with its plan. Yet already in Augustine, according to the insight of Karl Heinz Haag, the interiorization of progress allows the world to be assigned to the powers that be and therefore, as with Luther later, Christianity is to be commended because it preserves the political state” (Adorno 2005, 155, see also 2008, 160f).

as temporary set-backs that will ultimately contribute to ever greater progress. As Koselleck puts it:

During the eighteenth century and in the time since then, it has become a widespread belief that progress is general and constant while every regression, decline, or decay occurs only partially and temporarily. [...] the asymmetry between progress and decline is no longer related to the next world, on the one hand, and this world, on the other, as in the Christian Middle Ages, but rather progress has become a world historical category whose tendency is to interpret all regressions as temporary and finally even as the stimulus for new progress. (Koselleck 2002, 227)²⁰⁴

This understanding of progress is epitomized in philosophies of history of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which postulate both a *telos* of history and a mechanism of historical development, which guarantees, or at least gives reason to expect, that this *telos* will be reached. Progress is thus conceived as a general historical tendency that transcends individual human agency.²⁰⁵ As Allen points out, in spite of their many differences, the philosophies of history of Kant, Hegel, and Marx can and have been understood as following this pattern.²⁰⁶ They postulate a *telos* of history as well as a mechanism that drives history toward this goal, thus conceptualizing historical progress as “a necessary, inevitable, and unified process” (Allen 2016, 7):

Whether operating through the mechanism of a purposive nature, which uses evil to produce good, or of the cunning of reason, which behind men’s backs and over their heads rationalizes existing reality, or of the development of the forces and relations of production, which sows the seeds for communist revolution, these classical philosophies of history understood progress to be necessary (though they had somewhat different views on how much of a role individuals should or could play in bringing about that necessary development) and unified (as occurring more or less simultaneously across society as a whole). Moreover, these classical philosophies of history rested on metaphysically loaded conceptions of the goal or *telos*

²⁰⁴ This characteristic asymmetry is highlighted by Koselleck’s discussion, which focuses on the development of the modern notion of progress and the way it affects changes in the relative position to the notion of decline. He traces this transformation through three phases: while in Antiquity progress and regress start out as “*oppositional* concepts of equal rank” (2002, 221) and are frequently employed as “*concepts of succession*” (2002, 221), they become “*correlational concepts*” (2002, 224) in the Middle Ages, contrasting spiritual progress with worldly decline. In modern times, the relationship between the notions of progress and decline is marked by an asymmetry: “Progress and decline fell into an asymmetric relationship of tension, something that permitted Enlightenment intellectuals to interpret any decay and any detour as a step that would be followed by even more rapid progress” (2002, 231).

²⁰⁵ This aspect of the notion is also pointed out by Koselleck, who characterizes progress at the outset as combining a temporal perspective and an evaluative commitment with a “transpersonal subject of action” (2002, 219).

²⁰⁶ While Velleman’s metaethics is “kinda Kantian,” in the sense that it can be understood as a modified variant of Kantian constructivism, it does not inherit the aspects of Kant’s view that are relevant to Allen’s discussion because he does not draw on Kant’s philosophy of history.

toward which progress aimed, whether that was understood as the realization of the kingdom of ends on earth, the attainment of the standpoint of Absolute knowing, or communist utopia. (2016, 7)²⁰⁷

These “mechanisms” of historical development that Allen appeals to guarantee that progress is all-encompassing, both in the sense that it pertains to all domains of human life and all of humanity, and that it is (at least more or less) linear. Because of the interpretation they tend to give to regressions, philosophies of history that portray progress as necessary can be and have been linked to the theological notion of *theodicy*, that is, an explanation of evil in the world that reconciles it with the idea that it has been created by a good God. This parallel is pointed out, for example, by von Wright:

These obvious truths notwithstanding [that while there is scientific and technological progress, the hedonic and moral condition of humans is open to progress as well as regress, K.S.], attempts have been made to underpin belief in progress with technological arguments. Examples are Adam Smith’s notion of the “invisible hand” or Hegel’s related though more speculative idea of the “cunning of reason” (*List der Vernunft*). Their purpose can be said to have been to argue that apparent set-backs to progress have an inherent self-correcting tendency which promotes a favourable balance of progress over regress in the long run. The ideas of Smith and Hegel can be seen as mundane heirs to Leibniz’s *théodicée* and related to attempts to reconcile the existence of evil with the goodness of a transcendent ruler of the world. (von Wright 1997, 11)²⁰⁸

The modern understanding of history in terms of progress leads to a variety of tensions and discrepancies with historical experience afflicting the discourse of progress, which give rise to different kinds of criticism, many of which are as old as the discourse of progress itself. One of these lines of criticism concerns the idea that progress is all-encompassing in the sense that it is total and, in particular, the idea that it includes moral progress. It is often pointed out that, contrary to what is often assumed in the context of the modern discourse of progress, progress in other domains of life – such as scientific-technological progress – need not necessarily lead to progress in morality. As Koselleck puts this point:

[A]s soon as our category was filled with meaning, a discrepancy was already discovered to exist between the technological progress of civilization and the moral stance of humans. It was

²⁰⁷ All of these authors can be and have been interpreted in more subtle ways. However, more sophisticated reconstructions are often developed with an interest to develop a reading that can still be relevant today rather than the most historically accurate interpretation (see e.g. Honneth 2007).

²⁰⁸ Von Wright makes an exception for Kant, who posits progress as a “postulate of practical reason” (1997, 11), but, as the passage from Allen shows, Kant’s philosophy of history – in particular with respect to the role he ascribes to antagonism – can be and has been interpreted as stipulating a similar mechanism.

noticed again and again that morality hobbled along behind technology and its development. (Koselleck 2002, 235)

On the one hand, it is sometimes argued that progress in civilization can lead to specific phenomena of moral regression – a line of thought that is often associated with conservative outlooks, which idealize the ways of life of earlier historical periods.²⁰⁹ On the other hand, it is often pointed out that, absent moral progress, technological advances can and have led to mass-destruction rather than an improvement of the human condition (2002, 233).

A second line of criticism of the modern discourse of progress concerns the asymmetry between progress and regression that is characteristic of the modern discourse of progress. This line of criticism is closely connected to the claim that scientific-technological progress can contribute to moral evil rather than progress in morality. In response to historical catastrophes, in particular the Holocaust, criticisms along these lines have gained new force in the course of the twentieth century and have come to challenge the notion of progress more thoroughly. This stance is expressed by Adorno in a 1964 lecture:

After Auschwitz, a regression that has already *taken place* and is not merely expected à la Spengler, not only every positive doctrine of progress but also even every assertion that history has a *meaning* has become problematic and affirmative. There is here a transformation of quantity into quality. Even if the murder of millions could be described as an exception and not the expression of a trend (the atom bomb), any appeal to the idea of progress would seem absurd given the scale of the catastrophe. (Adorno 2008, 4)²¹⁰

As Adorno points out, the conspicuous discrepancy between the idea of steady progress and the catastrophe of the Holocaust, which is frequently interpreted as a complete breach with civilization, makes talk about progress seem implausible, misplaced, and, as he puts it, absurd.²¹¹ One of the consequences of this mismatch is that talk about progress cannot give

²⁰⁹ As Koselleck points out, this kind of critique is often associated with the writings of Rousseau (2002, 231f).

²¹⁰ While most of Adorno's lectures from the winter semester 1964/65 are printed based on audiotape transcriptions, some, including the one I am quoting from, are published only in the form of notes made by Adorno as the basis of his lecture as well as notes by Hilmar Tillack, who attended the lectures (see 2008, 267). While Adorno's own notes are quite succinct, Tillack's notes, which are based on what Adorno in fact said during the lecture, are more extensive. The quote given above is based on Adorno's own notes, but subsequent quotes are based on Tillack's. They can be understood as elaborations on the initial quote.

²¹¹ Adorno's claim that "any appeal to the idea of progress would seem absurd" chimes with Nagel's characterization of the absurd in terms of a "conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality" (Nagel 1971, 718). Velleman has argued that, by pointing to the discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality, Nagel succeeds at characterizing the ridiculous rather than the absurd and that Nagel's view of the absurd is better understood in terms of a clash between two different perspectives available to us: one from which we take our pursuits seriously and one from which they appear as arbitrary or rather peculiar and specific (Velleman 2015, 119–25, see Chapter 2.4.3.). This connects with a different formulation Adorno provides in the course of the lecture: "The catastrophe there was not just a disaster predicted by Spengler, but an actual reality, one that makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem *ludicrous*" (Adorno 2008, 7, my emphasis). The original German phrase "macht den Fortschritt zur Freiheit zu *etwas Läppischem*" (2001, 14, my

any guidance in the historical situation.²¹² But to think of history in terms of progress not only becomes absurd; in addition, Adorno suggests that there is something morally problematic about it. He associates this aspect with an “affirmative” view of history, which he characterizes as follows: “Confronted with the fact that Auschwitz was possible, that politics could merge directly with mass murder, the affirmative mentality becomes the mere assertion of a mind *that is incapable of looking horror in the face and that thereby perpetuates it*” (2008, 7, my emphasis). Adorno’s claim that talk of progress is “affirmative” in a morally problematic sense can be understood as targeting the tendency inherent in the modern idea of progress to interpret regressions as temporary set-backs in an overall progressive development. It expresses the worry that by interpreting periods of regression in terms of temporary set-backs or even as contributions to ever greater progress, talk of progress fails to do justice to regressions and those affected by them and that this itself constitutes a moral wrong:

And even if we do think of it as an exception and not the expression of a trend – although this latter is not implausible, given that the atom bomb and the gas chamber have certain catastrophic similarities – to do so is somehow absurd in the light of the scale of the disaster. What can it mean to say that the human race is making progress when millions are reduced to the level of objects?

Such things have a kind of retroactive force and demonstrate the extreme precariousness of the affirmative view of history. It raises the question whether the view of history as a continuous progression towards higher forms does not include the catastrophes that we are experiencing today; whether the predominance of the universal, the broad tendency, over the particular is not a delusion; whether the consolation of philosophy that the death of individuals is the price paid by the great movement of history was not always the swindle it is today; whether the sufferings of a single human being can be compensated for [*aufgehoben*] by the triumphal march of progress. (2008, 8)

In addition, Adorno’s claim that talk of progress is “affirmative” in a morally problematic sense can be understood as expressing a related worry sometimes associated with the discourse of progress, according to which thinking in terms of progress reconciles us with the way things are by portraying the “*status quo*” as an intermediary stage in an overall

emphasis), which has been translated as “makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem *ludicrous*” could also be translated as “makes all talk of progress towards freedom seem *ridiculous*.” In line with Nagel’s and Velleman’s discussion, Adorno’s remarks can be interpreted as claiming that, in the face of the horrors of the Holocaust, the discourse of progress can be seen as both ridiculous, due to a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality, and absurd, due to persistence in spite of reflective consciousness of this discrepancy.

²¹² Walter Benjamin even suggests that belief in progress contributed to the inability of political forces to avert fascism (Benjamin 2003, 393).

progressive development.²¹³ The common core of these closely related but distinct lines of thinking is the worry that the discourse of progress fails to do justice to regressions, in the sense of changes for the worse, and persistent evils more generally and to those affected by them.²¹⁴

A third line of criticism of the modern discourse of progress concerns the idea that progress is all-encompassing in the sense that it is universal. This line of critique is connected to the charge that, in spite of its universal pretensions, the discourse of progress is “Eurocentric.” There are, in fact, different ways in which the discourse of progress can rightly be taken to be “Eurocentric.” For one, as has been pointed out above, the notion of progress emerged in a specific historical context – eighteenth century Europe – in response to a particular historical experience. As Koselleck puts it: “The progress of modernity, despite its universal claim, reflects only a partial, self-consistent experience and, instead, masks or obscures other modes of experience for understandable reasons” (Koselleck 2002, 235).²¹⁵ Moreover, as both Koselleck and von Wright point out, the benefits of what has been perceived as progress have not in fact been evenly extended to the rest of the world (Koselleck 2002, 234; von Wright 1997, 9f). These aspects are closely connected to a further and related sense in which the discourse of progress is Eurocentric that gives rise to this kind of critique: the discourse of progress is Eurocentric in that it relies on the assumption that the development of Europe can be understood as setting the standards for what counts as progress in general. Because of this assumption, while progress is conceptualized as global, it is often assumed that for other parts of the world progress can only consist in assimilation to European ways of life. The modern discourse of progress thus gives rise to a notion of progress along the lines of what Thomas McCarthy calls a “convergence model of progress,” on which “progress in cultivation, civilization, and moralization is and will continue to be a process of

²¹³ This relates to the danger of “idolizing” (*vergötzen*) history that Adorno discusses in connection with Augustine’s philosophy of history. Adorno describes the notion of progress as in abeyance between worldly facticity and the idea of reconciliation, constantly threatening to collapse into one or the other: “If progress is equated with redemption as transcendental intervention per se, then it forfeits, along with the temporal dimension, its intelligible meaning and evaporates into ahistorical theology. But if progress is mediatized into history, then the idolization of history threatens and with it, both in the reflection of the concept as in reality, the absurdity that it is progress itself that inhibits progress” (2005, 147, see also 2008, 148).

²¹⁴ A similar worry seems to underlie Robin Celikates’s criticisms, which target conceptions of progress in terms of “learning-processes” in particular. Celikates expresses this kind of concern, for example, when he points out that despite the formal abolition of slavery, informal forms of slavery persist. The discourse of progress, according to which slavery has become something unthinkable, threatens to obscure this significant fact, “blocking our insight into the complex ways in which social transformations actually occur and slavery and other practices and institutions continue to shape our present” (Celikates 2018, 144).

²¹⁵ In light of the other aspects of the Eurocentrism of the notion of progress to be discussed and which Koselleck does not consider, his claim that other viewpoints are obscured “for understandable reasons” appears problematic.

diffusion from the West to the rest of the world” (McCarthy 2009, 66f).²¹⁶ Given the actual plurality of ways of life, the assumption that progress must lead to convergence is presumptuous, in particular, when it is combined with the presupposition that the development of one particular community can set the standards for all others. Therefore, conceptions of progress along the lines of a convergence model can license misleading conclusions about what kind of change to advocate and strive for, and what means are appropriate for doing so. These problematic implications become particularly evident when considering the entanglement of the discourse of progress with Europe’s legacy of colonialism, which has been forcefully criticized from the perspective of post- and decolonial scholarship. As Allen points out:

[P]erhaps the major lesson of postcolonial scholarship over the last thirty-five years has been that the developmentalist, progressive reading of history – in which Europe or “the West” is viewed as more enlightened or more developed than Asia, Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and so on – and the so-called civilizing mission of the West, which served to justify colonialism and imperialism and continues to underwrite the informal imperialism or neocolonialism of the current world economic, legal, and political order, are deeply intertwined. (Allen 2016, 3)²¹⁷

Allen distinguishes a political and an epistemological line of criticism of the discourse of progress, which point out two closely related problems. According to the political line of argument, the discourse of progress is problematic because by assuming that others are less advanced and can only make progress by becoming more similar to Europeans, it serves as a rationale for colonialism (2016, 16). Moreover, as Allen points out, the self-interpretation of European modernity as progressive relies on a selective reading of its history that obscures the fact that Europe is “materially” as well as “ideologically” dependent on its colonies: the developments that were interpreted as progress, in particular the rise of capitalism, were made possible by the material exploitation of colonies and European identity as a distinct culture was shaped in response to encounters with other cultures through colonialism (2016, 17–18).

²¹⁶ McCarthy develops this analysis with respect to Kant’s philosophy of history, which he takes to be representative of Enlightenment philosophy of history more generally (2009, 54). Because he is interested in understanding how universalist philosophical moral doctrines were compatible with exclusionary political practices, McCarthy points to a problem this conception of progress raises in the context of Kant’s moral philosophy: “With regard to Kant’s systematic intentions in practical philosophy, this projection raises an obvious problem: Is the convergence model of progress, with its attendant – even if not explicitly advocated – civilizing mission of the West, compatible with a future in which the passive recipients of development are on a cultural, political, and moral par with its active originators?” (2009, 67).

²¹⁷ Although the entanglement of the discourse of progress with colonialism is well established, the relationship between any particular philosopher’s theory of progress and colonialism is more complicated. This raises questions of interpretation as well as empirical questions about the possible impact of philosophical doctrines on politics. For a discussion of these questions as they play out regarding Kant’s philosophy, see the contributions in *Kant and Colonialism* (Flikschuh and Ypi 2014).

This political argument is closely connected to an epistemological argument which challenges that we can know what the standard of progress is without anticipating the end of history. This argument can be put in general terms – by pointing out the difficulties in justifying a standard of progress – but it has been put in a particularly forceful way in the context of postcolonialist critiques of the “stadial” view of history, according to which all cultures make progress by going through the same set of stages.²¹⁸ These critiques point out that Europeans *first* considered Native Americans as inferior, without having any independent justification for this claim, and *then* explained this inferiority by appeal to a theory of different stages, identifying themselves with higher and others with lower stages of the same development. These differences were then “naturalized” by appealing to biological theories of racism (2016, 20).²¹⁹

The criticisms of the discourse of progress are thus multi-faceted and come from different directions. While it has been pointed out early on that progress need not occur in all domains of human life in unison and that scientific and technological progress need not lead to moral progress, the events of the twentieth century have highlighted the worry that thinking in terms of progress is “affirmative,” in the sense that it fails to do justice to elements of regression and serves to reconcile us with the “*status quo*.” In addition, postcolonialist critique has emphasized a different set of problems associated with the idea that the discourse of progress is “Eurocentric” in ways that are epistemologically and politically problematic. While all of these lines of criticism are well-founded, their impact on conceptions of moral progress in metaethics is only indirect. In particular, criticisms that target the idea that progress occurs in all domains of human life, including morality, simultaneously, do not seem to cut any ice with respect to conceptions of moral progress. Conceptions of moral progress that follow from metaethical theories are restricted to the domain of morality in the first place and do not have to include any claims as to how it relates to progress in other domains of human life. However, other strands of criticism, which doubt whether conceptions of progress can adequately deal with the possibility of regression and the plurality of ways of life – although they do not have the same force that they have regarding Enlightenment philosophies of history – are not so easily discharged. While many of the commitments associated with this discourse of progress have become untenable, it is fair to say that remnants of this idea of progress remain influential. Moreover, both in public discourse and

²¹⁸ As Allen points out, this stadial reading of history originated with the Scottish Enlightenment and came to influence German philosophy as well as the foundations of sociology (2016, 19f).

²¹⁹ There is a tension between the view that everyone is part of the same stadial development and that some people are inferior to others by nature that corresponds to the tension between Kant’s philosophy of history and his moral philosophy highlighted by McCarthy.

philosophy, this idea of progress often does have a moral point. Progress in general is thought of as entailing moral progress or even as having moral progress as its ultimate goal. Therefore, I think that the criticisms of this notion of progress should inform our assessment of conceptions of moral progress in metaethics.

In spite of these problems that afflict the notion of progress in general, developing a conception of moral progress is useful because it can give practical guidance. Proponents of conceptions of progress emphasize that the notions of progress as well as regress can serve as critical concepts that help analyze past and ongoing transformations. In addition, belief in the possibility of moral progress is sometimes seen as a condition of possibility for action that can lead to moral progress (see Chapter 1.4.). Therefore, it is worth trying to develop a substantive conception of moral progress, while keeping in mind the criticisms of the discourse of progress. In the next section, I will begin to argue that Velleman's relativistic conception of moral progress can go some way to meet these challenges.

5.2. Moral Progress Without “Utopia”

One of the reasons an account of the possibility of moral progress seems to be in tension with the metaethical commitments of moral relativists is that progress is often associated with the idea of a single ideal end-state (see Chapter 1.4.). Following Roth, I refer to conceptions of progress that think of progress in terms of the approximation of such an ideal end-state as “utopian” conceptions of progress (Roth 2012, 385). As Roth points out, utopian conceptions of moral progress depend on the assumption of an “independent moral order” (2012, 388). They are thus squarely at odds with moral relativism. Therefore, it is perhaps unsurprising that relativist conceptions of moral progress, such as the one that follows from Velleman’s view and from functionalist views of morality more generally, make it possible to conceptualize moral progress “without utopia”; that is, they do not think of progress in terms of the approximation of an ideal end-state.²²⁰ Dispensing with the idea of a single ideal end-state allows the resulting conception of moral progress to avoid some of the problems that utopian conceptions of moral progress face. One of these problems has to do with the idea that the notion of an ideal end-state is very demanding – so demanding that assuming a utopian understanding might inspire skepticism about the very idea of moral progress. This is related to what Allen calls the “epistemological argument” in the context of postcolonialist critique of the discourse of progress. In a more general way, this kind of challenge is emphasized by Roth, who draws on Moody-Adams’s discussion of the topic (2012, 388f). In the passage Roth relies on, Moody-Adams envisions two different but closely related kinds of skepticism regarding the idea of moral progress. The first kind of skepticism challenges whether the idea of moral progress has any content:

Some critics will argue that we cannot know whether moral beliefs and practices are headed in the right direction until we know what the “destination” is, and that we cannot know what the destination is without proof of access to an objective standard of moral rightness. Those who combine this claim with skepticism about moral objectivity, as many do, will insist that the idea of moral progress has no content. (Moody-Adams 1999, 168)

The idea behind this kind of skepticism is that, in order to make judgments about moral progress, we would have to know what the “destination” of all progressive development

²²⁰ It might be thought that Velleman’s view is really a kind of utopian view on the grounds that it tells us to strive for the “maximally intelligible” social arrangement. However, in my view, this would not be a charitable understanding of Velleman’s position. For one, it is not clear that there is a unique maximally intelligible way of life. Moreover, the idea of a way of life that is maximally intelligible – if this is taken to mean maximally simple – is misleading. Because generality is only one aspect of a good explanation, it is at least possible that the ways of life that afford humans the most intelligibility leave room for ambivalences and ambiguities (see also Chapter 4.2.).

would be. This is very demanding because apart from access to “an objective standard of moral rightness,” as Moody-Adams points out, in order to be able to spell out this destination in any detail, it would also require the ability to partially predict an ideal course of history. Because of this demandingness, skeptics – in particular those who are already doubtful about the idea that there is an objective standard of moral rightness – might doubt whether the idea of moral progress has any content, as Moody-Adams puts it. That is, it is subject to skeptical doubt whether we even know what we mean when we say that a particular transformation constitutes or would constitute moral progress. But even if these skeptical worries could be assuaged, there remains a different kind of skeptical worry that Moody-Adams alludes to and that concerns the applicability of a conception of moral progress:

Others will urge that even if we could establish the existence – and perhaps also the substance – of an independent standard against which to test relevant beliefs and practices, it would be difficult (if not impossible) to identify a single direction in which those beliefs and practices, on the whole, are clearly headed. On this view, even if the idea of moral progress has any content, it is unlikely to have any plausible uses. (1999, 168f)

According to this second and related kind of skepticism about the idea of moral progress that Moody-Adams anticipates, because it is hard to determine in which direction morally relevant beliefs and practices are headed overall, it is doubtful whether a notion of moral progress – even if its content could be specified – could have any “plausible uses”; that is, it is unclear whether it would allow one to assess particular past or ongoing transformations as constituting progress.²²¹ Both of these kinds of skeptical worry sketched by Moody-Adams rely on the implicit assumption that progress can only be understood in terms of the approximation of an ideal end-state. Therefore, Roth is right in reading her as pointing out concerns with utopian conceptions of progress (Roth 2012, 388).

Against this background, Roth argues that her own “evolutionary” account of moral progress in terms of problem-solving has a distinctive advantage over “utopian” accounts “by offering a sort of *usefulness* that the utopian account does not provide” (2012, 388). Drawing on Dewey’s view that ethical enquiry is targeted at solving concrete problems rather than reaching an ideal end-state, Roth argues that reference to an ideal end-state is not *necessary* to assess changes as progressive.²²² This is because judgments of progress can be made based on a more local criterion: whether a given change contributes to solving a problem. This

²²¹ Moody-Adams goes on to undercut both kinds of skeptical worry by developing a notion of moral progress as a local phenomenon that consists in realizing a deeper understanding of existing moral concepts (1999, see also Chapter 3.1.).

²²² I will discuss Roth’s view in Chapter 3.4.

responds to the first kind of skeptical worry Moody-Adams characterizes. In addition, Roth argues that a conception of progress in terms of an ideal end-state might not be *sufficient* to make judgments about progress either (2012, 388f). Here, she appeals to the idea underlying the second kind of skeptical worry Moody-Adams envisions: that even if we could specify an ideal end-state, sometimes it would be hard to tell whether a specific change brings us closer to this state.²²³

Although there are some differences between the functionalist view of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism and Roth's pragmatist view in terms of problem-solving, both can be contrasted with a utopian view of progress in terms of the approximation of an ideal end-state.²²⁴ Therefore, Velleman's view is less likely to inspire skepticism of the kind Moody-Adams characterizes, that is, skepticism of the idea of moral progress itself on the assumption that it requires cognitive access to a "destination" of all progressive development. In a certain sense, Velleman's view also has the advantage of being more "useful": since it does not posit an ideal end-state, the problem that we do not know whether a certain change gets us closer to this state cannot arise. Developing a conception of moral progress is desirable, among other things, because it can give practical guidance (see Chapter 1.4.). However, on Velleman's view, judgments of progress can only be made retrospectively – after "experiments in living" have proven to bring an advance in intelligibility. In addition, Velleman issues the following warning to philosophers:

Finally, a warning to philosophers. We cannot eyeball various communities and see how well their ways of life facilitate mutual intelligibility. Differences in success between ways of life are usually too subtle to discern from an academic perspective, least of all from the

²²³ Both aspects of Roth's argument are mirrored in Amartya Sen's argument in favor of a "non-ideal" approach to theories of justice. Against the assumption that judgments about existing injustices need to rely on a theory of the ideally just society, Sen argues that this kind of ideal theory is *neither necessary nor sufficient* for making judgments about justice. It is not necessary because we are able to make comparative judgements about different actual and possible states of affairs without reference to an ideal state of affairs (Sen 2006, 222). Such a comparative ordering need not entail a best option because it need not be complete (2006, 223). It is not sufficient either because different actual and possible states can deviate from the ideal in different dimensions and to different degrees. It is not trivial how these different kinds of deviations should be ranked in order to provide a measure in terms of "distance" from the ideal (2006, 219).

²²⁴ This might be challenged because Roth understands utopian views as positing either an ideal end-state or a "fixed standard of evaluation" (Roth 2012, 385, see also Chapter 1.4.). She takes her own conception of progress to rely on neither notion. This is important to her because she wants to do justice to the pragmatist idea that not only means but also ends can be subject to rational revision (2012, 386). While Velleman's view definitely does not count as utopian on the former understanding of the notion in terms of positing an ideal end-state, whether it counts as utopian on the latter understanding depends on how exactly the notion of a "fixed standard of evaluation" is cashed out: if it is taken to mean just any considerations in light of which we can account for progress, then his view would count as utopian. However, on this broad reading, Roth's own account of progress in terms of problem-solving would count as utopian as well. Thus, there is reason to assume that by a "fixed standard of evaluation" Roth means a fixed standard that has a specific moral content. On this understanding, Velleman's view does not count as utopian. In any case, for the purposes of my argument, "utopian" can be understood only in terms of positing an ideal end-state.

philosopher's study. We just have to inhabit a particular way of life and do the daily work of interpreting, being interpretable, and helping to develop a common ground that facilitates mutual interpretation. Progress comes from a collective experiment in living, and there is no substitute for participating in the experiment. (Velleman 2015, 99)

This means that, in practice, it will often be difficult to judge in advance what kind of change would constitute progress in one's own community and that it will be particularly difficult to judge in advance what kind of change would constitute progress for a community other than one's own. However, I do not interpret Velleman's warning as taking away the action-guiding point of judgments about progress altogether. Rather, I take the guidance this conception of progress affords to be indirect: what kind of past changes we consider progressive can influence how we think we should go on and similarities between past changes we take to be progressive and ongoing changes can become reasons to support these ongoing changes in ways informed by past examples. The same can be said with respect to changes we can detect in communities other than our own – although in these cases there is reason to be cautious and our judgments are thus more likely to be fallible. How plausible these judgments about other communities are will in part depend on one's familiarity with the way of life of the community in question. Velleman's conception of moral progress is thus more easily applicable than utopian conceptions of progress; however, it provides practical guidance only in an indirect way.

Another problem associated with utopian conceptions of progress concerns the way in which they can become action-guiding. Here, the idea is that utopian conceptions of moral progress can be misleading with respect to the question what kind of change to advocate and strive for. This line of thought plays a role for what Allen calls the “political argument” in the context of postcolonialist critiques of the discourse of progress. In a different way, it can be discerned in the writings of Isaiah Berlin. While Berlin recognizes the value of utopian ideals, he notes that, when considered as directly action-guiding, they can become very problematic: “Utopias have their value – nothing so wonderfully expands the imaginative horizons of human potentialities – but as guides to conduct they can prove literally fatal” (Berlin 2013b, 15).²²⁵ Arguably, utopian conceptions of moral progress inherit this problem: insofar as they can offer practical guidance, they recommend bringing about or at least approximating what they take to be the ideal end-state. However, whether this is “fatal” as Berlin writes under the influence of what he calls the “great ideological storms” (2013b, 1) of the twentieth century

²²⁵ As Berlin points out in the context of “The Decline of Utopian Ideals in the West,” utopias can have other uses besides freeing up the imagination, one of which is to emphasize ills of the current state of society. In this sense they can be understood as “fictions deliberately constructed as satires, intended to criticize the actual world and to shame those who control existing regimes, or those who suffer them to tamely” (2013a, 21).

depends on the details of the view and the circumstances under which practical conclusions are drawn. Nevertheless, Berlin's considerations illustrate how utopian conceptions of moral progress can be (at least) misleading. By looking for potentials for progress in external ideals rather than dynamics internal to the way of life of a given community, they can license incorrect conclusions about what kind of change to strive for and what kind of measures are legitimate to achieve it, while at the same time occluding the potential of different kinds of progressive transformations. Berlin argues that at the heart of many ethical theories there is a "Platonic Ideal" at work, according to which "all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only," "there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths," and "the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole" (2013b, 6).²²⁶ This ideal leads to the assumption that a "final solution" – that is, a social order in which all values are realized – must be possible. Berlin takes this idea to be incoherent as well as dangerous. He takes it to be incoherent because, according to his own view, there is a plurality of objective values which can "clash," in the sense that they cannot be realized simultaneously in the same social order:

The notion of the perfect whole, the ultimate solution, in which all good things coexist, seems to me to be not merely unattainable – that is a truism – but conceptually incoherent; I do not know what is meant by a harmony of this kind. Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. That is a conceptual truth. (Berlin 2013b, 14)²²⁷

In addition, Berlin takes this ideal to be dangerous because he takes it to underlie the conviction of ruthless political leaders that what they take to be the ideal society is worth all kinds of human sacrifice:

The possibility of a final solution – even if we forget the terrible sense that these words acquired in Hitler's day – turns out to be an illusion; and a very dangerous one. For if one really believes that such a solution is possible, then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever – what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number

²²⁶ Berlin ascribes this ideal to a host of different traditions of ethical thought. While he acknowledges that for Hegel and Marx these truths were not timeless, he takes them to be committed to this ideal nevertheless because, on their views, the same kind of ideal would be realized at the end of history (2013b, 6f). There is a tension between this assessment of Marx as a utopian thinker among others and other interpretations of Marx that emphasize his opposition to Utopian Socialism and portray him as aware of the pitfalls of utopian thinking (see e.g. Jaeggi 2018b, 190).

²²⁷ How exactly to understand Berlin's claims that different incompatible values are "objective" and that his view is distinct from relativism (2013b, 11) are matters of interpretative dispute that are beyond the scope of my thesis. However, my argument does not depend on the validity of these assumptions. I rely on Berlin only to show in how far utopian conceptions of progress can be taken to have problematic practical consequences.

of eggs that should be broken – that was the faith of Lenin, of Trotsky, of Mao, for all I know of Pol Pot. (2013b, 15f)²²⁸

In light of this, Berlin argues that the kind of value pluralism he commits to is both “truer” and “more humane” than “monism” about values:

It is truer, because it does, at least, recognise the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. [...] It is more humane because it does not (as the system-builders do) deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings. (2002, 16f)

Berlin takes it to be an advantage of value pluralism that it does justice to the values humans in a particular cultural and historical context in fact live by. That this is an advantage is particularly plausible in the context of failed utopian projects in history which are persistently in the background of Berlin’s discussion. Although there are differences between Berlin’s and Velleman’s view, the way in which Velleman’s conception of moral progress is action-guiding can be seen to have an advantage over utopian conceptions of moral progress in light of Berlin’s discussion: this conception of progress does justice to the values communities have come to live by and looks for potentials for progress in these ways of life rather than an external ideal.²²⁹

Berlin draws out the consequences of his view primarily for the case of political decision-making within a given political community. However, it can also be seen to have consequences for the case of different communities, who live according to different and incompatible values. If one community cannot be expected to develop a social order that realizes all values in unison, how can different societies that live according to different values

²²⁸ The discussion above draws on “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” but Berlin makes a similar remark in the context of his “Two Concepts of Liberty”: “One belief, more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals – justice or progress or the happiness of future generations, or the sacred mission or emancipation of a nation or race or class, or even liberty itself, which demands the sacrifice of individuals for the freedom of society. This is the belief that somewhere, in the past or in the future, in divine revelation or in the mind of an individual thinker, in the pronouncements of history or science, or in the simple heart of an uncorrupted good man, there is a final solution. This ancient faith rests on the conviction that all the positive values in which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another” (2002, 212).

²²⁹ Drawing on Berlin’s considerations to support Velleman’s relativistic conception of moral progress might seem question-begging because they derive from an underlying commitment to value pluralism. Pluralism and relativism are certainly closely related: it is often unclear whether a view is best understood as a version of pluralism or relativism and, for example, Wong’s version of moral relativism relies on a commitment to value pluralism (Wong 2006, 6f, see also 2006, 94f). However, as Wong points out, not all value pluralists are relativists: Nagel’s version of value pluralism, for example, is compatible with universalism because Nagel combines it with the assumption that, given a conflict between two incommensurable values, judgment can still lead to a correct verdict (Nagel 1979, 135; Wong 2006, 95, see also Chapter 1.2.5.). Moreover, Berlin’s arguments against utopian ideals do not necessarily depend on this commitment but can be based on independent considerations of how they can be misleading when understood as action-guiding.

be expected to converge? This leads to a different problem associated with utopian conceptions of moral progress concerning the idea that progress must lead to *convergence*. Because utopian conceptions of moral progress conceptualize progress as the increasing approximation of an ideal end-state, they imply that progress would lead to convergence in the moral realm – at least in the long run or at some kind of ideal limit. Although, given the plurality of ways of life and attendant moral outlooks, there seems to be no *prima facie* reason to assume that progress must lead to convergence, there is reason to think that many conceptions of moral progress will imply such an assumption of convergence. Moral realism, understood as the view that there are mind-independent moral facts, for example, seems to lead to a utopian conception that entails the idea of an ideal end-state. This ideal end-state would be achieved when all moral facts are known, and moral agents abide by them. On such a view, progress and regress can be understood in terms of an adequate measure of distance between a preceding state, a current state, and this ideal state. As suggested by Jamieson, the approximation of this ideal state in subsequent stages can be understood in terms of an ever more accurate representation of a mind-independent reality:

On this view [i.e. moral realism, K.S.], the point of moral language is to correspond to the moral order, and the role of moral action is to exemplify or conform to it. Moral progress is assessed on the basis of how adequately our moral thought and action reflect this objective order in temporally successive stages. (Jamieson 2002, 320)

Versions of moral realism thus imply a fairly intuitive and maximally robust conception of moral progress in terms of an accumulation of mind-independent truths. Indeed, as Catherine Wilson points out, it is the fact that realism entails this substantive and attractive notion of progress that is often taken to count in favour of realism, not only in the moral domain:

There is a widespread assumption that its very possibility [i.e. the possibility of moral progress, K.S.] furnishes the basis of a transcendental argument in favour of moral realism. Yet there has been little or no direct discussion of whether the existence of moral progress actually gives realists a dialectical advantage. This is surprising because the relationship between the fact of scientific progress and the tenability of scientific realism has been vigorously debated, and because the analogies and disanalogies between knowledge of nature and knowledge of norms, between science and ethics, have received a good deal of attention. (Wilson 2010a, 97f)²³⁰

²³⁰ In line with Wilson's assessment, Howard Sankey argues that what is really at stake between realists and anti-realists in philosophy of science, what lies behind the stand-off of "no-miracle" and "pessimistic induction" arguments, is the question of how to conceive of scientific progress (Sankey 2017). He takes the need to give a substantive account of scientific progress in terms of an increase in knowledge about unobservable entities to be one of the main motivations behind scientific realism. Sankey holds that the models of progress implicit in the

Because this model of progress implies convergence, it seems that moral realists implicitly commit to the claim that moral progress would lead to convergence in the moral domain.

Against this, Sarah McGrath has recently argued that, while it is taken for granted by many anti-realists as well as realists, we have no good reason to assume that realists are committed to a non-trivial convergence thesis, according to which fully informed, rational agents would converge on the moral truth (McGrath 2010). More specifically, the realist has no reason to accept this claim because it can serve as a premise in an argument against realism based on the implausibility of the idea that rational and fully informed moral agents would in fact never hold incompatible views (2010, 62). According to McGrath, the realist should only be committed to what she calls a trivial convergence thesis, according to which rational and fully informed agents would converge on the truth if being rational requires knowledge of the relevant truths. For any less ambitious understanding of what it means to be rational, it is conceivable that fully rational and informed agents would reach different conclusions (2010, 77–79). However, even once the non-trivial convergence thesis is rejected, on a realist picture, whenever two views conflict, at least one of them must be wrong. Thus, there still remains a sense in which convergence on the truth is both possible and desirable – it would constitute a change for the better. There is, therefore, a sense in which a utopian account of progress is implicit even in a realist position of this kind. Moody-Adams, for example, interprets Platts’s realism as opposed to what I have called a utopian understanding of progress because he describes inquiry into moral reality as a process without end (see Moody-Adams 1999, 169, see also Chapter 3.1.). While, on such a view, convergence on the truth might in fact be unattainable, there is still a sense in which it would constitute an ideal end-state. The question is not whether convergence will happen, but whether there is something to converge on. Although moral realists need not commit to the claim that the state in which all moral truths are known and moral agents abide by them has been or will be achieved at any specific point in time or even that we have a rational way to get there, this possible end-state still functions as a regulative ideal.²³¹ It seems that at least *ceteris paribus*, something similar can be said for other metaethical positions, which imply a commitment to absolutism, such as, for example, standard versions of Kantian constructivism, even though they need not commit to the claim that the relevant truths are mind-independent.

models of theory change advocated by proponents of the historical approach to philosophy of science must ultimately fail as accounts of scientific progress because “they fail to mention growth in the truth known about an underlying reality” (2017, 210). This requirement is, however, contentious in philosophy of science. Moreover, even if it is accepted for science, it need not be for ethics.

²³¹ It might, however, not be the only notion of progress of interest on a realist view without a non-trivial convergence thesis. A transformation towards more information and rationality might, for example, constitute progress on such a view even without ever leading to convergence on the truth.

Although the assumption that progress must lead to convergence is thus implicit in many views of morality, conceptions of moral progress along the lines of what McCarthy calls a “convergence model” face difficulties. Berlin’s discussion can be interpreted as challenging the assumption that progress must lead to convergence, but it is most forcefully challenged in the context of postcolonialist critique of the discourse of progress (see Chapter 5.1.). While there are additional assumptions of Eurocentrism and the mechanisms of historical development at play, it is clear that the idea that progress must lead to convergence plays a crucial role in the context of this critique of the discourse of progress. Against this background, I take it to be an advantage of Velleman’s conception of moral progress that it does not entail the claim that progress must lead to convergence. By contrast, it makes it possible to understand progress in a genuinely “pluralistic” manner, that is, as at least potentially leading in different directions. This is an advantage of functionalist conceptions of moral progress more generally, including, for example, the conceptions of moral progress following from the functionalist views of morality of Wong and Kitcher. Kitcher emphasizes this consequence himself: “We can imagine two different ethical traditions proceeding indefinitely, making a series of progressive transitions, without its [sic] ever being possible to integrate their differing accomplishments” (Kitcher 2011, 248). Velleman associates this with a kind of “humility,” which he contrasts with “optimism” regarding convergence:

Now, maybe local institutions similar enough to qualify as moralities will turn out to be one and the same institution adapted to local conditions, or maybe they will turn out to differ only by having different internal inconsistencies that will be ironed out in the long run. An optimistic thought, but it is no more than optimism. There is no *a priori* reason to think that differences among the world’s many moralities would disappear if internal inconsistencies or external circumstances were factored out. Optimism must therefore be tempered with humility – that is, with the recognition that distant communities may never, not even ideally, converge. (Velleman 2015, 3)

While, according to Velleman, relativism “doesn’t counsel despair over the possibility of moral coordination among communities” (2015, 92), it does counsel humility, in the sense that “[w]e have to allow for the possibility that at the end of the conversation, common ground will still be out of reach” (2015, 92). According to Velleman, “[s]uch humility is the main lesson of moral relativism” (2015, 3). One reason for this is that, on Velleman’s view, there simply is no objectively correct set of moral norms upon which to converge.²³² In

²³² While not all versions of moral relativism have the resources to account for moral progress, challenges to the idea that moral difference is something to be overcome for the benefit of uniformity – and that thus, for example, all moral conflict has to be resolved – are at the heart of moral relativism. Following Rovane, a reluctance to this

addition, according to Velleman's specific version of a functionalist conception of moral progress, change itself has to be intelligible and what is intelligible depends on the way of life a community has developed thus far. As Velleman puts it:

If a whole community is to have reasons to change, those reasons must consist in circumstances in light of which social change would be interpretable, at least to members of that community, and what's interpretable by way of change in a community depends on what the community is already like. Reason-guided change is path-dependent: where it ends up depends on where it began. So different communities may have reason to change in ways that still lead to different ways of life, even if those ways of life are equally advanced by necessarily ubiquitous standards. (2015, 98)

The idea that change itself has to be intelligible is closely connected to the claim that Velleman's view does justice to the values members of a community actually live by.²³³ In addition, it undermines the idea that Velleman's view is best understood as leading to a unique maximally intelligible way of life. Because not only the way of life itself, but the path there would have to be intelligible, it is not clear what role a unique maximally intelligible way of life could play. However, with reference to his "Motivation by Ideal," Velleman makes an exception for "revolutionary change" (2015, 98, n24). There, Velleman explains how a person can undergo a kind of change without the change itself being intelligible given the way they are initially, by imitating an ideal (2002). Nevertheless, it is hard to see how this could be extended to the case of social change. Perhaps "utopian" ideals could play a constructive role if this kind of change was possible for communities.

To conclude, some of the advantages of the relativistic conception of moral progress "without utopia" that results from versions of moral relativism such as Velleman's become evident when it is contrasted with utopian conceptions of moral progress. Utopian conceptions of moral progress face problems concerning skepticism, the way in which they can be

view of difference can be understood as the moral motivation underlying versions of moral relativism (Rovane 2016, 281). This is also implicit in Rovane's and Wong's comments on moral relativism and moral progress discussed above (see Chapter 4.4.1., 4.4.4.). Williams's discussion of convergence can be interpreted as challenging the inverse entailment: that convergence must be a sign of improvement (Williams 1985, Chapter 8, see also Chapter 4.4.3.). However, all this does not mean that, on a relativist view, convergence is considered impossible. As Velleman puts it: "There may some day be world-wide convergence, if there is a world-wide community – the proverbial global village – but even then, relativism would hold. If as a result of advances in transportation and communication, everyone has to be prepared to interact with just about anyone, then a global way of life may develop, and cultural diversity will vanish. But which way of life became global would still be path-dependent, and what people had reason for feeling and doing would still be relative to the way of life in which mankind happened to end up, given where it began" (Velleman 2015, 98f). However, on a relativist view, this kind of contingent convergence alone would not indicate progress or regress.

²³³ Given this similarity between Velleman's and Berlin's view, it is perhaps unsurprising that Berlin alludes to two ideas that are central for Velleman's view as well: experiments in living (Berlin 2002, 215) and humility (2013b, 18). Although I think the kind of humility Berlin has in mind is best understood in fallibilist rather than relativist terms.

misleading when taken as directly action-guiding, and the claim that progress must lead to convergence. Velleman's relativist conception of moral progress, by contrast, is less likely to inspire skepticism and is more easily applicable. In addition, it does justice to the values members of different communities actually live by. It identifies potentials for progressive developments within the ways of life of communities rather than in external ideals and envisions progressive change as making sense from the point of view of the way of life a community has developed thus far. In this sense, it resembles what Roth calls an "evolutionary" conception of progress, on which progress is a local phenomenon that happens when a particular crisis is overcome (see Chapter 3.4.). Because it does not entail the assumption that progress must lead to convergence, Velleman's view makes it possible to think of moral progress in a genuinely pluralistic manner – as potentially leading in different directions rather than necessarily leading towards the same ideal end-state. This pluralistic view of progress helps to avoid an important line of critique of progress, according to which the discourse of progress is ethnocentric, and goes some way to account for the plurality of ways of life in light of this critique (see Chapter 5.1.). While the problem of skepticism and the problem of problematic practical conclusions might be addressed from the perspective of any kind of metaethics, there is reason to believe that many absolutist metaethical positions would entail the claim that progress must lead to convergence – at least in the long run or at some kind of ideal limit. Although absolutists have resources to counter the problematic implications conceptions of moral progress along the lines of a "convergence model" can have and can appeal to considerations of underdetermination in order to allow for a plurality of ways of life, if not of moral outlook, they cannot account for the possibility that progressive development will not, not even ideally, lead to convergence in the moral domain. The advantages of Velleman's relativist conception of moral progress thus provide a *prima facie* argument in favor of the underlying relativist view of morality. In the next section, I will discuss a paradigmatic example of moral progress in order to highlight some further advantages of Velleman's view of progress.

5.3. Closing “Hermeneutical Gaps” as a Paradigmatic Instance of Moral Progress

While the advantages discussed in the last section pertain to all conceptions of moral progress that derive from a functionalist view of morality, I will now turn to aspects of Velleman’s conception of moral progress in terms of an increase in intelligibility in particular. Although in comparison to utopian conceptions of moral progress in terms of an ideal end-state, Velleman’s conception of moral progress in terms of an increase in intelligibility has a certain “usefulness,” it is not easy to see what kinds of change are progressive according to this standard. That is, it is not easy to see what kind of practical guidance the standard of intelligibility can afford us. In order to clarify this, it is helpful to look at examples of types of change that constitute paradigmatic instances of progress on this view. In *How We Get Along*, Velleman offers one such example: the “tendency to dispense with dispensable distinctions in the design of our socially shared scenarios” (Velleman 2009, 81, see Chapter 4.2.). As Velleman puts it in this context, dispensing with dispensable distinctions represents progress according to the standard of intelligibility as the constitutive aim of agency and therefore “progress that is specifically rational” (2009, 81). However, the example also constitutes a paradigmatic instance of progress on the functionalist version of Velleman’s view developed in *Foundations for Moral Relativism*. According to this version of the view, it is the function of ways of life, of which moral norms are a part, to facilitate mutual intelligibility. If dispensing with dispensable distinctions leads to an increase in mutual intelligibility, it constitutes progress on this view. Looking at another paradigmatic instance of moral progress on this kind of view helps to bring out some advantages that pertain to the relativist conception of moral progress in terms of the standard of intelligibility. While in discussing this example I will sometimes refer to the constitutivist version of Velleman’s view as developed in *How We Get Along*, my argument does not depend on the additional assumptions associated with this version of the view (see also Chapter 4.2.).

The kind of change I have in mind as a paradigmatic instance of moral progress on Velleman’s view is exemplified by the story of Carmita Wood. Wood suffered sexual harassment at the hands of a professor when working as an administrator in the nuclear physics department of Cornell University in the late 1960s and early 1970s – importantly, a time before the term “sexual harassment” was coined. Wood’s story is related in Susan Brownmiller’s memoir *In Our Time: Memoir of a Revolution* (Brownmiller 1999), but it is best known, in the context of philosophy, because of Miranda Fricker’s discussion of the case

in her *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Fricker 2007). In order to preserve as much detail as possible for the discussion, I quote the account of Wood's story as it is given in Brownmiller's memoir at length:

As Wood told the story, the eminent man would jiggle his crotch when he stood near her desk and looked at his mail, or he'd deliberately brush against her breasts while reaching for some papers. One night as the lab workers were leaving their annual Christmas party, he cornered her in the elevator and planted some unwanted kisses on her mouth. After the Christmas party incident, Carmita Wood went out of her way to use the stairs in the lab building in order to avoid a repeat encounter, but the stress of the furtive molestations and her efforts to keep the scientist at a distance while maintaining cordial relations with his wife, whom she liked, brought on a host of physical symptoms. Wood developed chronic back and neck pains. Her right thumb tingled and grew numb. She requested a transfer to another department, and when it didn't come through, she quit. She walked out the door and went to Florida for some rest and recuperation. Upon her return she applied for unemployment insurance. When the claims investigator asked why she had left her job after eight years, Wood was at a loss to describe the hateful episodes. She was ashamed and embarrassed. Under prodding – the blank on the form needed to be filled in – she answered that her reasons had been personal. Her claim for unemployment benefits was denied. (Brownmiller 1999, 280f; quoted as part of a longer passage in Fricker 2007, 149f)

This account has been passed down because Wood eventually sought help from the women's section of the "Human Affairs" program Cornell had launched "to bridge the gap between the privileged Ivy League school and the surrounding community" (Brownmiller 1999, 279). In this context, Wood's account triggered a revelation, as it turned out that many women involved with this group had suffered similar incidents. They wanted to raise awareness about the issue, but in order to do this they needed a name for the phenomenon. This is how, according to Brownmiller, the term "sexual harassment" was coined – in Ithaca, in 1975.²³⁴ Wood's story can be understood as an instance of change of a specific type: an experience that is previously ill-understood by a community – much to the detriment of the members of the community who make it – becomes understood more fully in virtue of the introduction of a new concept. Therefore, it can be understood as a paradigmatic instance of moral progress on Velleman's view. An advance in intelligibility in the shared way of life of a community is made, constituting progress that is recognizably moral. In addition, in light of Velleman's version of constitutivism, the transition can be understood in terms of progress that is

²³⁴ For an account of the aftermath of these ground-breaking events up to the 1990s, including the development of legal protection against sexual harassment as a form of discrimination under Title VII, see the account given by Brownmiller (1999, 279–94).

“specifically rational.” Looking at this example in more detail can help further elucidate what moral progress according to the standard of intelligibility can look like – whether or not it is also understood as “the objective standard set by the constitutive aim of agency” (Velleman 2009, 81).

In spite of the fact that Fricker is interested in this case from a slightly different perspective, her influential discussion of the case (as a specifically epistemic kind of injustice that is subsequently overcome) highlights some features of the case that are central for understanding it as an instance of progress on Velleman’s view.²³⁵ In *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Fricker is interested in epistemic forms of injustice that wrong an agent “specifically in their capacity as a knower” (Fricker 2007, 1). Fricker insists that, at least when it comes to some of our epistemic practices – in spite of its perspicuous absence from epistemology, with the exception of feminist epistemology – injustice is the norm, rather than just an unfortunate and rare aberration (2007, vii–viii). She distinguishes two kinds of epistemic injustice: “testimonial” and “hermeneutical” injustice.²³⁶ Fricker discusses Wood’s case as an example of hermeneutical injustice, which she characterizes as occurring when an agent is unable to “properly comprehend her own experience, let alone render it communicatively intelligible to others” (2007, 6) due to “a gap in collective hermeneutical resources – a gap, that is, in our shared tools of social interpretation” (2007, 6).²³⁷ Moreover, for such a case to constitute an epistemic injustice (rather than a case of what Fricker calls “epistemic bad luck”²³⁸), the gap or lacuna in shared interpretative resources must be due to what Fricker calls “hermeneutical marginalization”; that is, the gap must persist because those who are most disadvantaged by it “participate unequally in the practices through which social meanings are generated” (Fricker 2007, 6). Fricker lists practices that

²³⁵ Both Fricker and Velleman in some way blur the boundaries between what is usually taken to be the subject of theoretical philosophy and what is usually taken to be the subject of practical philosophy: while Velleman develops a metaethical outlook that derives from his account of practical reasoning on which understanding – a capacity usually understood as an important part of theoretical reason – takes center stage, Fricker is interested in first-order ethical problems that come into view once our epistemic practices are understood as socially situated. However, there is also an important difference between the way Fricker interprets the episode and the way it can be interpreted from the perspective of Velleman’s view of morality: in discussing the case, Fricker avails herself of a range of first-order ethical judgments that are not in the same way accessible in the context of a metaethical theory.

²³⁶ The larger part of the book is spent on exploring testimonial injustice, which Fricker describes as occurring “when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word” (2007, 1). However, this kind of epistemic injustice plays a subordinated role for the present discussion. I will focus on hermeneutical injustice.

²³⁷ As Kristie Dotson points out, “[t]he problem of biased hermeneutical resources is discussed often in the work of women of color” (Dotson 2012, 29) preceding Fricker’s discussion (see e.g. Hill Collins 2000).

²³⁸ Dotson is critical of Fricker’s claim that any kind of epistemic obstacle encountered that does not qualify as either testimonial or hermeneutical injustice according to the characterizations she offers amounts to nothing more than epistemic “bad luck.” By contrast, Dotson takes it to be much more plausible that there is a variety of different kinds of epistemic injustices that are pervasive (Dotson 2012).

are “sustained by professions such as journalism, politics, academia, and law” (2007, 152) as some of the most obvious “practices by which collective social meanings are generated” (2007, 152).

While there can be “incidental” cases of hermeneutical injustice, Fricker is most interested in “systematic” cases. While in incidental cases of hermeneutical injustice an agent is disadvantaged once in a particular context, in cases of systematic hermeneutical injustice an agent is disadvantaged because of the “social type” they exemplify; that is, their hermeneutical marginalization is persistent and wide-ranging because of their membership in a socially subordinated group. Because social identities are complex, hermeneutical marginalization can affect “individuals in a differentiated manner; that is, it may afflict them *qua* one social type, but not another” (2007, 154). The kind of hermeneutical injustice agents suffer because they are members of certain groups is systematic in the sense that it is part of a broader pattern of social injustice. Therefore, it is the most salient kind of hermeneutical injustice from the point of how epistemic practices intersect with social justice (2007, 153–56). This exclusion from practices of generating social meanings is both due to and helps to stabilize unequal relations of social power. In particular, hermeneutical marginalization is due to unequal relations of identity power, that is, social power that is associated with shared interpretations of specific social identities (see Chapter 3.3.).²³⁹ Wood’s case is a case of hermeneutical injustice because the hermeneutical gap that causes the epistemic disadvantage in trying to make sense of her experience is due to hermeneutical marginalization:

Women’s position at the time of second wave feminism was still one of marked social powerlessness in relation to men; and, specifically, the unequal relations of power prevented women from participating on equal terms with men in those practices by which collective social meanings are generated. (2007, 152)

When the term “sexual harassment” is coined, steps are taken in order to fill this lacuna and thereby overcome the situation of hermeneutic injustice.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ This focus on identity prejudice brings out what Fricker describes as a “family resemblance” between hermeneutical and testimonial injustice: “In both sorts of epistemic injustice, the subject suffers from one or another sort of prejudice against them *qua* social type” (2007, 155). “At root, both kinds of systematic epistemic injustice stem from structural inequalities of power” (2007, 156). Fricker also points out that testimonial and hermeneutical injustice are likely to combine: low intelligibility contributing to low credibility (2007, 159). Moreover, as Fricker puts it, “hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage” (2007, 1) than testimonial injustice. In so far as hermeneutical injustice explains how the prejudices involved in testimonial injustice come about, it can be understood as more basic.

²⁴⁰ Importantly, these steps involve collective action. If Wood’s story ended with her own isolated insight in the phenomenon, it would have been a much different story. Although Fricker is interested in individual ethical-epistemic “virtues” that can counteract injustice, she notes that political action is necessary to affect change: “Eradicating these injustices would ultimately take not just more virtuous hearers, but collective social political change – in matters of epistemic injustice, the ethical is political” (2007, 8).

There are many important parallels between Fricker's discussion and the interpretation that can be given to the episode from the point of view of Velleman's relativist conception of moral progress in terms of the standard of intelligibility. These parallels support the idea that "closing hermeneutical gaps" can be understood not only in terms of "hermeneutical justice," but also as a paradigmatic instance of moral progress on Velleman's view. What Fricker calls "hermeneutical resources" are an important aspect of what Velleman calls "*mores*," or "ways of life" (or "shared ways of thinking, feeling, and acting") in *Foundations for Moral Relativism* and what he describes in more detail as a shared "repertoire of scenarios" in the context of *How We Get Along*. It is one of the upshots of these discussions that "ways of life" structure interpretation. Their aim is to facilitate mutual interpretability and they function as a "resource for self-understanding" (Velleman 2009, 77) as well as for understanding others and rendering oneself intelligible to them (see Chapter 4.1., 4.2.). In a similar way, Fricker describes instances of hermeneutical injustice as preventing an agent "from understanding a significant area of her social experience, thus depriving her of an important patch of *self-understanding*" (Fricker 2007, 149, my emphasis) and explores how self-understanding depends on shared resources and is connected to making oneself intelligible to others.²⁴¹ From the point of view of Velleman's version of moral relativism, the situation before the term "sexual harassment" is introduced can be understood as characterized by a deficiency in a given way of life, which deprives agents from making a given interaction properly intelligible.

Interestingly, because the problem is due to a hermeneutical gap or lacuna in the collective hermeneutical resources provided by a *shared* way of life, it seems that both agents in the story are equally impaired with respect to intelligibility. This is also emphasized by Fricker's discussion of the case. As Fricker puts it, "harasser and harassee alike are cognitively handicapped by the hermeneutical lacuna" (2007, 151).²⁴² However, Fricker's analysis of the case shows that, because the gap is due to an asymmetry in participation in the practices that shape hermeneutical resources, while both agents are affected by the lacuna, they are affected in different ways. While the harassee is a member of a marginalized group,

²⁴¹ Brownmiller too describes the transformation that happens when the term "sexual harassment" is coined, at least among other things, in terms of a new understanding: "Giving a name to sexual harassment, as the women in Ithaca did when they took up the case of Carmita Wood in 1975, put into bold relief a pernicious form of job discrimination that previously had been laughed at, trivialized, and ignored. In the process, the women set in motion a new *understanding* in business corporations, in the halls of Congress, in the military, in the school systems, and in courts of law" (Brownmiller 1999, 293f, my emphasis).

²⁴² In the context of Fricker's analysis of the case, this raises the question why the situation constitutes an instance of hermeneutical injustice only with respect to the harassee – which can be answered by pointing to the requirement of hermeneutical marginalization. Moreover, on Fricker's view, "[t]he hermeneutical inequality that exists, dormant, in a situation of hermeneutical marginalization erupts in injustice only when some actual attempt at intelligibility is handicapped by it" (2007, 159), and this is more likely to happen to the harassee than the harasser.

the harasser is a member of the group that has more influence on the way that hermeneutical resources are structured. Therefore, while neither of them can gain an accurate understanding of the situation, the distortion is such that it serves the harasser's interests – at least his immediate interest, which is to not have his conduct challenged (2007, 151).²⁴³ In the case at hand, the way hermeneutical marginalization affects the shared resources of social meaning would make it possible for the harasser to understand his own behavior as “flirting” (2007, 153). He might either think of himself as pursuing the woman and interpret her lack of reaction – because she cannot find an appropriate way of reacting – as her reciprocating his interest. Alternatively – because it is part of the interpretation in terms of “flirting” that the interaction is not very significant – he might not give it much thought at all. Therefore, the fact that his understanding of his behavior and their interaction is inadequate will likely go unnoticed for him, whereas the lack of resources to make proper sense has significant consequences for the harassee that will likely make it impossible for her to ignore it. As Fricker puts it:

The cognitive disablement prevents her from understanding a significant patch of her own experience: that is, a patch of experience which it is strongly in her interest to understand, for without that understanding she is left deeply troubled, confused, and isolated, not to mention vulnerable to continued harassment. Her hermeneutical disadvantage renders her unable to make sense of her ongoing mistreatment, and this in turn prevents her from protesting it, let alone securing effective measures to stop it. (2007, 151)

If intelligibility is further understood as the constitutive aim of practical reasoning, the situation can also be characterized in terms of a detriment to practical rationality.²⁴⁴ On this account, the harasser's actions can be understood as irrational because they do not make any sense given the kind of person he takes himself to be. There is some speculation involved here, but the information we have based on Wood's account, which describes him as a well-respected, married university professor, suggests that he understands himself as a good

²⁴³ Fricker adds that “[t]his is not to deny that if he is a decent person underneath, so that a better understanding of the seriousness of his bad behavior would have led him to refrain, then the hermeneutical lacuna is for him a source of epistemic and moral bad luck” (2007, 151).

²⁴⁴ It bears mentioning that both of the agents in the example do act irrationally on an intuitive understanding of instrumental rationality: for all we know, they act in ways that cannot contribute to what we can reasonably take to be their practical ends. This is particularly clear with respect to the harassee: before she resolves to seek help, she is unable to find the appropriate means to keep her job and secure unemployment benefits. While the harasser does in some sense act instrumentally rationally because he succeeds to act in ways that he thinks of as “flirting,” his actions are highly ineffective as a means to the end of actually flirting with the harassee as well as any ends that can reasonably be associated with this activity, such as developing a romantic relationship. This supports the idea that deficits in self-understanding thwart practical rationality. That both agents can intuitively be understood as acting irrationally, while only one of them can be understood as acting in a way that is morally problematic also shows that, while morally bad action can perhaps be understood in terms of irrationality, not all irrational action is morally bad.

scientist, an honorable academic, a loyal husband, a good colleague, a suitable superior, etc., at least to some extent. It makes absolutely no sense for this kind of person to harass his administrator. This also explains why he has to keep his actions secret (Brownmiller's account describes the molestations as "furtive") from his wife, but also from his colleagues, and perhaps to some extent from himself.²⁴⁵ The harasser's behavior can thus be understood as irrational – he is only able to pursue his actions without them making sense with respect to who he takes himself to be. The situation changes after attempts are made to introduce the concept "sexual harassment" into the collective hermeneutical resources. Now the harasser is enabled to understand his own doing in more adequate terms. He now faces a choice. One option is that the newly gained understanding will cause him to regret his actions and cease to act in this way, thereby becoming more rational. This has some plausibility because understanding oneself as a harasser – much like understanding oneself as being lazy – already has the evaluative element that would make such a change rational from his point of view (cf. Chapter 4.2.). Another option is that he will continue to behave in this way, now in a sense, more rationally, but at the cost of identifying as a harasser, making himself an irrational kind of person.²⁴⁶ Alternatively, the harasser might refuse to think of himself as a sexual harasser, even though this would be the best explanation for his behavior, thereby continuing to act irrationally. In this case, the attempt to close the hermeneutical gap will not have been fully successful and the situation would be best described in terms of what Dotson calls "contributory injustice." Dotson challenges the idea that hermeneutical resources are universally shared across a community (Dotson 2012, 31). In particular, if oppressed groups develop their own resources over a longer period of time without gaining appropriate uptake, hermeneutical resources can become fragmented and disjointed from the point of view of the entire community. The costs with respect to intelligibility, from the point of view of the entire community, are obvious. The refusal to use the new hermeneutical resources on the part of the privileged is what Dotson describes as "contributory injustice": "*Contributory injustice* is caused by an epistemic agent's situated ignorance, in the form of willful hermeneutical

²⁴⁵ This supports the view that there is a strong connection between transparency and what we intuitively take to be moral norms.

²⁴⁶ Identifying as a harasser would make the professor's way of life less rational because it would be in tension with other aspects of his identity thereby causing incoherence. However, it is also conceivable that he gives up thinking of himself as an honorable professor, a loyal husband, etc. just in virtue of coherently thinking of himself as a sexual harasser. He will then be an irrational kind of person to be in a different sense – not in virtue of incoherence, but in virtue of being unfit for shared improvising.

ignorance, in maintaining and utilizing structurally prejudiced hermeneutical resources that result in epistemic harm to the epistemic agency of a knower” (2012, 31).²⁴⁷

In any case, Velleman’s view makes it possible to understand the introduction of the term “sexual harassment” and the “closing of hermeneutical gaps” more generally as progress that is recognizably moral – it relates to the themes of “universality,” “mutuality,” and “transparency” – whether or not it is also understood as specifically rational in terms of Velleman’s version of constitutivism. However, the example differs from the example Velleman discusses in *How We Get Along* as a paradigmatic kind of progress: dispensing with dispensable distinctions. While both can be understood as progressive in terms of the standard of intelligibility, the example of closing hermeneutical gaps brings out a different set of implications of Velleman’s view. The two examples might even seem to be at odds with each other: while one relies on the idea that eliminating distinctions “in the design of our socially shared scenarios” (Velleman 2015, 81) is progressive, the other one relies on the idea that introducing a concept that enables a more fine-grained distinction is progressive. The asymmetry is not perfect: introducing the term sexual harassment enables a more fine-grained distinction between action-types, while treating people alike, irrespective of their identities, reduces the impact of distinctions between kinds of people. However, I do not think that the upshot is that introducing more action-types and eliminating distinctions between types of people (or their impact) will always be progressive. Rather, I take the lesson to be more general: whether introducing or reducing distinctions is conducive to intelligibility will depend on the details of a particular context. The account of dispensing with dispensable distinctions as a kind of change that is morally progressive draws on the idea that generalization plays an important role for understanding. However, interpretation is a holistic matter. There is a variety of criteria that make for a good explanation, including generality, but also empirical adequacy, fruitfulness, and theoretical unity, among other things (2009, 63, see also Chapter 4.2.). While introducing a new concept cannot be understood as increasing intelligibility according to the criterion of generality, it can be understood as increasing intelligibility according to the criterion of, for example, empirical adequacy. Because different criteria of a good explanation can be salient in different contexts, I take both examples to highlight different, but compatible implications of Velleman’s view.

²⁴⁷ Dotson’s characterization of contributory injustice draws on Gaile Pohlhaus’s notion of “willful hermeneutical ignorance,” which Pohlhaus renders as a refusal “to learn to use epistemic resources developed from marginalized situatedness” (Pohlhaus 2012, 722). According to Moody-Adams, willful or affected ignorance is a main obstacle when it comes to moral progress: “[T]he principal barrier to moral progress in beliefs is not ignorance of a revolutionary new moral idea, but affected ignorance of what can, and should, already be known” (Moody-Adams 1999, 171). The above discussion suggests that willful hermeneutical ignorance is relevant as a type of willful or affected ignorance that can obstruct moral progress.

The example of closing hermeneutical gaps as a paradigmatic instance of moral progress supports the idea that the conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism resembles an "evolutionary" rather than a "utopian" conception of progress: progress is conceptualized in terms of overcoming specific crises – in particular, crises of intelligibility – within a given way of life rather than in terms of an ideal-end state. The discussion of Wood's story from the perspective of Velleman's conception of moral progress bears this out. On this view, the physiological and psychological "symptoms" that are part of Brownmiller's account of Wood's story (Wood is described as suffering from "a host of physical symptoms", such as "chronic back and neck pains") can be understood as indicating that a certain way of life cannot be lived "authentically." Therefore, the "experiment in living" has failed, at least in this particular respect, and needs to be amended. Those affected by the crisis in intelligibility – such as Wood and others similarly placed – play an important role for identifying it. This emphasis on those who are most affected by the lacuna in shared hermeneutical resources also allows to connect Fricker's discussion of hermeneutical injustice to a different prominent strand in feminist epistemology, "standpoint epistemology":

One way of taking the epistemological suggestion that social power has an unfair impact on collective forms of social understanding is to think of our shared understandings as reflecting the perspectives of different social groups, and to entertain the idea that relations of unequal power can skew shared hermeneutical resources so that the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on as they make sense of their social experiences, whereas the powerless are more likely to find themselves having some social experiences through a glass darkly, with at best ill-fitting meanings to draw on in the effort to render them intelligible. (Fricker 2007, 148)²⁴⁸

This connection helps to emphasize the special role those who are detrimentally affected by hermeneutical distortions in a community's shared way of life play in the account. Feminist standpoint epistemology involves the claim that the standpoint of the oppressed is in some sense epistemically advantageous.²⁴⁹ There is a *prima facie* tension between this claim and Fricker's interest in epistemic injustice as causing specifically epistemic disadvantages. However, this tension can be resolved if the epistemic advantage is understood as consisting in being better placed to notice distortions in the shared hermeneutic resources. This supports

²⁴⁸ The claim that "the powerful tend to have appropriate understandings of their experiences ready to draw on" needs to be qualified along the lines of the above discussion: appropriate for the purposes of certain immediate interests, but not genuine understanding.

²⁴⁹ The classic formulation of this kind of feminist epistemology is closely connected to Marxist standpoint theory (Hartsock 1983).

the view that the epistemic advantage associated with oppression – if there is any – is of a specific kind and acquired rather than automatic. The situation of epistemic injustice becomes one in which a certain epistemic advantage can be ascribed to the harassee only through conscious collective efforts on part of the harassee and others.

This focus on the role of the oppressed also allows to respond to a different kind of challenge to conceptions of moral progress in general: is talk about moral progress “affirmative” in the sense that it obscures moral evils and serves to reconcile us with the “*status quo*” (see Chapter 5.1.)? At the outset, it might seem that the problem of notions of progress being “affirmative” is particularly acute for Velleman’s view because of its “conservative” consequences (Velleman 2009, 4, see also Chapter 3.3.). In the context of the notion of progress that follows from the view, this means that a lot of consideration is given to the shared values developed as part of a given way of life and that change has to be intelligible to the members of a community. It thus seems that Velleman’s conception of moral progress risks being “affirmative” in the sense that it portrays the “*status quo*” as the result of a progressive development and might thereby serve to obscure enduring deficits of a way of life.

However, my discussion of “closing hermeneutical gaps” as a paradigmatic instance of progress on Velleman’s view uncovers resources to respond to this challenge. While there is a sense in which the view remains conservative – it places special normative weight on the norms that are part of the ways of life communities have in fact developed – my discussion shows that it can accommodate the idea that some aspects of ways of life are not salient points of agreement because they facilitate cooperation, but because unequal power relations are in play. The example also puts pressure on the idea that change itself has to be intelligible, at least when understood as requiring it to be intelligible to everyone at the same time. As Fricker’s discussion highlights, closing hermeneutical gaps can require joint action on behalf of those most affected by the lacuna.²⁵⁰ The struggles to make a part of the social world as it is experienced from a particular perspective intelligible can often require deviance from the understanding that is given as part of a shared way of life. And deviance, at least initially, comes with costs regarding intelligibility.²⁵¹

²⁵⁰ Those who live under the “ozone hole” in the sense of Fricker’s analogy: “Hermeneutical lacunas are like holes in the ozone – it’s the people who live under them that get burnt” (Fricker 2007, 161).

²⁵¹ This comes out clearly in the context of Fricker’s discussion of “epistemic justice” as an “ethical-intellectual” virtue, which she describes as “an alertness or sensitivity to the possibility that the difficulty one’s interlocutor is having as she tries to render something communicatively intelligible is due not to its being nonsense or her being a fool, but rather to some sort of gap in collective hermeneutical resources” (2007, 169). However, as noted above, Fricker’s stance with respect to the effectiveness of this virtue as counteracting epistemic injustice is ambivalent. On the one hand, she claims: “Even though this virtue can only mitigate, rather than pre-empt, any

The example thus shows that Velleman's view of progress can avoid some of the criticisms raised with respect to conceptions of progress associated with the claim that it is "affirmative." While there are some conservative elements, it makes it possible to understand the present as in all likelihood at least partially shaped by power relations leaving morality in a problematic state – that can and should be improved upon. However, it also shows in what ways the view needs to be amended in order to be able to respond to this challenge. For one, it shows that, for certain kinds of change to be possible, convergence on a shared way of life cannot be conceived of as total and final. This puts pressure on the assumption that communities are internally homogenous (see Chapter 3.2.). Moreover, it highlights that deviations from the norm are not only possible due to individual idiosyncrasies, but more importantly, due to different positions within a community. These are the kinds of internal differences that should not be idealized away because they are crucial in order to explain certain important kinds of social change. In particular, positions that are marked by social disadvantage play an important role in understanding these kinds of change. Given certain adaptations that allow for a more complex view of the internal structure of communities, the conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism can thus respond to the objection that notion of progress serve to justify the "*status quo*." In the next section, I will revisit some questions discussed in Chapter 2, concerning moral disagreement and the possibility of criticism, in light of this assessment of Velleman's view of progress.

given instance of hermeneutical injustice, none the less the collective exercise of the virtue could ultimately lead to the eradication of hermeneutical injustice" (2007, 174). On the other hand, she emphasizes: "Shifting the unequal relations of power that create the conditions of hermeneutical injustice (namely, hermeneutical marginalization) takes more than virtuous individual conduct of any kind; it takes group political action for social change" (2007, 174).

5.4. Moral Disagreement and the Possibility of Criticism Revisited

Like Wong's version of moral relativism, Velleman's version of moral relativism is based on a functionalist view of morality. Functionalist views of morality are versions of social constructivism. However, to the social constructivist claim that the moral norms that bind us are ultimately constructed by communities trying to figure out a way to live together, they add the idea that these moral norms serve a certain function. The fact that they serve this function explains why the norms in question are valid in a given context. At the same time, the idea that moral norms serve a function establishes a parameter with respect to which different systems of moral norms can be evaluated. This is what allows functionalist versions of moral relativism to account for the possibility of moral progress. Indeed, of the versions of moral relativism I focus on, only Wong's and Velleman's – that is, only those based on a functionalist understanding of morality – can account for the possibility of moral progress. It is thus by virtue of the underlying view of morality as serving a function that Velleman's version of moral relativism leads to a relativist conception of moral progress. The resulting conception of moral progress has certain advantages that make it interesting as a conception of moral progress independently of the relativism debate. However, the fact that the underlying version of moral relativism can account for the possibility of moral progress also has consequences for another set of questions often associated with relativism concerning the phenomenon of moral disagreement and the possibility of criticism (see Chapter 2).

Accounting for the possibility of moral inter-group disagreement constitutes a challenge for moral relativists (see Chapter 2.1.). This challenge has to do with the normative significance usually ascribed to disagreements. Ordinarily, disagreements show us that something has gone wrong because at least one of the parties to a disagreement must be mistaken. Versions of moral relativism that include a contextualist semantics for moral discourse – such as Velleman's view as well as the views of Harman, Wong, and Rovane – can meet this challenge by accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of “metalinguistic negotiation” (see Chapter 2.3.). In my view, this presents the best solution to the challenge from moral disagreement from the perspective of the moral group relativists that I focus on because it allows them to account for intuitive cases of disagreements as evincing genuine disagreements without incurring any additional semantic commitments. However, accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation has consequences. Moral relativism is often associated with the claim that “faultless disagreement” is possible. Accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of faultless disagreement is one way to meet the challenge the phenomenon poses for the

relativist (see Chapter 2.2.). However, accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation vindicates faultless disagreement only as a special case (see Chapter 2.3.). That is, it does not lead to the claim that all moral disagreements between members of different communities are faultless. Rather, the different moral standards the disputants assume in making their conflicting judgments can be assessed with respect to how well they fulfill a given function. On this view, a moral inter-group disagreement is faultless only in the special case that both of two sets of standards leading to incompatible claims are equally suitable for the purpose at hand. This makes accounting for moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation particularly attractive from the point of view of versions of moral relativism that commit to a functionalist view of morality such as Velleman's and Wong's.

Moral relativism is often associated with the claim that all of the systems or practices of a relevant kind are “equally valid” in the sense that one is as good as the other (see e.g. Boghossian 2006a, 1–5, see also Chapter 1.1.). Functionalist versions of moral relativism are in tension with the claim that all of the relevant systems are as good as any other. However, they vindicate “equal validity” in this strong sense as a special case. On this type of view, two different systems of moral norms are equally valid just in case they fulfill the relevant function equally well (see Chapter 4.3.). This account of “equal validity” as a special case corresponds to the account of “faultless disagreement” as a special case that follows from accounting for disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation. A disagreement between members of different communities will be faultless because the disputants use moral terms in equally suitable ways just in case the systems of moral norms that they refer to are equally valid in the sense that they fulfill the function moral norms are supposed to fulfill equally well. Therefore, accounting for moral disagreements in terms of metalinguistic negotiation not only allows the relativist to account for intuitive cases of disagreements as genuine disagreements without incurring additional semantic commitments, it also matches the kind of functionalist view of morality Velleman and Wong defend.

This understanding of moral inter-group disagreement leads to a more nuanced picture of the normative significance of disagreement. Ordinarily, disagreements are taken to indicate that at least one of the disputants is mistaken. The notion of a faultless disagreement takes away the normative significance of moral disagreement entirely. Because disagreements between members of different communities are always faultless, disagreement cannot put our moral views into question. By contrast, on the understanding of moral disagreement that follows from a functionalist version of moral relativism combined with an account of

disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation, moral inter-group disagreements do have some normative significance. The fact that there is moral conflict should lead us to reassess our own commitments in light of this conflict. At the same time, moral inter-group disagreement does not have the same significance as moral intra-group disagreement. This is not only because it is at least possible that both views are equally suitable although incompatible, but because it will often be impossible for us to go over to the way of life of the other community or to copy aspects of their way of life directly. Therefore, there is a sense in which both ways of life can remain in equal standing. The moral norms that are part of a given way of life are genuinely locally valid in that context. Even if deficits with respect to intelligibility can be made out, this does not mean that these norms are no longer valid or have to be rejected entirely. Rather, it means there is reason to change them. This supports the view that moral relativism is compatible with different and nuanced stances towards moral difference (see Chapter 2.4.): depending on the specifics of the situation, it can be justified to exhibit different degrees of tolerance towards the moral beliefs and practices of others and different degrees of confidence in one's own moral commitments.

The fact that some versions of moral relativism imply a standard of moral progress also has consequences for the question of the possibility of criticism of other communities. The difficulty for moral relativists to account for the possibility of criticism arises when criticism is understood as “normatively external,” that is, as relying on standards that need not be accepted by those criticized. The relativist cannot rely on absolute moral standards because this would undermine their view according to which there are no such absolute moral standards. They cannot rely on their own first-order moral commitments either because according to their metaethical commitment to *Dependence* these only hold in their own context. “Normatively internal criticism,” however, remains available to the relativist. That is, moral relativists can criticize other communities based on standards that these communities accept as well, but deviate from in practice. However, this mode of criticism has its limits. It will not always be the case that morally problematic practices can be criticized based on the moral norms already accepted by the relevant community. The relativist's metaethical commitments thus limit the possibility of criticizing the practices of communities other than one's own (see Chapter 2.4.3.).

A different kind of criticism is indicated by the considerations that lead certain versions of moral relativism towards a conception of moral progress. The topic of progress is particularly closely connected to the topic of criticism of the way of life of communities other than one's own because both accounting for the possibility of progress and criticizing other

communities seem to depend on the availability of a standard that goes beyond the moral norms accepted by communities. Such a standard seems to be in tension with the basic commitments of moral relativism. Nevertheless, a different kind of criticism that goes beyond normatively internal criticism in the sense discussed is available to versions of moral relativism that can account for the effects of unequal social power relations on the moral norms that become entrenched in ways of life (see Chapter 3). This kind of critique makes it possible to criticize moral norms and the practices they are part of based on the suspicion that these norms have been developed and passed on under circumstances of unequal power and unequal participation. Sikka refers to criticism of this kind as “ideology critique.” She introduces this notion as follows:

I would add that another kind of immanent critique is a permanent possibility in any culture where the concept of morality rules out self-serving justifications. This is the critique of ideology: the exposure of certain prescriptions, practices and values, with their attendant justifying narratives, as merely pretending to be for the common good but actually arising from self-serving motivations and functioning to promote the ignoble interests of a particular class or group of individuals. (Sikka 2012, 62)

The kind of critique described by Sikka goes beyond internal critique in the sense discussed because it does not appeal to an ideal accepted by a community and demand that the practice be brought in accordance with this norm. Rather, it criticizes the norms or ideals accepted by a community. But it does so based on the idea that there is something wrong with norms that serve the interests of a privileged group in a society. While a morality that openly affirms the moral right of the powerful is perhaps not unthinkable, there are systematic reasons why systems of moral norms usually are not like that. Wong lists the criterion that subordination of interests needs to be justified as a criterion all adequate moralities have to meet (see Wong 2006, 59–62). There is thus reason to expect that all adequate moralities will contain norms that underwrite this kind of immanent critique. Therefore, ideology critique will be possible in a normatively internal mode as long as the system of moral norms in question underwrites the claim that moral norms should not openly serve the interests of the powerful. While it has the advantages of normatively internal critique – the question of how to justify the standard of critique does not arise – ideology critique is not structurally conservative; that is, rather than demanding that the norms and ideals of a community be realized in practice, it challenges these norms and ideals.

In addition to “normatively” internal and external critique, I have distinguished between “socially” internal and external critique. Whether critique is normatively internal or

external depends on whether the standard of critique is part of the self-conception of the community that is criticized, whether a critique is socially internal and external depends on the social location of the critic. That is, only a member of the relevant community can criticize the practices of that community in a socially internal mode, while everyone can criticize their practices in a normatively internal way. According to Jaeggi, it is a standing objection to ideology critique that it dissociates the standpoint of critique from the standpoint of the actors who are in the grip of ideology (see Jaeggi 2009, 80). However, this need not be the case on Sikka's theoretically thin notion of ideology critique. On this view, there is no reason why those most affected by ideology should not be well placed to criticize it. Even if they will not always be well placed to clearly articulate criticism, those most affected by inequalities will be most likely to notice distortions in moral norms because their interests are being thwarted. This leads back to the role of the socially disadvantaged.

Moral relativists often envisage communities as homogenous, clearly delineated and mutually isolated (see Chapter 3.2.). This kind of idealization is problematic not only because it leads to an inaccurate portrayal – most relativists are aware that it does – but because of its consequences. On the one hand, it makes it difficult for relativists to conceptualize morally relevant change in ways of life. This is because social change is at least in part caused by critical reflection on practices and by the kinds of intra-group conflicts that can result from such socially internal criticism. However, if a community is conceptualized as homogenous, it becomes unclear how these phenomena can occur. Moreover, assuming that communities are homogenous not only obscures the fact that members of different communities have different perspectives on their shared way of life, but also that this phenomenon of what Moody-Adams calls “social differentiation” is due to differences in social role and social power. In idealizing away from this kind of internal complexity, moral relativism risks to inadvertently take sides with the powerful members of a community (see Chapter 3.3.). As the episode of the invention of the term “sexual harassment” shows, in spite of social disadvantage, the standpoint of the oppressed can be particularly advantageous when it comes to discerning deficits in a shared way of life (see Chapter 5.3.). This is why the socially oppressed – what Moody-Adams calls “internal outsiders” – can also play a special role when it comes to critique. The upshot is that criticism will be most easily developed from the inside because it presupposes a thorough understanding of the practices of a community. However, members of other communities are not in principle barred from criticizing the practices of a community. I interpret Velleman's caveat that “[w]e cannot eyeball various communities and see how well their ways of life facilitate mutual intelligibility” (Velleman 2015, 99, see also Chapter 5.2.)

as a warning against criticism of other communities that is too quick, rather than claiming that it is categorically impossible.

This conception of ideology critique builds on the claim that, if morality is supposed to serve a certain function, not just anything can count as an adequate moral system. On most understandings of what a system of moral norms is, a moral norm cannot openly require subordination of the powerless. However, the view that it is the function of ways of life that contain moral norms to enable members of a community to understand themselves and each other gives a particularly strong explanation for why ideology critique is an apt form of immanent critique. An ideology in the broadest sense is a way of understanding the social world that is inadequate; it is a kind of systematic misunderstanding of what is actually going on in a community. Rather than openly demanding the subordination of the socially disadvantaged, moral norms and ideals that are produced and reproduced under conditions of unequal power will portray what is going on in a distorting way so that the subordination of the interests of some members of a community appears justified, that is, appears to make sense. Acting under the influence of ideology is therefore a form of practical irrationality on Velleman's understanding of intelligibility of the constitutive aim of agency (see Chapter 4.2.). The same considerations that lead some versions of moral relativism towards a conception of moral progress thus lead to a different kind of criticism of the ways of life of communities other than one's own.

In this chapter, I have argued that the conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's version of moral relativism has distinctive advantages that make it interesting beyond the question of moral relativism. While some of these advantages pertain to all conceptions of moral progress that derive from a functionalist view of morality, others are specific to Velleman's version of a functionalist view of morality, according to which it is the function of ways of life, which contain moral norms, to facilitate intelligibility. The advantages of Velleman's relativist conception of moral progress come into full view against the background of different strands of critique of the discourse of progress, in particular the criticism that the discourse of progress is "Eurocentric" and that it is "affirmative" in the sense that it neglects regressions and serves to justify the "*status quo*." I have argued that the relativist conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman's view can avoid these criticisms because it makes it possible to think about progress without convergence and to analyze the effects of unequal power relations on the development of ways of life. In order for the latter to be possible, the view needs to be amended with respect to the degree of internal complexity it ascribes to communities. Because all of these advantages are due to the

conception of moral progress following from a relativist view of morality, they constitute a *prima facie* argument in favor of the underlying type of moral relativism. Finally, I have shown that the same considerations that lead versions of moral relativism of this kind towards a relativist conception of moral progress lead to a revised relativist understanding of the phenomenon of moral inter-group disagreement and the possibility of criticizing other communities.

Conclusion

The main question of my dissertation is whether moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress. I started by characterizing moral relativism in terms of a commitment to *Dependence*, *Plurality*, *Exclusiveness*, and *Symmetry*. *Prima facie*, these commitments seem to be in tension with a standard of moral progress. However, drawing on Velleman's work on the topic, I argued that some versions of moral relativism provide a standard of moral progress nevertheless. The main idea behind this argument is that in order to be a distinct metaethical position – in particular, in order not to collapse into moral skepticism or moral nihilism – the moral relativist has to explain what makes different sets of moral norms valid in their respective contexts. Velleman argues that such an account of the local validity of moral norms at the same time provides a standard for moral progress. However, this argument only works on the additional assumption that all of the relevant accounts of local validity provide a criterion that can be met to varying degrees. For example, according to Velleman's and Wong's versions of moral relativism, moral norms are constructed by communities in order to serve a certain function. Because this function can be fulfilled to varying degrees, this functionalist version of moral relativism provides an account of the local validity of different sets of moral norms, which at the same time provides a criterion of moral progress. Any change that allows a system of moral norms to better fulfill the relevant function constitutes moral progress. According to Harman's version of moral relativism, by contrast, moral norms are the upshots of conditional agreements in intention. This is supposed to account for the local validity of moral norms, but it does not constitute a criterion that can be met to varying degrees. Any agreement is as good as any other. Therefore, this version of moral relativism does not provide a criterion of moral progress. Whether this constitutes a counterexample to the argument depends on whether Harman's account is interpreted as giving a sufficient account of the validity of moral norms. There is room to argue that it does not because it amounts to a “debunking” version of moral relativism, according to which the validity of moral norms is just a matter of social acceptance and moral norms therefore do not in fact have the binding force we take them to have. In any case, there are versions of moral relativism that do not attempt to explain the local validity of different sets of moral norms at all. This shows that only certain specific versions of moral relativism can provide a standard of moral progress. Of the versions of moral relativism that I addressed, only Wong's and Velleman's functionalist versions of moral relativism entail a

standard of moral progress. This is because they provide an account of the validity of moral norms that supplies a criterion that can be met to varying degrees.

I have argued that the relativist conception of moral progress that follows from some versions of moral relativism has distinctive advantages. These advantages come out especially clearly when the resulting conception of moral progress is seen against the background of important lines of critique of the discourse of progress and contrasted with “utopian” conceptions of moral progress that conceptualize progress in terms of an ideal end-state. The modern notion of progress, which is closely connected to Enlightenment philosophy of history, has fallen into disrepute for a number of reasons. Two lines of critique, which matter for conceptions of moral progress in contemporary metaethics, claim, first, that the notion of progress is Eurocentric, that is, it conceptualizes progress in terms of convergence on the way of life of Western modernity, and, second, that it is “affirmative” in a problematic sense, that is, that it neglects regressions and serves to justify the “*status quo*.” I have argued that the relativist conception of moral progress that follows from Velleman’s functionalist version of moral relativism can avoid these criticisms. It can avoid the charges associated with the claim that the discourse of progress is Eurocentric because it conceptualizes progress in a genuinely pluralistic manner that does justice to a plurality of ways of life and attendant moral outlooks. According to the functionalist criterion of progress, progress need not lead to convergence on one moral system, but progressive developments can lead in different directions. It can further avoid the charges connected with the claim that the discourse of progress is “affirmative” because it can account for the fact that systems of moral norms can be subject to distortions due to unequal power relations affecting the conditions of production and reproduction of ways of life. However, in order for the resulting conception of moral progress to be able to do so, it needs to be amended. Moral relativists tend to conceptualize communities as clearly defined, mutually isolated, and internally homogenous. While most relativists are aware that these assumptions are strictly speaking false and see them as idealizations that help in theorizing, these assumptions are nevertheless problematic. This is because they abstract away from internal complexities that are highly relevant to questions of the dynamics of social change and moral progress. Only once we make room for the fact that communities are internally complex and marked by socially internal criticism and intra-group conflict can we begin to theorize these transformations. Differences in perspective that are due to unequal relations of social power play a particularly important role with respect to these dynamics. Those who are detrimentally affected by the distortions in a given way of life that are due to unequal participation in shaping the associated resources of understanding are particularly

well placed to detect these distortions – although they might not always be well placed to clearly articulate and openly contest them. Abstracting away from internal complexities of communities thus not only undermines the relativist’s ability to account for certain kinds of social change, but it can also lead to an inadvertent allegiance between moral relativists and the privileged members of a community.

The argument that moral relativists can account for the possibility of moral progress that I built on in this dissertation has consequences for how moral relativism is understood. In particular, the idea that in order not to collapse into skepticism or nihilism, moral relativists must give an account of the local validity of different sets of moral norms seems to blur the distinction between relativism and absolutism. This comes out in the following reflection by Scanlon on what he calls “benign” relativism, that is, a version of moral relativism that does not try to “debunk” the validity of moral norms:

If a defense of benign relativism must start from some conception of what can confer the kind of significance that marks a standard as moral, then it must start from some conception of morality. In order for benign relativism to be distinguished from parametric universalism, then, a distinction must be drawn between, on the one hand, a conception of what can confer the kind of status that moral principles have and, on the other, a substantive standard on which all other moral principles must be based. There is certainly a distinction here, but it cannot be a sharp one, since no plausible account of the considerations that can confer moral status could leave it entirely open which principles could have that status. I take it, therefore, that the boundaries of “relativism” are inevitably somewhat blurred. (Scanlon 1998, 334f)

While I agree with Scanlon’s assessment of the situation, I think that the functionalist views of morality that Velleman and Wong defend should be understood as versions of moral relativism nevertheless. Their accounts of morality allow for a degree of contingency and variation that goes beyond the kind of diversity vindicated by absolutist conceptions of morality that allow for the same moral principles leading to different requirements in different circumstances. Moral relativism is often associated with the slogan “anything goes.” One way to understand this slogan is as implying that on a relativist view of morality, anything can count as a valid moral system and any moral system is as good as any other. Functionalist versions of moral relativism are in stark contrast to this understanding of moral relativism. As I have shown, they vindicate the possibility that two different and incompatible systems of moral norms are “equally valid” in the sense that one is as good as the other only as a special case. Correspondingly, the account of moral inter-group disagreement in terms of metalinguistic negotiation that I have advocated for vindicates the possibility of a faultless disagreement as a special case: a moral disagreement between members of different

communities is faultless in the sense that the disputants use moral terms in ways that are equally suitable to the purpose of moral terms just in case the moral systems they refer to are equally valid in the sense that they fulfill the function of moral norms equally well. Because of this, I think that functionalist versions of moral relativism are better associated with the slogan “whatever works.” The function component of these views spells out the sense in which in order to be valid, moral norms have to “work.” This component of the view provides a criterion to rule out some moral norms as invalid as well as a standard of moral progress. While specifying a function that moral norms need to fulfill constrains the content of valid moral norms, it does not lead to a single privileged version of moral norms. Rather, it allows people to come up with “whatever” kind of arrangement works for them in their given context. I hope to have shown that, in contrast to what might be expected at the outset, at least some versions of moral relativism can account for the possibility of moral progress and that the resulting relativist view of moral progress has advantages that make it interesting beyond the debate on moral relativism.

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Abstract

This dissertation contributes to the debate on two controversial topics: moral relativism and moral progress. The main argument is that some versions of moral relativism can account for the possibility of moral progress. This is surprising because judgments about moral progress seem to require a standard that transcends different contexts. Such a standard seems to be in tension with central commitments of moral relativism. The argument is based on the idea that in order not to collapse into moral skepticism or moral nihilism, versions of moral relativism have to give an account of the local validity of different sets of moral norms. As J. David Velleman has pointed out, given certain circumstances, such an account of the local validity of moral norms establishes a standard of moral progress. This argument has consequences for how moral relativism should be understood. At the same time, it leads to a relativist conception of moral progress that is of interest beyond the debate on moral relativism. One reason for this is that the resulting relativist conception of moral progress conceptualizes moral progress without the assumption that progress must lead to convergence – at least in the long run or at some kind of ideal limit. Therefore, it can conceptualize progress in a genuinely pluralistic manner, as potentially leading in different directions.

Zusammenfassung

Die vorliegende Dissertation liefert einen Beitrag zu den Debatten zu zwei verschiedenen kontroversiellen Themen: einerseits zur Debatte um moralischen Relativismus, andererseits zur Debatte um moralischen Fortschritt. Das Hauptargument ist, dass bestimmte Versionen eines moralischen Relativismus die Möglichkeit moralischen Fortschritts erklären können. Das ist überraschend, da Urteile über moralischen Fortschritt einen Standard voraussetzen scheinen, der verschiedene Kontexte transzendiert. So ein Standard scheint im Widerspruch zu zentralen Annahmen des moralischen Relativismus zu stehen. Das Argument basiert auf der Idee, dass Versionen eines moralischen Relativismus die lokale Gültigkeit verschiedener Systeme moralischer Normen erklären können müssen, um nicht zu moralischem Skeptizismus oder Nihilismus zu werden. Wie J. David Velleman herausgearbeitet hat impliziert so eine Erklärung der lokalen Gültigkeit moralischer Normen unter bestimmten Umständen einen Standard für moralischen Fortschritt. Dieses Argument hat Auswirkungen darauf, was unter moralischem Relativismus zu verstehen ist. Gleichzeitig führt es zu einer relativistischen Konzeption moralischen Fortschritts, die auch jenseits der Debatte um moralischen Relativismus von Interesse ist. Einer der Gründe dafür ist, dass die daraus resultierende relativistische Konzeption moralischen Fortschritts Fortschritt ohne die Annahme konzeptualisiert, dass moralischer Fortschritt – zumindest langfristig gesehen oder idealerweise – zur Konvergenz führen muss. Das ermöglicht eine Fortschrittskonzeption, die genuin pluralistisch ist, in dem Sinn, dass sie moralischen Fortschritt als potenziell in verschiedene Richtungen führend denken kann.