I. Introduction
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There is no universally valid morality, only moralities plural, each having merely local validity. This much seems clear on first glance at the historical and ethnographic data. First impressions can be deceiving, though, and this one is troubling as well, so it calls for a second look. Ethnographers and historians can look again at its empirical sources;¹ a philosopher wants to look at its foundations. The philosopher asks: Can there be plural moralities of merely local validity?

There can of course be local *mores.* *Mores* are always specific to a culture or society or community.² But *mores* lack the obligatoriness, or binding force, of morality: one can be justified in ignoring or defying them. Also, *mores* include such trivial matters as the choice of a fork or the height of a hemline. Local moralities, by contrast, would have to make inexorable demands on unavoidable matters, despite being restricted to the members of a particular culture or society or community. Moral relativism must therefore explain how *mores* can have moral force and moral subject matter without being universal.

This explanation cannot invoke a universal obligation to conform to one’s local *mores,* since moral relativism denies the existence of universal obligations. Nor can the explanation invoke extrinsic considerations such as a fear of social sanctions or a desire to fit in, since morality binds even those

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¹ I do not mean to imply that anthropologists have not done excellent work on the foundations of relativism. For an extremely clear and cogent characterization of moral relativism, see Richard A. Shweder, “Ethical Relativism: Is There a Defensible Version?”, *Ethos* 18, no. 2 (1990): 205–218.

² Throughout the book, I will use the term ‘community’ for a group of people living in proximity to one another and therefore obliged to interact with one another frequently. The term is less than ideal, but I know of none better. As the term is generally understood, the members of a community are bound together by more than proximity. Since one of my goals is to explain how they are bound together, however, I will use the term without that connotation, so as not to beg any questions. Moreover, communities have vague and porous boundaries, whereas I will speak as if they can be clearly individuated. In this latter respect, my use of the term is an idealization intended as an aid to theorizing.

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who do not care about these. Relativism must rather explain how *mores* can have the force and subject matter of morality all by themselves.

Philosophers may question whether I am really a relativist, for two reasons.

One reason is that I don’t believe in faultless disagreement. Faultless disagreement would occur if one person accepted a proposition or principle and another person rejected it, without either one’s being wrong. Faultless disagreement is impossible, though it’s just the sort of impossibility that spurs philosophers to heroic measures on its behalf.

My concern is moral relativism in the real world, not in logical heaven. I want to explain how there can be multiple, locally valid moralities of the sort that there actually appear to be. That explanation need not show that there can be faultless disagreement between moralities; it may show instead that they do not even share enough common ground to disagree, and that it is therefore a moot question which one is right. If it’s a moot question which of two moralities is right, then there is no adjudicating between them, and both remain standing — which is all that real-world relativism requires.

Of course, if ‘morality’ refers to a common set of pro-or-con questions on which different communities give different answers, then their views cannot be equally valid unless there is faultless disagreement. But the assumption of a common set of questions is already a form of universalism. It implies that communities agree about *how* to think, even if not *what* to think, about how to live. I believe that communities are more foreign to one another than that.

I see two obstacles to disagreement between moralities. One bar to disagreement is the lack of a shared taxonomy of actions. Actions are performed under descriptions, and act-descriptions are socially constructed, with the result that communities differ over the domain of things that can be done. If members of one community are choosing among options that members of another have never imagined, then the latter will have no opinion about the choice and no grounds for forming one.

A more profound bar to disagreement is that reasons for acting are essentially perspectival. What makes for a morality is not a set of answers to some universal questions but, as I have suggested, inexorable demands on unavoidable matters. Those demands come in the form of reasons for acting and reacting. I will argue that such reasons are perspectival in a way that prevents disagreement.

The challenge for a relativist who denies that communities disagree about a given set of moral questions is to show that there is still a shared topic
— namely, morality — on which they are, for that very reason, failing to disagree. In other words, such a relativist must show that different communities are talking about the same thing but not in sufficiently similar ways to clash head-on. I meet this challenge by showing that the mores of different communities can share general themes that we would call moral, which they address with a force that we would call moral, without agreeing or disagreeing on any particular moral issue.

In short, 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. For this reason, I do not offer a definition of what I mean by ‘morality’ or ‘moralities’. I mean that family (you know which one it is). We should not be surprised that relativism rules out the possibility of giving a universal definition of morality.

My assertion of shared moral themes may be a second source of doubt about my credentials as a relativist. In order to show that there could be other moralities, I have to show that they would overlap enough with what we call morality to deserve the name, and then I seem to have found unavoidable convergence rather than unbridgeable difference.

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.

Such humility is the main lesson of moral relativism. The mere possibility of multiple valid moralities should be enough to shake our certainty in having the absolute truth about morality, given that there may be no such thing.

The chapters of this book 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 that would account for the cross-cultural and historical phenomena.

In Chapter II, “Virtual Action”, I prepare the ground for my account of relativism by analyzing the construction of agency. I take as a model
the construction of online agents in virtual worlds, where participants act with animated avatars as their online bodies. I argue that real agents are real-world participants acting, as it were, with flesh-and-blood bodies as their avatars. Both kinds of agent are designed, I claim, for social interaction of the sort required to pass a Turing Test of personhood.

In Chapter III, “Doables”, I widen my view to the construction of action-types by members of a community. I argue that members of a community construct a shared taxonomy of actions because they need to make sense of one another and to one another for the sake of social interaction. The social construction of action-types results in differences that stand in the way of moral disagreement between communities.

The central chapter of the book is “Foundations for Moral Relativism”, Chapter IV, which explains the construction of perspective-relative reasons that can underwrite the demands of local moralities. Although these processes leave no room for moral disagreement, I argue, they give application to a secular concept of progress. (This argument will raise further doubts about my credentials as a relativist.)

In Chapter V, “Sociality and Solitude”, I offer a reason for thinking that human communities will tend to develop reasons that we can recognize as moral. I begin with the human capacity that makes possible the processes of action and interaction that I have discussed in previous chapters: I call this capacity objective self-awareness. I then argue that objective self-awareness is an essential, perhaps the essential, element of personhood, and that it is the object of many attitudes by which we value persons. Thus, the foundations of moral relativism, as I conceive them, are also foundations for pro-moral values.

Finally, in Chapter VI, “Life Absurd? Don’t Be Ridiculous”, I consider the claim that the truth of relativism would deprive life of its meaning. I argue that the possibility of progress, which I have asserted in Chapter IV, is sufficient to prevent life from being absurd.