

# The Way Things Go: Moral Relativism and Suspension of Judgment

## Abstract

A popular accusation against moral relativism is that it goes too far in its vindication of tolerance. The idea behind accusations like this can be summarized in the slogan, frequently attributed to relativism, that “anything goes”. The aim of this paper is to defend moral relativism from the accusation that it is an “anything goes” view; from the accusation that it forces us to suspend our judgment in cases in which we do not think we should even be allowed to. In the end, relativism is not an “anything goes” view because it is not a view about *what goes*, but about *the way things go*—about what goes on when we say that something is morally right or wrong. There is indeed a view, sometimes called “relativism”, that forces us to suspend our judgment about practices that do not allow for such comfort, but it is not so much moral relativism as moral *contextualism*. Apparently, though, the most salient alternative to “anything goes” views such as contextualism is not moral relativism. It is moral *objectivism*, according to which there is a fact of the matter about moral issues. However, I show that moral objectivism too ends up being an “anything goes” view unless the objectivist takes herself to be endowed with “God’s point of view”, something that I prove troublesome.

## 1. Introduction

A popular accusation against moral relativism is that it goes too far in its vindication of tolerance. By setting no limits to what we should tolerate, the accusation goes, moral relativism condemns us to shrug our shoulders no matter what disgusting practice we are confronted with, for every practice is deemed permissible by some moral standard or another. W. T. Stace, who spent much of his philosophical career arguing against relativism, put it this way:

Certainly, if we believe that any one moral standard is as good as any other, we are likely to be more tolerant. We shall tolerate widow-burning, human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, the infliction of physical torture, or any other of the thousand and

one abominations which are, or have been, from time approved by moral code or another. But this is not the kind of toleration that we want, and I do not think its cultivation will prove “an advantage to morality”. (Stace 1937: 58–59)

The idea behind accusations like these can be summarized in the slogan, frequently attributed to relativism, that “anything goes”. The aim of this paper is to defend moral relativism from the accusation that it is an “anything goes” view; from the accusation that it forces us to *suspend our judgment* about human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, or torture. In the end, as we will see, relativism is not an “anything goes” view because it is not a view about *what goes*, but about *the way things go*—about what goes on when we say that something is morally right or wrong.

Here, I characterize moral relativism in terms similar to the ones contemporarily used to characterize the corresponding view about predicates of personal taste, which I borrow from MacFarlane (2014): moral relativism is the view that the truth of moral claims is relative to the *context of assessment*, that is, the context from which we wonder whether the claim is true or false. There is indeed a view, sometimes called “relativism”, that forces us to suspend our judgment about practices as the ones mentioned above, but, as I will show, it is not so much moral relativism as moral *contextualism*—the view that the truth of moral claims is relative to the *context of use*, or the context at which the claim is made.<sup>1</sup> As we will see, once the context of assessment gets into the picture, we are deprived of the resources that would allow us to say that “anything goes”; the contextualist, for whom these resources are still available, is the one who is forced to say so.

Apparently, though, the most salient alternative to “anything goes” views such as contextualism is not moral relativism. It is moral *objectivism*, according to which there is a fact of the matter about moral issues (see, for instance, Hirvonen 2016). However, I will show that moral objectivism too ends up being an “anything goes” view unless the objectivist takes herself to be

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<sup>1</sup> Two examples of this kind of view that will be mentioned throughout this paper are Harman’s (1975/2013) and Dreier’s (1990), both presented as varieties of relativism by their proponents.

endowed with “God’s point of view”, something that I will prove troublesome. In this case as well as in that of contextualism, as I mentioned above, what makes the consequence that “anything goes” undesirable is that it forces us to suspend our judgment in cases in which we do not think we should even be allowed to. Relativism is precisely the view that, unlike contextualism and the “anything goes” versions of objectivism, does not even allow us to suspend our judgment.

In this and other respects, my view bears strong resemblance with Field’s (2009, 2018) view on the nature of epistemic evaluation. However, I hope to contribute to making clearer the sense in which views such as Field’s or mine account for our assessing practices, whether moral or epistemic, in a more natural way than their alternatives. I also hope to make explicit the contribution that MacFarlane’s theoretical scaffolding can make to the clarification of the main tenets of varieties of epistemic relativism such as Field’s, and also of moral relativism.

Before getting to the substance of this paper, two points of clarification are in order. First, the task of defending moral relativism from the accusation that it leads to an “anything goes” view involves two things: clarifying what it is that makes a view relativist, and showing that this does not mean that anything goes. These two fronts are often mixed in ways that make it not obvious what belongs to one project and what to the other. One could always retort that, according to my characterization of relativism, all theories that have been called so are actually varieties of contextualism, and that, consequently, they do have the pernicious consequences that have been attributed to them. Thus, I may be proposing a new view that is in fact worth embracing, but not actually defending what has been called “relativism”. I would as well be satisfied if I had achieved such a thing, but I am doing more than this. I will argue that the positions of many (although not all) actual relativists can be characterized in the way I characterize relativism here, and that their contextualist readings misconstrue them.

Second, moral relativism in the sense suggested here is by definition a kind of *cognitivism*. In other words, moral claims are the kind of thing to which truth or falsity can be attributed; relativism construed in the way I favor then says that the truth or falseness of these claims is relative to the

context of assessment. Besides being susceptible of truth or falsity, moral claims also express propositions in what Charlow (2014: 639) calls “the deflationary (merely functional) sense”. In this sense, to express a proposition is to have a content that can serve as the extension of phrases such as “what she said” and “what she believes” (see also Frápolli 2019a, 2019b). In saying that moral claims express propositions, I am not saying that they represent the world as being in any particular way, as it would follow if I used “proposition” in Charlow’s “inflationary (representational) sense”.<sup>2</sup> In fact, by relativizing the truth of moral claims to contexts of assessment we could be seen as suggesting that they do not represent the world, although I will not press this issue here (for an argument in this direction, see Field 2018: 14).

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 2, I present the three theories that will be compared in it—objectivism, contextualism, and relativism. In section 3, I show that objectivism in its basic form fosters intolerance, a problem that is solved by contextualism. The feature that makes contextualism more tolerant than objectivism is its capacity to account for *faultless disagreement*, which I also characterize in this section. As I show in section 4, however, contextualism accounts for faultless disagreement at the cost of making us *too* tolerant, thus forcing us to suspend our judgment about issues that do not allow for such comfort. Relativism not only makes suspension of judgment not compulsory, but also forbids it, a result that is desirable when we are talking about issues that matter to us as much as moral ones. I also show in this section that, most of the times, critics who accuse relativism of being an “anything goes” view are in fact talking about contextualism.

In section 5, I revisit section 3’s assumption that, although objectivism is incompatible with tolerance, at least it does not force suspension of judgment like contextualism does.. The basic form

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<sup>2</sup> I would also be comfortable with saying, as Brandom (1994, 2001) does, that a proposition is just whatever can serve as a premise or conclusion in an argument, whether it tells us something about how the world is or not.

of objectivism discussed in section 3 does not allow us to suspend our judgment at the cost of fostering intolerance, but there are also versions of objectivism that make room for tolerance at exactly the same cost as contextualism: they make room for suspension of judgment too. Relativism is thus again vindicated as the view that affords us the appropriate amount of tolerance, and no more.

## 2. Objectivism, contextualism, relativism

In this section, I characterize the three views around which the discussion in this paper revolves—objectivism, contextualism, and relativism. These are views about what we should take into account when deciding whether someone who has made a moral claim has said something true. The characterization of objectivism that we will have by the end of the section, unlike the ones offered for contextualism and relativism, will be provisional. In section 5, we will see that it corresponds only to a particular version of the view.

Suppose Beth, who endorses a moral standard that sanctions eating black pudding, utters

(1) Eating black pudding isn't morally wrong.

Alice, who endorses a moral standard that forbids eating black pudding, hears this and wonders whether Beth has said something true or false. There are (at least) three options as to how Alice should answer to this question:

**Objectivism (provisional):** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff the fact of the matter is that eating black pudding is morally right.

**Contextualism (provisional):** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff eating black pudding is morally right relative to Beth's moral standard.

**Relativism (provisional):** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff eating black pudding is morally right relative to Alice's moral standard.<sup>3</sup>

The contextualist and relativist instructions seem pretty straightforward for Alice to apply, but it is less clear what it means to say that, as a matter of fact, eating black pudding is morally right. As I said, I will discuss what exactly the objectivist instruction tells Alice to do in section 5. For now, though, let us phrase it this way: objectivist Alice should judge that Beth has said something true if and only if eating black pudding is morally right *simpliciter*, that is, not relative to anything else.

Contextualism and relativism, by contrast, make Alice take into consideration something other than the referred practice when deciding whether Beth has said something true—a moral standard. They differ, however, as to what standard this is. Contextualism takes it to be Beth's, while relativism takes it to be Alice's. In fact, contextualism does not tell Alice to take Beth's standard into account because it is Beth's standard, but because it is the one that is relevant at the context at which Beth makes her claim. Let us call this the *context of use*. Similarly, relativism tells Alice to take her own standard into account because it is the one that is relevant at the *context of assessment*, that is, the context from which Alice wonders whether Beth has said something true.

Although in this case the standard relevant at the context of use coincides with that of the speaker, and the one relevant at the context of assessment coincides with that of the assessor, this will not always be necessarily the case (see [author]). For instance, as Recanati points out, the location that the context of use supplies need not be the location at which the speaker is, but “some other place that is being talked about” (Recanati 2007: 6). In other words, it is possible for the context of use to provide a value for a parameter that is different from the one that figures in the *index of the context*, understood as the index that includes the speaker who made the utterance, the

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<sup>3</sup> As we will see, there are other standards, besides Alice's and Beth's, that Alice could take into account when assessing Beth's claim. This is why, if the views are characterized in this way, there are *at least three* options as to how Alice should answer to the question whether Beth has said something true.

time and location at which it was made, the speaker's standards, etc. Likewise, the context of assessment can supply a parameter that is not the assessor's. In particular, it could even be that the context of assessment makes it relevant to evaluate the claim with respect to the speaker's standards. This would apply to moral standards too. Thus, in order to characterize contextualism and relativism in the most general terms possible we should do so not in terms of the speaker's or assessor's standards, but in terms of the standards relevant at the context of use or the context of assessment:

**Contextualism:** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff eating black pudding is morally right relative to the moral standard that is relevant at the context of use.

**Relativism:** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff eating black pudding is morally right relative to the moral standard that is relevant at the context of assessment.

Let us call the context at which Beth utters (1)  $c_B$ , and the context from which Alice assesses it  $c_A$ . According to contextualism, (1) is true, as uttered by Beth, if and only if eating black pudding is morally right relative to the moral standard determined by  $c_B$ . Let us assume that this is the moral standard endorsed by Beth, and let us call it  $m_B$ . Since eating black pudding is morally right relative to such standard, (1) is true as assessed by Alice. The context that is relevant to determine the moral standard relative to which the claim should be true is the context from which the speaker carries it out. This is the context of use. Moral contextualism, then, is the theory that the truth of a moral claim depends on the context of use.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> I intend this characterization to be neutral as to whether contextualism is better understood as an *indexical* view or as a *nonindexical* one (see, for instance, MacFarlane 2009 for the distinction). These are two different ways in which the idea that the truth of moral claims is relative to moral standards can be implemented. On the one hand, we can say that the content of a moral claim includes a moral standard, so that the same moral claim can vary in truth-value depending on the occasion, for it has a different content each time. This is what an indexical contextualist would say. On the other hand, we can say that the content

According to relativism, for its part, the truth of a moral claim depends not on the context of use, but on the context of assessment.<sup>5</sup> (1) will thus be true, as uttered by Beth *and assessed by Alice*, if and only if eating black pudding is morally right relative to the moral standard determined by  $c_A$ , which, assuming it is the one endorsed by Alice, I will call  $m_A$ . Since eating black pudding is *not* morally right relative to such standard, (1) is false as assessed by Alice. Note that, according to contextualism, (1) would be true even as assessed by Alice, for it has it that her moral standard plays no role in her assessment of the claim.

Although contextualism might hold that the content of moral claims is relative, or that the truth of these contents is,<sup>6</sup> only relativism has it that *the truth of moral claims itself* is relative. MacFarlane notes that it is not possible to talk of “*the* context of assessment” in the same sense in which we talk of “*the* context of utterance”, for there is a potentially infinite number of contexts from which we might assess a single utterance (MacFarlane 2014: 61–62). The consequence, as Field notes, is that in contextualism we can always say whether a claim is correct from an independent perspective—if the proposition it expresses is true, either by itself or relative to the context at which the claim is made. In relativism, on the contrary, we can find claims that cannot be

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of a moral claim is always the same, but whether this content is true or false depends on the occasion; in this case, too, the same moral claim can be true under some circumstances and false under others. This is the option pursued by nonindexical contextualism. Everything I say about contextualism in this paper is intended to apply to both versions of contextualism.

<sup>5</sup> Applying MacFarlane’s relativism to moral claims supposes extending his theory beyond the cases for which it is intended. MacFarlane does not develop nor argue for moral relativism—he does propose to use relativism to explain the behavior of claims featuring “ought” (Kolodny & MacFarlane 2010; MacFarlane 2014: chapter 11), but this is a prudential, rather than a moral, “ought”. Still, I think moral relativism too is best characterized in terms of the context of assessment.

<sup>6</sup> In the first case, we would be talking about indexical contextualism; in the second case, about nonindexical contextualism (see n. 4 for the distinction).

said to be accurate from an independent perspective. This happens when their truth or falsity does not depend on the context of use, but on the context of assessment (Field 2009: 273). Another way to put this is that there is no privileged point of view, a commitment that I take to characterize relativism too. As we will see, this idea that there is no privileged point of view is the one that will make relativism, unlike contextualism, forbid suspension of judgment.

One could object that it is contextualism that excludes the idea of a privileged point of view. After all, the objection would go, in assessing what another person says, relativism tells us to take into consideration only our own point of view, while contextualism encourages us to use each speaker's standpoint. Relativism, by contrast, is still committed to the idea of a privileged point of view, i.e., that of the assessor.<sup>7</sup> In response to this objection, remember, first, that the point of view made relevant by the context of use does not have to be the speaker's, nor has the context of assessment to make the assessor's point of view the relevant one. Next, note that the context that is attached to a given claim is only one, so that, once a claim has been made, contextualism makes what is said true or false once and forever. Contexts of assessment, however, are potentially infinite even for the same claim, so it is relativism that best implements the insight that there are no settled truths. Thus, there is no privileged point of view in relativism—not even the assessor's. But there is a privileged point of view in contextualism to which we have to look when attaching a truth-value to a given claim, and this is the one determined by the context of use, be this the speaker's point of view or not.

This paper revolves around the dialectic between objectivism, contextualism, and relativism. To a first approximation, the story that I will tell is this. Objectivism makes Alice intolerant.<sup>8</sup> Contextualism does not make Alice intolerant; however, it makes her so tolerant that she is forced

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<sup>7</sup> Thanks to [*name suppressed*] for suggesting this objection to me.

<sup>8</sup> In fact, we will see in section 5 that there are versions of objectivism that do not make Alice intolerant, but they have other problems. Let us keep things simple for now, though.

to suspend her judgment about issues that we take to be important. Relativism, in contrast to both objectivism and contextualism, provides Alice with the exact amount of tolerance—not so little as to make her intolerant, not so much as to force her to suspend her judgment.

### 3. Tolerance and contextualism

In this section, I motivate moral contextualism as a response to moral objectivism's lack of tolerance. Contextualism makes us tolerant, I say, because it makes us see disagreements about moral matters as faultless, something that is not available to the kind of objectivist that I consider here.

When one has not been confronted with arguments for the relativity of truth, it is perhaps natural to assume that propositions are true or false *simpliciter*. This idea fits nicely with the phenomenology of many of the disagreements that we encounter in daily life. Consider, for instance, the one that holds between Alice and Beth when the former says

(2) Black pudding is made out of blood.

and the latter replies

(3) No, it isn't.

It seems clear that, in a case like this, at least one of the speakers must have made a mistake, and it would be enough to look at black pudding's production process to know which one. Black pudding cannot be made and not made out of blood at the same time, so if Alice is right, Beth is wrong; and if Beth is right, Alice is wrong. This description of the facts seems to vindicate a picture according to which propositions are true or false *simpliciter*—Alice is affirming the proposition that black pudding is made out of blood, Beth is denying it; if this proposition is true, Alice will be right and Beth will be wrong, and the other way around. If we find this is the right way of looking at things, we will be objectivists about “being made out of blood”.

However, other things can be said about black pudding that are not like being made out of blood—for instance, whether it is morally right to eat it. Consider the following dialogue. Alice and Beth are at a restaurant and they are looking at the menu, trying to choose a starter that they can share. Alice says

(4) Eating black pudding is morally wrong.

and Beth, again, replies with (3). In this case, things do not seem as easy as they were in the previous one. Alice and Beth can both have a right to say what they say, and it is not clear in which sense at least one of them has to have made a mistake. Moreover, it is hard to imagine a fact that could settle their dispute, something that was easier to do when they discussed black pudding's ingredients. Disagreements such as this one are “faultless disagreements” (Kölbel 2002, 2004; Wright 2006). In faultless disagreements, it seems possible to say that none of the speakers is at fault if no mistake is involved in their saying what they say, hence the name chosen for the phenomenon. When discussing black pudding's ingredients, by contrast, at least one of the speakers has to be at fault.<sup>9</sup>

Seeing their dispute as a faultless disagreement allows Alice and Beth to be tolerant with respect to each other's opinion. As none of them is at fault, they should understand that both have a right to say what they say. The problem with objectivism, thus, is that it seems to be at odds with tolerance: if there is a fact of the matter as to whether it is morally right to eat black pudding, it is impossible for Alice, for instance, to see Beth's utterance as legitimate, as she will take it to be the result of a mistake. One way to make room for tolerance is to move from moral objectivism to

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<sup>9</sup> It has been discussed whether there is such a thing as faultless disagreement. Some authors, such as Stojanovic (2007) or Iacona (2008), have argued that, as long as there is no fault in the exchange, it cannot count as a disagreement. Here, however, I will leave this discussion aside and assume that it makes sense to talk about faultless disagreement, and that it is something for which we should expect a theory to account.

moral contextualism. Remember that, according to this view, the truth of moral claims is relative to a moral standard, which is determined by the context at which the claim is made.

Suppose that Alice utters (4) because she endorses a moral standard that condemns eating black pudding, while Beth replies with (3), which can be seen as a pro-sentence for

(1) Eating black pudding isn't morally wrong.

because her moral standard permits it. Remember that we have called the context from which Alice assesses (1)  $c_A$ . This is also the context from which she utters (4). Similarly,  $c_B$ , the context from which Beth utters (1), is also the context from which she assesses (4). If, as we assumed,  $c_A$  determines Alice's standard  $m_A$  and  $c_B$  determines Beth's standard  $m_B$ , contextualism will say for this case that (4) is true relative to  $m_A$  and false relative to  $m_B$ , while (1) is true relative to  $m_B$  and false relative to  $m_A$ . Alice should hence realize that whether it is wrong to eat black pudding is relative to a moral standard, and with it, that the disagreement she is having with Beth is faultless. This realization is likely to make her more tolerant than she would be if she assumed that there is a fact of the matter as to whether it is wrong to eat black pudding.

So this is what we have as of now. Contextualism makes room for faultless disagreements, while objectivism does not. This makes contextualists able to vindicate tolerance in a way in which objectivists just cannot. As we will see in the next section, however, contextualist tolerance ends up being excessive, thus paralyzing the contextualist.

#### **4. Suspension of judgment and relativism**

In this section, I argue that contextualism takes tolerance as far as to force suspension of judgment, while relativism stops just ahead of this. However, relativism has been accused precisely of forcing us to suspend our judgment. Take, for instance, Stace's quote in section 1. Two ideas are explicitly stated there: (i) all practices are morally right according to some standard or another, and (ii) all standards stand on a par. Together, these two ideas are a recipe for suspension of judgment. However, both follow if we take the truth of moral claims to be relative to a moral standard that is

determined by the context of use, as contextualism does, but not if we take it to be relative to a standard determined by the context of assessment, as suggested by relativism. (i) can be straightforwardly derived from the characterization of contextualism in section 2, but it takes a little more to show that (ii) follows from it. The aim of this section is to do this. Once this is done, it will be apparent that it is contextualism that Stace has in mind when he accuses relativism of going too far in its vindication of tolerance.

Boghossian calls (ii) “Equal Validity”, according to which the many radically different ways of seeing the world are equally valid, and takes this thesis to characterize relativism (Boghossian 2006: 2). Baghramian (2019: 249) attributes this commitment to relativism too, and the words that Williamson puts in the mouth of Zac, the relativist character of his *Tetralogue* (Williamson 2015), invite us to think that he does the same thing.<sup>10</sup> To see how Equal Validity follows from the characterization of contextualism, note that what is worrying about views committed to Equal Validity is that they preclude us from condemning practices that virtually all philosophers engaged in the conversation on moral relativism find outrageous. Contextualism has precisely this consequence. To mention an example especially cherished by antirelativists, consider the following moral claim:

(5) Female genital mutilation is morally wrong.

Contextualism implies that the truth of this claim is relative to a moral standard, that is, (5) may be true according to a standard and false relative to another. For instance, suppose that Alice and Beth disagree about whether female genital mutilation is morally wrong. This is how we would describe a situation in which Alice uttered (5) and Beth replied:

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<sup>10</sup> Boghossian, Baghramian, and Williamson characterize relativism as committed to Equal Validity in the context of their criticizing *epistemic* relativism, but they arguably intend their characterization to apply to moral relativism as well.

(6) Female genital mutilation isn't morally wrong.

Suppose, again, that Alice utters (5) because she endorses a moral standard that condemns female genital mutilation, while Beth replies with (6) because her moral standard permits it. In cases like this, as we saw before, contextualism says that (5) is true relative to Alice's standard and false relative to Beth's, while (6) is true relative to Beth's standard and false relative to Alice's. As outrageous as Alice might find female genital mutilation, hence, she should realize that its moral valence is relative to a moral standard, thus making her disagreement with Beth faultless and tolerance the stance to take.

However, what Alice is interested in is not whether female genital mutilation is right or wrong according to this or that, but whether it is right or wrong, period.<sup>11</sup> When deciding whether female genital mutilation is right or wrong, she should ask herself who —Beth or herself— has spoken truly; in other words, she should consider whether (5) and (6) are true or false *simpliciter*. However, for (5) to be true or false *simpliciter* is for it to be so with respect to Alice's moral standard, while for (6) to be true or false *simpliciter* is for it to be so with respect to Beth's. (5) and (6) are thus both true *simpliciter*. It is in this sense in which, for contextualism, Alice's and Beth's standards stand on a par; the sense in which contextualism is committed to Equal Validity. The only thing that would be left for Alice to do in this situation is thus to suspend her judgment about the matter. This paralyzing consequence is thus what makes moral contextualism so terrible. It seems to force us to remain silent in front of injustice.

Relativism allows Alice to be aware of the fact that (5) and (6) are both true relative to the standard of the person who utters them, thus making it easier for her to be tolerant, but this does not mean that, for her, female genital mutilation is neither right nor wrong. For this to be so, she would have to be able to put both her standard and Beth's into play when assessing the moral valence of

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<sup>11</sup> This is reminiscent of Moore's "What's at issue?" problem (see Moore 1903/1993: section 11; see also Gibbard 2003: 23–29).

female genital mutilation. But she only has the standard that she has, and she cannot “jump over it” to assess female genital mutilation from someone else’s point of view. If she could, she would be able to see things as they stand from a perspective that makes Beth’s standard just as valid as hers, that is, from a perspective that commits her to Equal Validity. It is important, though, to emphasize that relativism makes Alice aware that there are points of view other than her own, even if it is only the latter that is at play when she considers the moral valence of female genital mutilation. She can put herself in Beth’s shoes, which, besides fostering tolerance, can contribute to Alice’s revising her standard after comparing it with Beth’s.<sup>12</sup> This can have an effect on Alice’s evaluation, but, in deciding whether female genital mutilation is right or wrong, she is not deciding whether it is right or wrong relative to any standard but hers. Beth’s standard may be at play when Alice reflects on the adequacy of her own standard, but not when she simply asks herself what she thinks about female genital mutilation.

Thus, contextualism forces Alice to suspend her judgment about the moral valence of female genital mutilation, but relativism does not. However, as we have seen, suspension of judgment is a central piece of some arguments against relativism. The way to untie this knot is to realize that the kind of view that antirelativists have opposed on these grounds is contextualism, not relativism. Of course, the adequacy of this solution depends on our ability to show that at least a couple of actual relativists have not said such thing—that their views, even if committed to the idea that the truth of all moral claims is relative, do not make it relative to the context of use. If we fail to show this, all we will be able to do is read the paragraphs above as advancing an argument for a new theory. We would then say that antirelativists are right in dismissing the relativist views that have actually been proposed as claiming that “anything goes”. The problem with these views, though, is that they are not actually relativist, but contextualist. A true relativist view would look like the one sketched

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<sup>12</sup> Thanks to [*name suppressed*] for making me aware of the importance of emphasizing this.

above, and so-called relativists would be wise to adopt it in place of the contextualism they have embraced up to now.

Fortunately, there are a couple of examples of relativists who are not committed to Boghossian's Equal Validity thesis, and consequently, to the idea that "anything goes". One of them is Kusch (2019), who at the same time gathers for us some textual evidence that "(a)lmost all card-carrying (...) relativists deny being committed to Equal Validity" (Kusch 2019: 273). He quotes Bloor, for instance, as saying that "(o)ur (...) postulate (...) is not that all beliefs are equally true or equally false" (Barnes and Bloor 1982: 23), and Feyerabend as saying that "not all approaches to "reality" are successful" (Feyerabend 1999: 215).<sup>13</sup> If not all standards are equally valid, then at least some things do not go. The way to make sense of a moral relativism that does not commit us to Equal Validity, I have suggested above, is to replace the context of use with the context of assessment. Given how such authoritative relativist voices as Bloor and Feyerabend reject Equal Validity, I think the most parsimonious way of characterizing moral relativism is in terms of the context of assessment, so that its critics have been wrong in characterizing it in such a way that it could only be a contextualism. This is the view that is in fact committed to Equal Validity.

This does not preclude that some so-called moral relativists have in fact been moral contextualists who should thus be committed to Equal Validity and, in consequence, hold "anything goes" views. One example is Dreier (1990).<sup>14</sup> Another is Harman (1975/2013), who claims that the

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<sup>13</sup> See Herbert (2001: 25–28) for a collection of some further examples that show that relativism is not committed to Equal Validity.

<sup>14</sup> The kind of argument that Dreier (2005: 253–257) offers for his view, which resembles the argument for relativism advanced in this paper, may drive us to think that he is indeed a relativist, as he claims, and not a contextualist, as I do. However, for Dreier's argument to work he needs moral standards to be relative to the context of assessment, and not to the context of use, which is the one that plays a role in the characterization he gives of his view (Dreier 2005: 251–252). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for *Philosophical Studies* for suggesting me to take Dreier's argument into consideration.

logical form of an inner judgment such as “ $A$  ought to  $D$ ”, where  $A$  is an agent and  $D$  is a course of action, is “Ought( $A,D,C,M$ )”, where  $C$  stands for considerations and  $M$ , for motivating attitudes (Harman 1975/2013: 10). Thus, by saying “ $A$  ought to  $D$ ” at a context where  $C$  and  $M$  are the salient considerations and motivating attitudes respectively, one means that, “given that  $A$  has motivating attitudes  $M$  and given  $C$ ,  $D$  is the course of action for  $A$  that is supported by the best reasons” (Harman 1975/2013: 11). Note that the judgment will be an inner one only if the agent’s motivating attitudes  $M$  are shared by the speaker and (the speaker assumes) the audience. It is the context of use that determines what  $C$  and  $M$  are to be—speakers imply that agents have some reason to act and that they share that reason (Harman 1975/2013: 8). Hence, Harman’s moral relativism is not a relativism in the sense embraced here, but a variety of contextualism. However, even if Dreier’s and Harman’s are indeed “anything goes” views, I think their cases are exceptions rather than instances of a norm. We should construe views such as Bloor’s, Feyerabend’s, or Kusch in terms of the context of assessment if we want to make sense of their rejection of Equal Validity.

## 5. Objectivism revisited

In section 3, I motivated contextualism as a response to objectivism’s lack of tolerance. In section 4, however, we have seen that contextualism’s tolerance can be just too much—contextualism can make us tolerant to the point of forcing us to suspend our judgment even about the most important issues. Relativism, in contrast to both objectivism and contextualism, makes us tolerant and caring at the same time. In this section, I complicate the picture resulting from section 3 a little. Not all forms of objectivism make us intolerant. However, those that make room for tolerance share with contextualism its making just too much room for it, thus forcing us to suspend our judgment again.

To see this, note, as a preliminary point, the equivalence between saying that the truth of moral claims is not relative to moral standards and saying that it is always relative to the same standard, which we may call  $m_o$ . This is the “objective standard”, the one that would hold from God’s point of view. Even if some objectivists (see, for instance, Hirvonen 2016) would claim that

the truth of the claims at issue should not be relativized to any standard, not even an objective one, introducing the standard into the truth-conditions of the claim is in this case merely a technical device that is as such justified (see MacFarlane 2014: 67). Objectivism would then be the theory according to which (6), as uttered by Beth and assessed by Alice, is true if and only if female genital mutilation is morally right relative to  $m_o$ . In fact, any moral claim should be assessed with respect to this same standard, no matter who makes or assesses it, as neither the context of use nor the context of assessment appear on the right-hand side of the biconditional.

There are two options for the objectivist at this point. The first one is to take Alice's standard to be in fact  $m_o$ . By doing so, we would obtain the kind of objectivism that was deemed incompatible with tolerance in section 3, which we may call *absolutist*:

**Absolutist objectivism:** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff female genital mutilation is morally right relative to the objective moral standard.

If Alice's standard is  $m_o$ , the context that determines for Alice the truth of (6) is the same that determines for her the truth of (5), so she cannot suspend her judgment. However, this requires Alice to be assessing (6) from a context in which  $m_o$  holds, or, in other words, from God's point of view. I take this to be unacceptable for two different reasons. First, absolutist objectivism requires the postulation of a realm of "moral facts", together with the assumption that Alice, or any of us for that matter, is connected with them in a way that makes no room for error. If  $m_A = m_o$ , Alice should be infallible. This is too hard a pill to swallow. The absolutist objectivist believes not only that there is an objective point of view, but also that she has been graced with it, which is highly unlikely. Second, as we saw in section 3, absolutist objectivism fits badly with tolerance, while relativism encompasses the idea that what other people think, even if wrong by our standards, may be correct by theirs. This idea can naturally move us to accept opinions different from our own. As Prinz (2007: 208) says, relativism does not entail tolerance, but it makes intolerance psychologically

difficult to sustain. It is easier to be intolerant if you think that you have the only correct standard, something that is more readily available for objectivists than for relativists.

Of course, almost no one who holds that moral claims are true or false relative to an objective standard will take herself to be infallible or behave in an intolerant way. Objectivists who want to avoid these undesirable consequences have a second option available to them—*open-minded* objectivism:

**Open-minded objectivism:** Alice should judge that Beth has said something true iff she believes female genital mutilation to be morally right relative to the objective moral standard.

An open-minded objectivist would take moral claims to be always relative to  $m_o$ , but would accept that human nature is limited in such a way that  $m_o$ , even if the standard that we *should* use to assess our moral claims, is never the standard that we *do* use. If we were fully committed to the truth of a moral claim—that is, committed to the claim as describing the way we think things are, not the way we should take them to be given our purposes—, we would be so from God’s point of view. But, since such a point of view is unattainable, all our assessments of moral claims, and with them all our opinions on moral issues, are provisional (see Rachels 1986: chapter 2).

Open-minded objectivism does not make us infallible, but avoids this at the cost of losing what little would make absolutist objectivism preferable to contextualism—it makes room for, and in fact forces suspension of judgment, since it describes matters in such a way that we can never be certain about the moral valence of any practice. It makes it possible for us to remain silent until we have attained God’s point of view, something that, of course, never comes. In doing so, open-minded objectivism devoids moral discussion of any seriousness, for nothing we can say on these matters will have the force of a full-blown commitment. Relativists, Prinz says, can be tolerant without doubting about their own views, while objectivists can be so only as long as they are not

sure about what they think: “(R)elativism offers a more satisfying form of tolerance, because it does not force a choice between debilitating self-doubt and arrogant self-assurance” (Prinz 2007: 208).

A point of clarification is in order here. When I say that open-minded objectivists are forced to suspend their judgment about issues about which we do not think it is morally permissible to do so, I do not mean to claim that the theory of open-minded objectivists is wrong because it drives them to act in immoral ways. Open-minded objectivism could be true even if it makes us bad people. My claim is rather this. I assume that there are cases in which we can reasonably refuse to suspend our judgment; however, if open-minded objectivism (or, for that matter, contextualism) were true, this would just be irrational, for we would always be forced to suspend our judgment even about the most pressing issues. Some open-minded objectivists will suspend their judgment about female genital mutilation until they have gathered ultimate moral evidence against it, but most will not. My point is that, in pronouncing themselves against female genital mutilation, self-proclaimed open-minded objectivists are actually behaving like relativists.

Objectivists thus face a dilemma. Either they countenance infallible agents and thus foster intolerance, or they are forced to accept suspension of judgment back. Relativism does not find itself in such a situation, for it can avoid and even forbid suspension of judgment without introducing God’s point of view into the picture and throwing tolerance out of it. Relativism thus offers us effective weapons against the two-headed monster of contextualism and objectivism, whose objectivist head is itself two-horned.

## **6. Concluding remarks**

Moral relativism does not tell us that “anything goes”. It does not because it is not a view about *what goes*, although it does have consequences as to what things a particular person can say are morally right. Rather, moral relativism is a view about *the way things go*: it tells us that whatever we say is morally right is so from our present point of view, not from a putative “objective” one. In saying this, relativism helps us become aware that there are points of view different from our own,

and that there is a point of contingency to the views that we hold. In this way, relativism accounts for the fact that tolerance is a possibility. Contextualism makes room for this possibility too, as does an open-minded objectivism. Absolutist objectivism does not.

But, no matter how conscious we are that other people's moral claims can be true by their standards even if they are not by ours, in deciding what moral valence to attribute to a given practice we have nothing but our own standard. For the relativist to be able to say that "anything goes", she would have to be able to "jump over her own standard" to see that it is just not one among many, but one among many equally valid ones; but she simply cannot do this. She has to pronounce herself. The contextualist and the open-minded absolutist are both able to jump over their own standards when deciding on the moral valence of female genital mutilation; the former can act as if she adopted other people's standards, while the latter can act as if she adopted the "objective" one, knowing that at the end of the day she does not. It is in this way, and not through relativism, that "anything goes". People who want to be tolerant while still caring about the issues that matter us most should thus realize that moral relativism is the view that fits best with their practices.

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