

6

Relativism

6.1 Moral Relativism

According to *moral relativism*, morality is not absolute, but rather varies from society to society. Indeed, it may vary from one group to the next, even within a given society, or from one period to the next. Since there is no such thing as a single, unique moral code—valid across all places and all times—what a person ought to do in any given case depends on the particular moral code that happens to hold in their society (or group) at that time. Roughly speaking, one ought to conform to the code of one's society.

Is a view like this a form of moral skepticism? Certainly many people think of relativism in this way, including many of those who accept the view. The relativist denies the existence of a universally valid moral code. They reject the existence of an objective morality (in at least one natural reading of that term). What more could it take to be a skeptic about morality?

In fact, however, the issue is somewhat more complicated than it might initially appear. For on what I take to be the most common form of relativism, moral relativism actually seems to be a form of moral realism! After all, according to the relativist there is a *fact* about what the given person should do in any given situation: they should conform to the code of their society. And this seems to mean that there are indeed substantive first-order moral facts. If, for example, killing in self-defense is permitted by the moral code of your society, then according to relativism it is a *fact* that it is permissible for you to kill in such a case. And if, in contrast, killing in self-defense is forbidden by the code of your society, then according to relativism it is a fact that it is forbidden for you to kill. What the facts *are* will depend on the contents of your particular society's code, but for all that, there will indeed be moral facts about what you are permitted to do. Similarly, of course, for other moral issues. So whatever else is true of the relativist, she seems to be a realist.

Of course, sometimes people who embrace something they *call* "moral relativism" use this as the name for a view whose bottom line is that there really are no facts about what people ought to do at all (since different societies

endorse different moralities). But this is not how we will be using the term. We will use it for the view just described, according to which there are indeed facts about what one ought to do, but the facts *vary*, depending on your society. And as I just noted, this makes the relativist a realist.

But still, we might ask, is the relativist really a *moral* realist? Do the obligations she posits genuinely count as moral obligations? More broadly, are the various first-order, substantive claims she puts forward really *moral* claims? The relativist clearly believes in facts of some sort, and she may well use moral language to describe them—talking, for example, about what is or is not morally permissible for a given person to do—but is it truly appropriate to describe these facts as facts about morality?

Your answer, unsurprisingly, will depend on what all you build into your concept of morality. If you built into the very job description of morality a requirement that basic moral principles must be universal (if there really is to be such a thing as morality at all), valid at all places and at all times, then the facts posited by the relativist will not count as moral facts, precisely because the relativist is open to the possibility that the basic principles vary (at least to some extent) from society to society. A bit more precisely, if you consider it an *essential* element of the job description that the basic principles be absolute, then you will consider it unacceptable for the relativist to hold that these principles may vary from one society to the next.

The situation is even worse if you consider it an essential element of the job description that basic moral truths must be *necessary* truths, holding across all possible worlds. (Recall the distinction—explained in 1.2—between requiring that moral truths be universal or absolute, and requiring that they be necessary.) For even if it should accidentally turn out to be the case that all actual societies accept the very same moral code, presumably it *could* have been otherwise. For the relativist, then, moral principles are not necessary, but contingent. Accordingly, if you think that anything worthy of the name morality must involve some basic truths that hold at all places and at all times—and especially if you think that these basic truths must be *necessary* ones—then you will conclude that if anything like relativism is true, there really is no such thing as morality after all.

Thus, anyone who includes necessity or absolutism as nonnegotiable elements of the concept of morality will want to say that what the relativist offers us isn't truly morality at all. Seen from this perspective relativism is indeed a form of *skepticism* about morality, and the relativist is indeed a kind of moral skeptic.

I imagine that most—not all, but most—of those who reject moral relativism do in fact think of it in these terms, that is, as a skeptical view. And, I suspect that the same thing is true even for those who *accept* moral relativism. That is to say, I suspect that even most moral relativists—not all, but most—think that if relativism is true (as they take it to be) then there isn't really such a thing as objective morality after all.

As I explained in an earlier chapter (in 2.4), I don't think it worth our time to try to settle whether a view like this is “really” a skeptical view or not. How you want to classify it will depend on which elements of morality's job description you consider nonnegotiable.

For similar reasons, I think that there is also little point in trying to settle the question of whether the facts posited by the relativist count as *objective* or not (again, see 1.2.) Certainly in one ordinary use of the term, they do count as objective, for there will be right and wrong answers about what, for example, a given person is permitted to do. If the code of the relevant society permits a given act it is permissible for the person to perform that act, full stop, and anyone who says otherwise is simply mistaken. Admittedly, *whether* the act is permissible will depend on facts about the agent in question (since it depends on whether the act is permitted by the code of *their* society), and so may vary from person to person (as we move from one society to the next), but all of this is compatible with there being an objective fact about what any given individual is permitted to do.

That this kind of relativity is compatible with objectivity (in one ordinary use of the term) is a familiar point in other contexts. Consider, for example, facts about diet and nutrition. These are often relative, depending on the particular individual in question. It might be, for example, that one person has a calcium shortage, and so should eat a diet that is rich in dairy products, while a second person is lactose intolerant, and so should avoid dairy products as much as possible. In cases like this, facts about what it would be good for a person to eat will vary, depending on the person in question. And yet, for all that, we would ordinarily say that there are *objective* facts, in any given case, about what the person should eat. The facts may be relative, but there are right and wrong answers for any given case, and in that sense of the term the relevant facts are objective ones. Similarly, then, even if moral relativism is true—so that the facts about what one should do can vary, depending on one's society—there will still be right answers in any given case about what someone is permitted to do (and so forth), and in that sense, at least, the relevant facts will be objective ones, not mere matters of opinion.

On the other hand, sometimes when people talk about something being an objective matter, they have in mind the idea that the relevant facts should not depend in any way on the beliefs, reactions, or attitudes of any particular minds. To be objective, in this second sense of the term, the facts in question must be mind *independent*. In *this* sense of the term, facts about chemistry, say, are objective ones, whereas facts about what's fashionable are not. To be sure, there may well be right answers about what is in fashion in any given place and time, but since such facts clearly depend on the tastes and attitudes of the relevant members of society, in this second sense of the term facts about fashion are not objective.

Given this second sense of the term, some people will find themselves inclined to say that if relativism is true then even though there may be facts about what a given person should or should not do (and so on), these are not objective facts at all. For as we will see, the most prominent versions of moral relativism are *constructivist* ones, where moral facts boil down to facts about the attitudes and reactions of the relevant minds. So if you think of mind independence as a requirement for genuine (or complete) objectivity, you aren't likely to think that a defense of moral relativism would constitute a defense of an *objective* morality.

Unsurprisingly, my own view is that just as there is little point in belaboring the question of whether under relativism the so-called moral facts are truly *moral* facts or not, there is also little point in trying to settle whether these facts truly count as objective or not. What does seem clear, I think, is that many people will find themselves inclined to *view* relativism as a form of skepticism, so I think it worth our time to ask whether there is good reason to *accept* relativism or not.

Furthermore, even those with a sufficiently encompassing conception of morality (and objectivity) as to allow for the possibility of moral principles that are relative rather than absolute may well be troubled or unhappy at the thought that this might turn out to actually be the case. It is one thing to say that relative moral rules would indeed still count as objective moral rules (provided that they are action guiding, reason giving, and so on); it is quite another thing to be indifferent as to whether or not moral principles really are socially relative in this way. So even if you don't think of relativism as a form of skepticism about objective morality, you may still wonder whether we have any good reason to believe in it.

One last point. If moral relativism is to be an interesting position, the kinds of moral differences it posits must be at a fairly deep level. After all (to

return to a point noted already in 1.2), even those who believe in universal moral principles agree that differing circumstances will generate differences in terms of derivative moral obligations. If I have made a promise, and you have not, I have an obligation that you lack. That kind of relativity doesn't trouble those who believe in absolute moral principles. Similarly, then, if the moral code of your society requires something that the moral code of my society does not, but this is simply due to different circumstances in our two societies—so that the very same underlying principle can yield these distinct but derivative obligations—that too will not constitute the kind of relativity that the absolutist will find troubling. What the moral relativist believes, but the defender of absolute morality denies, is that there is relativity even at the level of the underlying, *fundamental* moral principles.

It is important not to lose sight of this point, since it is easy to be misled by surface differences. Different societies might have different ways of showing respect, for example, or they may adopt different conventions with regard to the division of moral labor, thus generating different role-based obligations. But as long as these are expressions of the same underlying principles (for example, a requirement to show respect, or a requirement to do one's part in achieving important social goals), cases like this needn't trouble the absolutist. If moral relativism is to be an interesting position—a challenge to the absolutist—it must posit differences in even the *basic* moral principles. That, at any rate, is how I shall understand it.

6.2 Clarifying Relativism

According to moral relativism, what a given person should do depends on the moral code of their society. Relativity comes in once we acknowledge the possibility that the moral code for one society may be different (in significant ways) from the code for a different society.

That's the basic idea, at any rate, and for many purposes that's probably enough. But there are a few further issues about the nature of relativism that it may be worth our noting before we turn to considering arguments for the view itself. First, and perhaps most importantly, we need to get more precise about who, exactly, is bound by a given society's code. Is it the *members* of the society? Or, alternatively, is it those who are located within its *boundaries*?

In ordinary cases these two views converge. If I am a member of a particular society, and I am currently at home, living within its borders, then both

the membership and the location versions of moral relativism agree that I am bound by my society's code. But imagine, instead, that I am not at home, but rather temporarily traveling abroad in a society with a rather different moral code. Which code is it, then, that I am to follow? The membership approach says that so long as I remain a member of my original society, it is *that* code that I should obey. But the location approach says that so long as I am visiting the new society it is this *foreign* moral code that applies to me. The same question arises, of course, with regard to foreigners visiting *my* society: should they obey the code of *their* home society, or the code of *my* society? The membership view says the former; the location view, the latter.

Consider the saying "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," which is sometimes used as a quick expression of relativism. When used in this way it seems to be an expression of *location* relativism. Nonetheless, I suspect that if it is genuinely *moral* relativism that we are thinking about—where the issue is which fundamental *moral* principles one should obey, and not simply a question of diet or dress or etiquette—I suspect that most people have something more like member relativism in mind. So that is the version I will focus on, and that is why I have talked about relativism as holding that an individual ought to obey the code of *their* society. (Perhaps, then, the view should be expressed as "When you are a Roman, do as the Romans do.")

We might still want to ask, however, what is a person to do if they are a member of more than one group or society (with diverging codes)? Someone might be an American *and* a Hindu *and* a member of the Mob. If, as we might readily imagine, the moral codes of these three groups differ from one another, which code is the relevant one for the person to obey?

Should we go for the code of the largest group? The smallest? The group with which the person most identifies? Should we somehow try to identify the places where the relevant codes agree, and then just disregard the rest? Or might it be that some of these groups are of the wrong *sort* (from the perspective of moral relativism) and so don't even *count* as "societies" in the first place?

I don't think it is at all obvious what the relativist's answer to this question should be. So I propose to leave the issue unresolved. Let's just bracket worries about membership in multiple groups and simplify our discussion by supposing that someone can be a member of only *one* relevant group or society at any given time. (Similar questions would of course have arisen if we had adopted *location* relativism instead, as one might be located within a nested series of larger and larger groups or societies.)

With this simplifying assumption in place, we can return to our earlier formulations and continue to say that according to moral relativism (as we are understanding it), any given individual should obey the moral code of their society. But this brings us to a different question. Just what is it for a given code to *be* the code “of” a given society? What makes it the case that one code, rather than another, is the code that is valid or relevant? By virtue of what, exactly, is one particular code the code that “morally governs” a society (as we might put it)?

In principle, I suppose, relativism *per se* is compatible with a variety of different answers to this question. It could be, for example, that there are facts about the climate or the environment (or the location, or the history, and so on) of particular societies that somehow make one code valid or binding for one society, while another code is valid or binding for a different one. But the most common answers, I take it, are *constructivist* ones, where a given code applies to a given society by virtue of facts about the attitudes or reactions of the relevant minds.

And whose minds are the relevant ones? Here too different answers are possible. A relativist could, for example, accept a “divine command” version of constructivism, where the relevant mind is God’s. Perhaps God assigns one code to one society, while assigning a different code to another. But I imagine that the most common form of relativism is a *social* version of constructivism, where the relevant minds are those of the members of the given society. More particularly, the most common form of relativism holds that a given code is the relevant one by virtue of the fact that the members of that society *accept* or embrace (or strive to conform to) the code in question. (Which attitudes, precisely, are the crucial ones? Is it a matter of *believing* the principles of the code, or *approving* of acts that conform to the code, or what? For present purposes we need not try to settle this question, though a related issue will be relevant below.)

That’s fairly straightforward, as long as we imagine that the various members of a given society agree about fundamental moral questions. If they all accept the same moral code, then that is the code that is valid for their society. But things are less straightforward if we imagine that the members of the society are not, in fact, in complete agreement about the basic moral principles. If some accept one code, while others accept a somewhat different code, is there nonetheless a fact of the matter concerning which code is the code that is valid for that society? Must there be complete agreement (including agreement about all the details), or else no valid code at all?

Presumably not. Presumably the relativist thinks it is possible for a given code to be sufficiently dominant in a given society for that code to be the relevant one, even though some members of the society don't accept it (or disagree about some of the details). The situation here might be similar to what holds with regard to the rules of a society's primary language. I take it, after all, that the rules of Spanish grammar that hold in Mexico, say, are valid by virtue of the fact that Mexican speakers of Spanish largely agree about their content (even if they might have trouble describing the underlying rules explicitly). Presumably it needn't be the case that every single Spanish speaker in Mexico accepts every single rule, or would agree with the majority concerning every single detail of Spanish grammar. Somehow, if there is sufficient agreement among a sufficiently large majority of the relevant population, this suffices to fix the rules of Spanish grammar, even in the absence of unanimity. Something similar might then be proposed by the moral relativist: a code can be the valid one in a given society, even if not all members of that society accept it, and even if some members disagree about some of the relevant details.

(But what if, for some question, the society lacks *sufficient* consensus to fix the content of the code with regard to that question? Perhaps the relativist will say that morality doesn't speak to that question in that particular society. Alternatively, perhaps the relativist will say that those acts not otherwise forbidden by the code are all morally permissible.)

So far, so good. We are taking moral relativism to be a constructivist view where facts about morality depend on details of the code embraced (in the right way) by a sufficient number of the members of the given society. But that raises, in turn, a further question: what will the contents of a given code *look* like? Normally, no doubt, much of the content will be only implicit, embodied in shared understandings (or, perhaps, dispositions) that may never reach the level of fully explicit expression. But suppose that we successfully stated the content of some code, explicitly and precisely. What would that look like?

It is natural to suppose that we might have a set of principles, like "lying is forbidden," or "killing is wrong, except in cases of self-defense," and so on. Perhaps some of the principles will speak to the value of outcomes ("equality is intrinsically valuable") or will stipulate what the most attractive character traits are ("honesty is a virtue"). For our purposes we don't need to worry about the details. What is important, rather, is recognizing that principles like this do not seem to be relativized in terms of who they apply to; they

seem to be laying down moral edicts for *everyone*. The first principle, for example, does not say that lying is forbidden *if* you are a member of this society. Rather, this principle is most naturally understood as saying that lying is forbidden, *period*—regardless of whether you are a member of this or any other society. Similarly, the second principle seems to be saying that self-defense is permissible regardless of what society you belong to; it doesn't restrict the permissibility of self-defense to those individuals who happen to belong to the society whose code we are describing. In short, the principles seem to be making universal or absolute claims: such and such acts are permissible for everyone; such and such character traits are virtuous for anyone at all; such and such outcomes are intrinsically good ones regardless of what society you belong to.

But if that's right, then the relativist is in the rather odd position of having to insist that each and every moral code—regardless of its details—is mistaken. For if moral codes ever disagree with one another (and presumably that's what the relativist thinks is often the case), then oddly enough they will all be *wrong*!

Suppose, for example, that one society's code says that some white lies are permissible, while another says that all lies, including white lies, are forbidden. According to the relativist, then, a member of the first society is permitted to tell a white lie (under suitable conditions), while a member of the second society is not. But this means that the first moral code is *mistaken*, insofar as it implicitly claims—incorrectly—that *everyone* is permitted to tell a white lie in appropriate circumstances; and the second code is mistaken as well, insofar as *it* implicitly claims—also incorrectly—that *no one* is ever permitted to tell a white lie. Thus, if relativism is true, and yet moral codes are stated (as they seem to be) in terms of absolute or universal principles, then all of those codes are false! (Of course, not every single principle of every single code would have to be false. If there are principles *shared* across all societies, there is no problem. But wherever principles from two or more codes contradict one another, both principles will turn out to be mistaken.)

Perhaps there are some relativists who are comfortable with this result. (This would certainly reinforce the thought that relativism is indeed a form of moral skepticism.) But most relativists, I imagine, would rather say something like this: each society's code is actually *correct*, not mistaken at all, precisely because it applies only to the members of the corresponding *society*. If a code says, for example, that white lies are permissible, then appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, this doesn't actually mean that white lies

are permissible for absolutely *everyone*; what it actually means, rather, is only that white lies are permissible for everyone who is a *member* of this society (that is, the society whose code this is).

On this alternative approach to thinking about the contents of moral codes, there is what we might think of as a hidden relativization parameter. When we say that a given code says that something is permissible, or valuable, or virtuous, and so on, the relevant principles are implicitly *restricted* to being claims about what is permissible (and so on) for those who are members of society S—where “S” stands for the particular society whose code we are describing. The claims do not extend to everyone, but only cover those who are members of the relevant society.

Of course, this implicit relativization may not be obvious at a quick glance. Indeed, when we first try to describe the contents of a given code we may not even recognize that this kind of relativization is taking place. That’s the point of describing the relativization parameter as being “hidden.” We may not realize it’s there. Indeed, even the members of the given society—including people who might otherwise be quite adept at spelling out the contents of their society’s code—may not at first recognize that this kind of relativization is taking place.

The situation here (according to this second approach) is similar to what we find when we try to make sense of talk about something being to the left or to the right of something else. Such language *looks* like it is absolute—as though something could be to the left or right of something absolutely, or unqualifiedly, rather than only being to the left or right *relative* to some frame of reference. But in fact, of course, there is no such thing as being to the left of something *full stop*; there is only being to the left of something relative to a frame of reference. That frame of reference might be mine, or it might be yours (if I am speaking to you); it might be the frame of reference you have now, or it might be the one you will have later (once you reach a certain location); and so on. Typically, of course, we don’t bother to make the relevant frame of reference explicit—and so at first glance we might *seem* to be making claims about absolute directions. Indeed, very young children sometimes fall prey to this illusion. But whether or not we are fully aware of this fact, our spatial directions always involve a (typically unstated) reference to an implied frame of reference. Left and right is always a relative affair.

Similarly, then, the relativist may say, whether or not we are fully aware of this fact, our moral claims always involve a (typically unstated) reference to a particular society. Morality is always a relative affair. And once

we remember to make the relativization parameter explicit, moral relativism no longer has the unsettling implication that all moral codes are false. If a given society's moral code says that telling white lies is permissible, then since it is (implicitly) only making a claim about what is permissible for members of the society whose code this is, then it is making no claims at all about what is permissible for people who are not, in fact, members of that society. And since, according to relativism, each person is bound by the code of their own society, the code will turn out to be correct—rather than mistaken—when it says that people (that is, the *relevant* people) are permitted to tell white lies. And if a different society's code says that lies are *never* permissible, this will be correct as well, since this code too will only be making a claim about a relevant group of people—in this instance, the quite different group of people who are members of that *second* society.

But if we do adopt this second approach to moral relativism, new worries arise. For now, it seems, it turns out that a society can never have a *mistaken* moral code! After all, if we do relativize the claims of moral codes in this way then each code is only making claims about the members of a certain society; and given relativism's insistence that each person should *obey* the code of their society, it follows that the code is *correct* when it makes its various claims.

Indeed, it cannot be otherwise. Whatever the given code says that people are to do, it will necessarily follow—given the truth of moral relativism—that people (that is, the relevant people) are indeed to do just what the code *says* they are to do. No matter what a given society's moral code says, it turns out to be impossible for the code to be mistaken.

Admittedly, in any given instance this or that individual may be mistaken about what the code of their society implies with regard to their particular situation. (And for that matter, those of us who are not members of the society in question may misunderstand what the code implies for those who *are* members.) A code can certainly be misapplied. But with regard to the most basic, underlying principles of the given code, it seems that there is no possibility of the code *itself* being mistaken at all. A society cannot have the wrong moral code.

Is that an unacceptable implication? Many relativists, in any event, will be comfortable with it. Perhaps they will say that the situation is like the one we find with regard to the rules of a given language. Roughly speaking, if enough people in a society consider a given type of sentence grammatical, doesn't it necessarily follow that it *is* grammatical? If everyone in a given society speaks

a certain way (and accepts sentences of that sort, and so on), won't it be true, by virtue of that very fact, that this way of speaking is—in that society, at that time—correct? When it comes to the grammar of a given language (or dialect), it seems that there is no possibility of society as a whole being wrong. Individuals may misapply the rules of the grammar, but the rules themselves cannot be mistaken. Perhaps, then, something similar is true with regard to morality.

For closely related reasons, it seems that on this second approach it will also turn out that societies cannot actually *disagree* with one another about fundamental moral matters. For if the claims of a moral code are relativized and restricted to the members of the society whose code it is, then the codes of different societies are talking about different groups of individuals. Even if, for example, one society says that slavery is permissible, while another condemns it, all that is really going on is that the first code is saying that slavery is permissible for members of *that* society, while the second code is saying that slavery is wrong for members of the *second* society. Thus there is no real disagreement. Although it may *look* like the two societies are disagreeing with one another, given the implicit relativization of the codes such disagreement is actually impossible.

To be sure, precisely because the relativization is typically *hidden*, members of one society may not even *realize* that they are not actually making moral claims about members of other societies at all. So people from differing societies may *think* that they are disagreeing with each other about fundamental moral issues; but in fact, they're not.

Of course, people can still disagree with one another about what a given society's code *says*, or what it *implies* about a given situation. But as we have just seen, the code *itself* cannot be mistaken.

Given all of this, however, we might find ourselves wondering: if relativism is true, is anything like moral *reform* truly possible? If someone proclaims that the moral code accepted by their society is misguided in some way—allowing slavery, perhaps, though slavery is actually morally wrong—won't it follow that it is the would-be reformer who is actually mistaken on this point, and not the code itself?

As far as I can see, there are two possible replies the relativist might make. First, although the code itself cannot be mistaken, in at least some cases it does seem possible for there to be common misunderstandings about what the code actually permits. Even if we accept the constructivist account of relativism, where the relevant minds are the members of the given society,

there can still be shared misunderstandings about the *contents* of the shared code. (Analogously, the rules of grammar depend on relevant facts about the reactions and attitudes of those who speak the language. But for all that, language speakers can be mistaken about what those rules permit, and these misunderstandings can be widespread.) Perhaps, then, the moral reformer is only attempting to correct some common misunderstandings concerning the contents of the code, rather than criticizing the code itself.

But suppose the reformer does indeed mean to criticize the code itself. Can they coherently do so? Here a second possible reply suggests itself. Suppose that the code of the society in question really does permit slavery. If the reformer gets up and announces that slavery is nonetheless actually morally forbidden, then—given the truth of relativism—what they say is simply *false*. But for all that, the reformer may be able to change hearts and minds. Appealing to some of the other values or sentiments shared by her compatriots, the reformer may succeed in changing underlying attitudes toward slavery. And if the reform movement becomes sufficiently successful, eventually it might be the case that enough minds are opposed to slavery (in the relevant ways) so that it is *no longer* the case that the moral code that obtains in the society permits slavery. In effect, although the reformer will have been speaking incorrectly at the start, if she is successful then what she is saying may end up being the truth. *At first* the code permitted slavery, but now it forbids it. (The analogy to language may be helpful here as well. Initially, when one violates some rule of grammar, one is simply mistaken. But if the ungrammatical way of speaking catches on sufficiently, the linguistic norms may change, and then the formerly ungrammatical form of speech may *become* grammatical.)

6.3 Arguing for Relativism

So far, all we have been doing is *describing* the moral relativist's position. We haven't yet asked whether there is any good reason to believe that relativism is correct. My own view is that despite the perennial appeal of the view (especially among those who have learned something about the moral practices of other societies), there is actually surprisingly little to be said in its favor.

In thinking about the plausibility of relativism it is important to distinguish the *normative* view that interests us—the claim that what a given individual ought to do is to conform to the moral code of their society—from

the mere *descriptive* claim that, in point of fact, different societies accept (and have accepted) different moral codes.

Even if the latter is true—a point we will return to in a moment—that wouldn't immediately imply the truth of the former. After all, it seems as though it could be that societies *accept* different codes and yet, for all that, there is nonetheless a uniquely *correct* moral code. It could be, that is to say, that there are basic moral principles that apply to everyone at all places and at all times, and if some society accepts a moral code with principles incompatible with these, then to that extent the code in question is simply mistaken, nothing more.

If that's right, the situation would be analogous to what we think about subjects like, say, astronomy. Some societies have accepted the belief that the earth is flat and that the sun revolves around this flat earth, while other societies have accepted the belief that the earth is round and that this round earth revolves around the sun (rather than the other way around). But no one is tempted to conclude from these differences in astronomical beliefs that somehow the astronomical facts themselves vary from society to society. On the contrary, what we believe is that there is a single, correct theory of astronomy, and if a given society accepts beliefs incompatible with it, then to that extent the beliefs of the society are simply mistaken, nothing more. Similarly, then, even if the moral codes of societies differ in various ways from one another, we don't yet have reason to believe that the *validity* of a given principle somehow depends on which society one happens to be a member of.

For that matter, even if different societies have different moral codes, why not take them, for all that, at face value, as making incompatible but nonetheless absolute claims about how everyone should behave (and what things are good, and what character traits are virtuous, and so on). Instead of positing a hidden relativization (so that each code is speaking only to its own members), why not take these codes to be doing what they certainly *appear* to be doing—making absolute moral claims about everyone—and then conclude, more simply, that in light of these disagreements, at most one of these codes is correct? (Conceivably, of course, *no* society has yet articulated a completely correct moral code.)

Nonetheless, in what I take to be the most common line of thought in favor of moral relativism we do indeed begin with the descriptive claim that different societies have different moral codes. Somehow the fact of such intersocial disagreement is supposed to lend support to the normative

claim that interests us, that people should *obey* the code of their own society. Accordingly, let us start by asking—if only briefly—whether it really is true that we find the kind of differences in moral codes that the relativist claims we find.

Given my discussion of disagreement in the previous chapter, it won't surprise you to learn that I am myself skeptical about the confident assertions that are frequently made in this connection. What we are wondering about, after all, is whether different societies accept different views concerning the most fundamental moral principles. Given this focus, it is irrelevant if it turns out that societies often have distinct *derivative* moral beliefs, since these may not indicate any differences concerning the basic principles themselves.

To revert to an earlier example, if one society believes that the death penalty helps deter crime, while another rejects this empirical claim, then this difference in the specified nonmoral *belief* may generate a difference in the social attitude toward the death penalty, even if it turns out that the two societies share the same fundamental views about the justification of punishment. Similarly (a closely related, though not quite identical point), if it turns out the *effects* of different policies would differ in one society as compared to another, then here too the first society might embrace a different value from the second without this indicating any genuine divergence at the level of the most *basic* principles or values. What we need to know, I have been suggesting, is how much difference we would find at the level of *fundamental* moral principles, and this, I suspect, is something concerning which we have far less empirical evidence than is normally assumed.

To be sure, I have previously acknowledged (in 5.3) that people do sometimes disagree about fundamental moral questions. But even this doesn't suffice to establish the point now at issue, since individual differences are irrelevant unless these differences are reflected at the *social* level. For the purpose of defending the claim that different *societies* have different moral codes, it doesn't help at all if, say, one Italian has different moral beliefs from those had by another Italian, or if one American has different beliefs from those had by another American. Rather, it has to be that Italians, on the whole, share the very *same* basic moral outlook, while that outlook differs from a second moral outlook, which is nonetheless shared by most *Americans*. Is anything like that claim true? My own view is that we really just don't know. Many superficial differences will disappear at the fundamental level, so even if there are some broad differences in the ethics of Italians and Americans (or the Japanese, or the ancient Romans, and so on) it is far from clear whether

differences remain at the level of fundamental moral principles as well. (For example, comparative anthropologists sometimes argue for the existence of diverse moral codes by pointing to differences in sexual mores and mating practices, or by noting differing beliefs about appropriate ways to show honor and respect. But these are relatively superficial differences and may not reveal anything much about differences at the level of underlying moral principles. Similarly for when anthropologists point to differing conventions concerning the division of moral labor.)

In light of these points, I don't think that it is obvious whether social moral codes really do differ in the fundamental ways that relativists claim they do. But let us suppose that the descriptive claim is indeed true and there are deep differences in the codes of different societies. We still need to ask, why should that lend support to the *normative* claim, that what one ought to do is to obey the code of one's own society?

One initially tempting idea is this. Suppose that the *noncognitivist* is right, and moral claims are actually disguised imperatives, used to issue commands. We have, of course, yet to see convincing reason to *accept* noncognitivism; but for the moment put such concerns aside and simply consider the implications of noncognitivism in the current debate. If moral claims are simply disguised imperatives, then when my society's moral code tells me that, say, killing in self-defense is forbidden, I am being commanded to refrain from killing even in self-defense. But if, in contrast, your society's code says that killing in self-defense is permissible, then you are not being given that same command. Thus, you are being given a different set of commands than I am, precisely because of the fact that you belong to one society while I belong to a different one. So if noncognitivism is correct, and there is nothing more to making a moral claim than the issuing of imperatives (and the expression of the corresponding attitudes of approval and disapproval), doesn't the truth of moral relativism fall out more or less immediately—once we accept the descriptive claim that different societies have different moral codes? Principles are just (disguised) imperatives, and you are bound by one set, while I am bound by another.

Of course, if this defense of relativism is correct, then it was a mistake for me to characterize moral relativism (as I did at the start of the chapter) as a form of moral *realism*, since realism is a form of cognitivism and the argument we are considering presupposes the truth of *noncognitivism*. But we need not linger over this point. If the best defense of moral relativism is noncognitivist, so be it. (This would further vindicate those who view relativism as a form of moral skepticism.)

In fact, however, the breezy argument I just sketched is unsuccessful. For the moral relativist is not content to observe that members of different societies are being *given* different commands (*by* their respective societies); they also want to insist, essentially, that what any given individual ought to do is to *obey* the commands of their society.

We must not lose sight of the fact that the relativist is *herself* making a normative claim—that each person *ought* to obey the moral code of their society. And according to noncognitivism this normative claim is itself simply one more imperative, used to issue one more command. In particular, then, according to noncognitivism, the relativist is simply ordering each of us to obey the more specific imperatives contained within the moral codes of our respective societies. And in asking you to embrace relativism, the relativist is asking you to issue a similar imperative (and approve and disapprove of specific acts accordingly).

But why in the world would anyone want to issue such an imperative? Why would I want to tell each person to obey the terms of their society's moral code, regardless of the potentially abhorrent and objectionable things their code might enjoin? Suppose I live in a society whose code condemns slavery, but you live in one whose code permits or even requires it. And suppose as well that I fully embrace my society's condemnation of slavery. Why then would I ever want to command you nonetheless to go along with your society's practice of enslaving others? Far from wanting to command you to obey your society's code, I would presumably want to command you to reject it! And a similar point holds, of course, for any number of other ways in which your moral code might differ importantly from my own. As far as I can see, except in utterly extraordinary circumstances it is almost inconceivable that a reasonable person would ever want to issue a blanket imperative to everyone to obey the codes of their respective societies, *regardless* of what those codes might say. So it is almost inconceivable that a reasonable person would ever be willing to endorse the relativist's position—if this is construed as the noncognitivist would have us construe it.

(Sometimes people advocate moral relativism on the supposed ground that it is a highly tolerant view: let each person obey the code of their own society! Isn't that a reason for issuing the relativist's imperative? Unfortunately, however, there is no requirement within relativism that any given moral code *be* particularly tolerant. The relevant code might require killing others, for example, or forcing them to live lives they despise. Accordingly, no friend

of tolerance should be prepared to issue a blanket imperative that tells each person to obey the code of their individual society.)

Suppose we put this attempted noncognitivist defense of relativism aside, and revert to the realist understanding of relativism that we had previously adopted. Relativism might then still turn out to be the truth. For even if we are *unhappy* at the prospect of each person obeying the code of their society (given how objectionable some codes might be), it could still be the simple truth of the matter that this is what each person is required to do. But now our earlier question returns. Supposing that different societies really do have different moral codes, why would that support the normative claim that one *ought* to obey the code of one's society?

The relativist might suggest that the answer to this question was already implicit in our earlier discussion: the truth of moral relativism follows from the descriptive claim (that different societies have different moral codes) once we recognize the truth of *constructivism*. Suppose, after all, that the constructivist is right, and moral facts really do boil down to the attitudes and reactions of the relevant minds. If it really is the case that the accepted moral codes *vary* from society to society, doesn't this show that the relevant *attitudes* of the relevant minds vary in corresponding ways, as we move from one society to the next? (What else could the fact that societies have different codes *consist* in other than the underlying fact that the relevant minds—the minds of their respective members—have different attitudes?) So given the truth of constructivism, won't it follow that basic moral facts really do vary as well, as we move from society to society?

Clearly, one way to resist this argument would be to reject the constructivist viewpoint that it appeals to. Some will insist that if constructivism supports relativism, perhaps that simply gives us a reason to reject constructivism as well. But the truth is, even a constructivist need not find this line of thought especially compelling. Admittedly, if constructivism is true then moral facts do ultimately boil down to the attitudes and reactions of the *relevant* minds. And it certainly does seem plausible to suggest, as well, that a given society's acceptance of a particular moral code ultimately boils down to the attitudes and reactions of its members. But why should we assume, without argument, that since the members of a society are the relevant minds when the question is what code is *accepted* by that society, they must also be the relevant minds when the question is instead what code is *valid* for the members of that society?

For example, couldn't a constructivist hold that it is *God's* will that settles the question of our obligations, even though it is presumably our *own* attitudes and reactions that settle the question of what code our society accepts? Alternatively, couldn't a constructivist hold that although the members of a given society are the relevant minds when the question is which obligations are *accepted* by a society, nonetheless, when the question is what obligations are morally *binding* on those members, the relevant minds include *all* of us—not just the members of the given society alone, but all humans (or perhaps, more boldly still, all rational beings)? It simply isn't the case that constructivism per se insists that the only relevant minds for fixing the obligations of a given group are the minds of that group's *members*.

Furthermore, even if we were given a convincing reason to believe that under the best version of constructivism it is indeed true that the only relevant minds for fixing the obligations of a given group are the minds of its members, there would still be no reason to assume that the *particular* attitudes and reactions (of those members) that are relevant are the same when it is a matter of fixing the group's *obligations* as when it is a matter of fixing the group's *beliefs*. Presumably, if we are asking what code is *accepted* by a given society, the answer will boil down to the *actual* attitudes and reactions of its members. But if, instead, we are asking what code is valid for or *binding* upon those members, the constructivist might well prefer to ask, rather, about the attitudes and reactions that people *would* have under suitably ideal conditions (for example, if they were fully informed and perfectly rational, and so on). Since there is no reason to assume that the attitudes people would have under ideal conditions are the very same as the ones that they do have, there is no reason for the constructivist to assume that the obligations that are binding upon people correspond to the ones that are actually accepted in any given society. Indeed, for all we know, under sufficiently ideal conditions people might have attitudes supporting a single, unique moral code.

Thus, even if constructivism is true, there is no particular reason to think that the diversity of moral codes among different societies somehow shows that valid moral obligations vary as well, as we move from one society to the next.

A rather different argument for relativism might begin with the thought that a genuine moral obligation must be something that someone who is under that obligation can be moved by. That is, if I have an obligation to do an act, then it must be the case that I can be moved by that very thought. The relativist might then argue that I can only be moved by the *thought* that

I have a given obligation if I do indeed *believe* that I have that obligation. But this seems to imply that something can be a genuine obligation of mine only if I accept that it is. Consequently if, as we are assuming, different societies accept different moral codes, the members of those societies will take themselves to be under different obligations, and this will mean, in turn, that they actually *are* under different obligations. For if some purported duty is not part of my society's moral code, I won't accept it, and so can't be moved by it, and so it cannot be a genuine duty after all. Thus, the relativist may conclude, your genuine moral obligations will depend on the principles contained within the code of your society. Given that moral codes vary from one society to the next, moral obligations will do so as well.

Although I suspect that some people are indeed attracted to relativism as a result of thoughts along these lines, I imagine it is clear to most that this argument faces a number of telling objections. Let me note two. First, and most obviously, any given individual need not actually accept the moral code of the society of which they are a member. So even if the rest of the argument went through, we couldn't actually conclude that you must obey the code of your *society*. (We might, instead, need to conclude—even more implausibly—that the only obligations you have are the ones that you yourself happen to recognize!) But second, and more importantly, even if we grant that a genuine obligation must be one that in some sense you “can” be moved by, it is quite implausible to conclude that this means that genuine obligations must be ones that you *already* accept. Presumably, the requisite connection between obligation and motivation (assuming that there is one) will be in place provided that you can *come* to accept the obligation in question (perhaps only after suitable reflection) and can *then* be moved by it. So your obligations needn't be limited to those that are *already* recognized in your moral code (whether your own personal code *or* the one embraced by your society). And this means that until we learn more about what moral principles one might reasonably come to accept, we won't yet have reason to think that basic obligations are relative rather than being absolute.

We have been examining different attempts to show that moral relativism somehow follows from the existence of diverging moral codes. Relativism is true, these arguments claim, *because* societies have different codes. I have argued, of course, that these various arguments are unsuccessful. Conceivably, however, it might be suggested that we have been looking at things backwards. Instead of suggesting that relativism is true because of the differences we find in moral codes, might the relativist do better if she argued,

on the contrary, that these differences exist because of the *truth of relativism*? In particular, then, might the relativist argue that we should accept moral relativism because it offers the best *explanation* of the fact that societies have different moral codes?

After all, *something* must lie behind the fact (we are supposing it to be a fact) that different societies accept different principles. What better explanation than the hypothesis that societies put forward different principles for their members precisely because different principles are valid or binding, depending on *which* society you are a member of?

Of course, this is not the first time we have asked ourselves how best to explain moral disagreement. We previously considered the quite different suggestion that our disagreements about moral matters can best be explained by embracing the hypothesis that there are actually *no* moral facts at all! (That was the thought behind the argument from disagreement, examined in the last chapter.) Obviously, had that idea been accepted, that would have given us compelling reason to *reject* moral relativism (along with other forms of moral realism), since the relativist believes, on the contrary, that there are indeed facts about what each person should do.

I argued, however, that disagreement in a given domain should not normally be taken to be an indication that there are no facts concerning that domain, and further, that there is no good reason to think that *moral* disagreements are an exception in this regard. So it does remain open to the moral relativist to argue, instead, that if we find moral codes differing from one another, the best explanation is not that there are no moral facts at all, but rather that the facts are relative, differing from society to society. Would a defense of relativism along these new lines do better than the arguments we have already considered?

(Of course, for reasons already explained, if moral codes do involve a hidden relativization parameter, then strictly speaking they don't really disagree, and so, strictly speaking, there is no *disagreement* here in need of explanation. Still, we are supposing that different societies put forward different principles for their respective members, and the relativist can be taken as offering an explanation of why *these* differences exist.)

Unfortunately, even if it is open to the relativist to *propose* moral relativism as the best explanation of the differences we find in the codes of different societies, that doesn't mean that this is a particularly complete or compelling explanation. Consider what the relativist would now be suggesting. It wouldn't be that people are under different obligations because the codes

of their societies vary, but rather the reverse: the codes are different—the claim would be—because they reflect the differences in obligation that exist *independently* of their being recognized by these codes. People in different societies are under different obligations (for reasons yet to be explained), and the codes simply reflect that fact.

I should note, in passing, that if an account like this is accepted, the resulting view is no longer committed to constructivism about morality. It isn't that people have the obligations that they do because the relevant minds have the attitudes that they do (as made manifest in their given society's code). Rather, people have the attitudes that they do (as made manifest in their code) because they "already" have the *obligations* that they do. The relativist will thus need some further account of why people *have* the obligations that they do, and there is no particular reason to assume that this further account will turn out to be a constructivist one (though it could be).

But this particular point need not detain us. If, despite initial appearances, the best account of moral relativism is not constructivist after all, that may be surprising, but it isn't problematic.

A more pressing point is this. It doesn't suffice for the relativist to put forward any old "further" account of why people have the particular obligations that they do. Rather, that account needs to generate *different* obligations for different people, depending on what *society* they happen to belong to. And it certainly isn't obvious how that further account should go in order to do that. Just why *is* it that the members of different societies have fundamentally different obligations?

No doubt we can dream up partial stories on behalf of the relativist. Perhaps the relativist should accept a divine command theory of moral obligation and then posit that God simply chooses to give different principles to different groups. But why would God do that? The answer isn't obvious. Or perhaps the relativist should insist that the fundamental conditions in different societies are so radically different that only distinct moral codes could adequately promote and protect human interests in such varying circumstances. But just what are the specific environmental conditions that make differing codes necessary? The answer isn't obvious here either.

I certainly don't mean to suggest that one cannot construct theories of the foundations or bases of our moral obligations that are capable (in principle, at least) of generating different obligations for different societies. Indeed, we'll return to that possibility in the very next section. But in the absence of details, the relativist's "explanation" of the differences in moral codes seems

nothing more than a promissory note, the mere suggestion that *something* or the other generates distinct moral obligations, varying by society.

And this brings us to the most significant point. If our goal is simply to explain the differences in moral codes that we may find, do we really need to bring in the relativist's conjecture at all? Can't we readily explain these differences without supposing that the underlying, valid principles really do vary from society to society? (As an analogy, can't we explain the fact that different societies have had different astronomical beliefs without supposing that the underlying astronomical facts somehow vary from society to society?)

It certainly seems as though there are numerous possible explanations of why different societies might come to have different moral codes, explanations that take no particular stance as to whether the *valid* moral principles are absolute or relative. Given the variety of historical factors that may influence a society's culture—including accidents of which religion came to dominance when, which ethical teachers and literatures became culturally prominent, which moral outlooks best served the political and economic interests of those in power in the given society, and so on—it should hardly surprise us if different societies end up with moral codes that differ in at least some ways. Even if—as absolutists believe—there really is a single, uniquely correct moral code, valid at all places and at all times, given the sheer difficulty of working out its content and the constant danger of motivated beliefs (see 5.3), there is no particular reason to assume that all societies would agree about its details. We can explain differences without embracing relativism.

Of course, none of this establishes that the absolutist is right. Even if differences in moral codes can be adequately explained without positing the truth of moral relativism, that doesn't *prove* that the valid principles are absolute. But it does still leave the relativist searching for a compelling reason for us to *prefer* relativism.

6.4 Relativized Foundational Theories

Let me mention one final way the relativist might try to defend their position. All of the arguments for relativism that we have examined to date make essential use of the descriptive claim that different societies have different moral codes. Although these arguments differ in their details, they share the thought that this descriptive claim somehow lends support to the

normative claim that particularly interests us, the claim that people have different moral *obligations* (depending on their society). Unfortunately for the relativist, however, the various attempts to establish the reality of this support have proven unsuccessful.

Perhaps then the relativist should abandon the attempt to defend the normative claim by means of the *descriptive* one, and simply look for some other, more direct, way of arguing for moral relativism.

In what I take to be the most interesting approach to doing this, the relativist would claim that the best account of the foundations of normative ethics already has relativity *built into it*. Let's consider this idea more carefully.

When we think about morality we normally have in mind basic principles like the claim that killing is wrong (except, perhaps, in self-defense), or that one is required to keep one's promises, as well as lists of basic moral rights (for example, the right to life, or the right not to be enslaved) and of various virtues (such as honesty, loyalty, or compassion), and so on. Much of moral philosophy is devoted to debating and articulating these items and working out their details.

But beyond that, moral philosophy also includes rival theories concerning the ultimate foundation or basis of all these basic principles, rights, virtues, and the like. These theories attempt to explain what it is *by virtue of which* certain principles are valid, while others that we might imagine are not. (Similarly for the basic rights and virtues, and so forth.)

For example, *contractarians* hold that the valid principles (and so on) are those that we would agree upon during a suitable bargaining session. *Rule consequentialists* hold, instead, that the valid principles are those that would have the best results if everyone were to accept them and act upon them. *Ideal observer* theories hold that the valid principles are those that would be endorsed by a suitably ideal lawgiver (perhaps God), while *universalizability* theories hold that the valid principles are those that can be rationally willed to be universally valid. Obviously enough, there are different ways of filling in the details of these various theories, so that each approach subdivides further, and there are, of course, still other theories I haven't mentioned. But what all of these foundational theories have in common is the thought that the various valid principles (and the like) are valid by virtue of the fact that the correct foundational "machinery" would select, or endorse, or produce them. (In contrast, *nonfoundationalists* believe that once we have listed the basic principles, and so on, there is nothing deeper that can be said about

why the valid principles are valid, while others are not. These are simply brute facts about the ethical domain.)

It would be far beyond the scope of the present book to try to spell out the underlying ideas behind these rival foundational theories or to explore the different ways in which they can be developed. But it is worth noting that these theories are almost always put forward in (what we might think of as) a *universal* mode. We ask what *single* set of rules would be agreed upon if we were *all* to engage in the bargaining sessions. We ask what single set of rules would have the best results if we were *all* to conform to those rules. We ask what single set of rules would be given to *all* of us by the ideal observer. We ask what single set of rules are the ones we can all rationally will, and so on. (Even nonfoundationalists typically assume that there is a single set of rules—valid for all of us—even if nothing deeper can be said about why these rules are valid.)

But in principle, at least, it seems as though most or all of these foundational theories could be offered in *relativized* versions instead. Rather than looking for a single set of rules, valid for all, we could ask instead what rules would be agreed upon by the *members* of a given society (to be binding upon their society alone), what rules would have the best results if the members of a *particular society* were to conform to them, what rules would be given to a particular society by the ideal observer, what rules could be rationally willed as valid *within* a given society, and so on.

Perhaps, then, the moral relativist should simply insist that the *correct* foundational theory (whatever exactly that turns out to be) will actually take a *relativized* form rather than a universal one. What we will have then, unsurprisingly, will be moral codes tailored to individual societies, rather than a single moral code valid across all places and times. A bit more precisely, what we will have is a foundational theory that is *open* to the possibility of generating different moral codes for different societies, rather than building into the theory itself an assumption to the effect that one size fits (or had better fit) all.

The first thing to notice about an approach like this is that there is no longer any particular reason to think that the specific code that gets “assigned” to a given society will be the same as the code that is in fact *accepted* within that society. While it would still be the case that what you are required to do would depend on what society you are a member of, and so, in one sense of the term, you would still be required to conform to the code “of” your society, there is no particular reason to assume that this code—the code that

is *valid* for your society—will have much in common with the code that is *accepted* by (or acted upon by) the members of that society.

So this approach to relativism yields a rather different version of relativism than the one we have considered so far. It isn't so much a matter of "When you are a Roman, do as the Romans do," nor even "When you are a Roman, do as the Romans *believe* the Romans should do," but rather something more like "When you are a Roman, do as the Romans *should* do (regardless of what they *think* they should do)." Unlike the version of moral relativism that we have been examining up to this point, with this new version there is no particular reason to think you can learn how to behave properly by learning the moral code that happens to be accepted within your society.

So this new approach to moral relativism differs in some essential ways from the more standard version of relativism that we have been discussing. But there is a further point worth emphasizing as well, namely, that it isn't yet clear whether relativized foundational theories really will *assign* different moral codes to different societies. Having a relativized foundational theory certainly opens the door, as we might put it, to the possibility of having different codes for different societies. But is there good reason to think this possibility will be realized? Even if the correct foundational theory *could*, in principle, assign different moral rules to different societies, why think that it *will*?

As far as I can see, it is impossible to settle this question decisively without taking a stand on what the correct foundational theory actually is, since the details of the relevant arguments would vary, depending on the foundational theory in question. But there is at least some general reason to be skeptical. For the crucial issue is whether the relevant facts about societies and their members vary *sufficiently* to have the foundational machinery generate different codes. It isn't clear why we should think that they do, especially when we bear in mind that we are asking not whether the codes might have different derivative implications (given local circumstances), but rather whether the codes will differ in terms of the fundamental moral principles themselves. Given the basic facts of the human condition I find it easy to imagine that the fundamental moral principles appropriate for any given society (from the perspective of the foundational theory) may turn out to be the same from one society to the next.

(If we do conclude that each society will in fact be assigned the very same basic moral principles, does this still count as a version of moral *relativism*? In a minimal sense, perhaps, since the theory *might* have given different

obligations to different people depending on their society. But in a more robust sense, probably not, for everyone will turn out to be bound by the very same moral code.)

Still, as I have already remarked, I don't think we can settle whether a relativized foundational theory will truly assign different moral principles without first determining the correct foundational theory. And that is beyond the scope of the present book. So let us suppose—if only for the sake of argument—that if the correct foundational theory is put forward in a relativized form then it will indeed generate different moral codes. That still leaves the question whether we should *prefer* foundational theories in their relativized versions rather than the more common universal ones. It is hard to see why we should.

Conceivably, the relativist might try to offer some general considerations—points independent of any particular foundational theory—for preferring relativization. That is, she might argue that no matter *what* the best foundational theory turns out to be, we have reason to think that the best *version* of that foundational theory will be a relativized one.

But what might such general considerations look like? Presumably the relativist would want to appeal to independently plausible ideas about the very function and purpose of morality. Still, it remains difficult to see how, exactly, the argument would go. Suppose we grant, for example, the idea that one essential function of morality is to guide action (see 1.2). If the relativist could somehow make out the thought that morality can only *be* action guiding (or can only do an adequate job of being action guiding) if moral principles vary from society to society rather than being universal, that might give us reason to think that the correct foundational theory (whatever it is) will be relativized. But it seems obvious (to me, at least) that even absolute moral principles can do a perfectly good job of guiding action. Or suppose we grant the idea that moral principles must serve to protect, respect, and promote people's significant interests (again, see 1.2). If the relativist could somehow make out the claim that morality can only do this (or can do it better) if basic moral principles vary with the given society, that too might give us reason to expect that the correct foundational theory will be relativized. But here too, it is difficult to see why absolute moral principles should do less well in this regard.

Speaking personally, I cannot think of any compelling arguments along these lines, that is, arguments that start with independently plausible general remarks about the nature and purpose of morality and then move from these

to the relativist's desired conclusion, that the correct foundational theory should be cast in a relativized mode.

Of course, that doesn't show that there is compelling reason to prefer foundational theories presented in a *universal* mode either. Are there general considerations that give us reason to prefer universal over relativized foundational theories? Perhaps. To the extent that part of the purpose of morality is to guide our interactions with others, protecting and respecting the interests of everyone, we might think that a foundational theory will serve that purpose most effectively if it generates a single set of rules, so that even when we interact (directly or indirectly) with people from *other* societies, all concerned parties will approach those interactions from the same shared moral perspective. If that's right, then perhaps we do indeed have reason to prefer universal rather than relativized foundational theories.

But there is no need for those who believe in absolute moral theories to insist upon this point. Our goal is not to establish the unique superiority of the view that valid moral principles are absolute, but only to deflect and disarm arguments that seek to establish the opposite. So in the absence of a compelling reason to think that foundational theories should be relativized, those who believe in absolute moral rules can reasonably maintain that their own favored position remains an acceptable one.

It is, of course, still a possibility that once we have settled on the correct account of the foundations of morality we will find something *specific* to that account that leads us to conclude that this *particular* foundational theory—the correct one—should indeed be cast in a relative rather than a universal mode. For example, perhaps there is something about *contractarianism* in particular that makes it appropriate to embrace it in a relativized form, even if the same wouldn't have been true for other foundational theories. Or maybe there is something special in this regard about rule consequentialism, or the ideal observer theory, and so on. Even if there is no reason in the abstract to prefer relativized theories to universal ones, it could still turn out that for the *particular* foundational theory that we ultimately endorse we will discover such reasons. I doubt that this is the case; but that does still remain a possibility.

To explore this question properly would require detailed consideration of each of the leading foundational theories (or, at the very least, detailed consideration of whatever foundational theory you already happen to prefer). It will not surprise you to learn that we won't undertake that sort

of investigation here. To engage in it would be to turn our attention fully to normative ethics, and that would constitute a significant detour from our main concerns.

Perhaps then the conclusion that we should reach is this. While it remains possible that a full-blown systematic discussion of normative ethics and its foundations would lead us, eventually, to some form of moral relativism, there is currently no particularly compelling reason to think that it will. That should be good enough, I think, for our purposes. No doubt, those who believe in absolute moral truths—valid for all people and all times—should remain open minded. But they have not yet been given reason to think that they are mistaken.