On the Relation Between Metaethical and Substantial Normative Forms of Moral Relativism

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1. INTRODUCTION

Moral relativism comes in many forms. Most discussed of these are metaethical ideas that make claim to some form of relativity regarding the truth, meaning and/or knowledge of moral judgements. Notwithstanding the vast differences that exist between more precise versions of metaethical relativism (MR), they all have one basic feature in common: A moral judgement can only be true (or have a certain meaning, or be known) relative to a person or some group of persons. However, a moral judgement to which this applies need not be true (or have the same meaning or be known) relative to some other person or group of persons. This, in turn, is allegedly due to the actual existence or possibility of substantial differences between people when it comes to moral opinions, language and general belief systems. Obviously, such ideas tell us nothing about what is right or wrong, good or bad (not even relatively so) – in itself they lack all normative content. However, in philosophical discussions they are not seldom connected to normative ideas that in a similar manner position themselves with regard to the fact that people actually do or may have very different ways of thinking about moral matters and the world in general.

In an excellent overview of different brands of moral relativism, Lars Bergström has used the term "normative relativism" (NR) to denote

such ideas and has also distinguished two main families among them.[1] One of these is *tolerance theories* prescribing some degree and/or form of acceptance in the face of moral opinions of others that differ from one's own. In recent debate on moral relativism, such ideas have been put forward by David Wong, who also claims that certain forms of MR although not strictly forcing us to accept any tolerance theory still lend some degree of support to such ideas.[2] Even when defended against a background of MR and although the prescriptions of tolerance theories are of no practical consequence unless some difference of moral opinion exists, the tolerance theories themselves do not, however, relativise their moral message to the differences of this kind that may exist between people (tolerance is equally prescribed for everyone by the theory).

This is a contrast to the other family of NR, the *substance theories* or *substantial* NR (SNR as I will mostly call them). These are united by the feature that the fact that a person or group of persons embraces a moral opinion makes for a special reason to act in accordance with this opinion that is valid with regard to this person, or the persons belonging to the group in question, but not to those who do not embrace the opinion in question (or belong to a group that does so). The rest of this paper will be devoted to investigating the relation between such SNR and various forms of MR.

After having described different types of SNR that have been defended in philosophical discussion in section 2, I will devote section 3 to outline a possible argument to the effect that there indeed exists a strong connection between at least some forms of SNR and MR to the effect that these forms of MR force us to accept some version of SNR. In section 4, however, I will point to what I take to be strong reasons to reject this suggestion. I will then close, in section 5, by reflecting on what would be needed in order to bridge the gap between SNR and MR

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[1] Bergström L 1998, "Relativism", *Filosofisk tidskrift* 1998, 19 (1).

[2] Wong D 1984, *Moral Relativity*, Berkeley CA: University of California Press. Others, however, seem to disagree on this last point. Geoffrey Harrison (1976, "Relativism and Tolerance", *Ethics* 86: 122-35) argues that a tolerance theory can only be supported on normative ethical grounds, while Bernard Williams (1972, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, New York: Harper & Row, pp. 22-26) makes the even stronger claim that combinations of MR and tolerance theories are inconsistent. It should be remarked, though, that these apparent disagreements may not be real ones, due to the fact that it is quite possible (if not probable) that the writers in question discuss different versions of MR and/or tolerance theories.

and whether, on second thought, this is something that should be strived for by supporters of SNR and MR respectively.

2. FORMS OF SUBSTANTIAL NORMATIVE RELATIVISM (SNR)

Different versions of SNR may roughly be sorted into two main categories: agent relative and group relative.

Agent relative SNR claims that the fact that a person holds a moral opinion is a reason for the claim that this person should act in accordance with the opinion in question. However, with regard to people who do not hold this opinion, this reason is lacking. This does not imply that the latter people must lack *all* reason to act in accordance with the opinion in question. However, they do lack the extra reason that, according to agent relative SNR, is present in the case of persons holding this moral opinion. Agent relative SNR is one branch of those normative ethical theories that embrace the idea of agent relative moral reasons.[3] However, the idea of agent relativity may very well be constructed in a way that does not imply any form of SNR.[4]

Examples of agent relative SNR can be found in the history of ethics at least since the reformation of the christian church. One of the basic ideas of protestant christian ethics is that one should act according to one's conscience – one's will to do good and one's considered perception of what is good. This idea has been further developed in different directions, one of which is the so-called situationistic tradition of christian ethics, where the importance of the considered individual choice in particular circumstances for the determination of morally acceptable conduct is stressed.[5] It has often been observed that this tradition contrasts clearly with the tradition within christian ethics building mainly on the idea of the Ten commandments in that it rejects the idea of universal ethical principles and thus distances itself from any interpretation of christian morality in terms of deontological notions or the

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[3] See, e.g., Kagan S 1989, *The Limits of Morality, Oxford*: Clarendon Press, p. 61; Nagel T 1986, *The View from Nowhere*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 152-154; and Parfit D 1984, *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p. 27.

[4] E.g., the idea that people owe special obligations to their near and dear.

[5] See, e.g., Cunningham, R L 1970 (ed.), *Situationism and the New Morality*, New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts.

idea of the natural law.[6] However, besides this, the situationistic tradition also exhibit clear agent relative features, since what is in accordance with one person's conscience or considerations with regard to a particular situation need not be so with regard to another person.[7]

The situationistic tradition of christian ethics has several secular counterparts. One of these is the existentialist ethical ideal of authenticity: in any situation of choice, the important thing is to consciously take a stand and act on it. If you do so and recognise that this is what you do you escape what Sartre called 'bad faith' and Nietzsche rejected as 'slavery' – the only real sin for a human being.[8] Again, we see a clear connection to agent relative SNR, since different people may very well take very different stands on the same moral issues.[9] More recent philosophical suggestions that retain the connection to SNR while avoiding the more extreme ideas within the existentialist tradition regarding things as personal identity are provided by the moral philosophy of Bernard Williams and so-called narrative ethics.

Williams SNR-related ideas, which like situationism also contains strong anti universalist tendencies,[10] can be illustrated by his example of

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[6] A good illustration of this is provided in the writings of the situationistic christian ethicist Joseph Fletcher, e.g., Fletcher J 1979, *Humanhood: Essays in Biomedical Ethics*, Buffalo NY: Prometheus Books.

[7] It is interesting to note that one way of reading Kant's moral philosophy is that, besides refuting Hume's theory of practical reason, he is concerned with bridging these two gaps between the just described traditions within christian ethics. The function of the categorical imperative can be said to be to set limits to what may legitimately be prescribed by a person's conscience or from a will to do good and, doing so, it also makes room for universal ethical principles.

[8] Kierkegaard S 1992, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*, London: Penguin; Nietzsche F 2002, *Beyond Good and Evil : Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Sartre J-P 1956, *Being and Nothingness*, New York: Washington Square Press.

[9] The more radical implications of this strand of thought is, of course, more or less underlined by different philosophers in the existentialist tradition. The Nietzsche who cheers enthusiatically for those who willfully chooses to lift themselves above the norms and limits of the common life and people of his own time can be contrasted both with Sartre, who mainly notes that whatever one chooses it will be one's own choice and the only way to be authentic is to recognise this fact, and even more so with Kierkegaard, who introduces the "religious stage" as a sort of top of his hinted hierarchy of personal development and where just any choice will not do anymore, although conscious choice is indeed sufficient for the authentic "ethical stage".

[10] Especially as presented in Williams B 1985, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, London: Fontana Press.

Jim, used in an attack on utilitarianism.[11] Poor Jim finds himself in the unfortunate situation of being offered by a vicious military commander to kill one innocent person out of a group of twenty in order for the remaining nineteen to be spared. If he refuses, the commander assures Jim that all twenty will be immediately executed by his troops. This is a hard choice for Jim not mainly because the prospect of killing a human being is repulsive, but foremost because he is deeply committed to the personal project of obeying the fifth commandment. For Williams, this commitment of Jim becomes the springboard for his attack on the typical utilitarian response that, clearly, Jim should take the offer, since twenty dead would be much worse than one. Jim may, of course, let such a thought lead him to revise his commitment to the ban on murder. However, Williams reasons, since he in fact has this commitment, he does not need to abandon it in order to act morally acceptable. He can act on his conviction and refuse the offer without blame for the nineteen innocent people that will then be killed as an indirect result of his choice. Now, some would concur with this for the reason that it will not be Jim that does the killing[12] or that he is not doing any harm, merely allowing it to occur.[13] However, Williams point is explicitly connected to the moral commitment of Jim. It is because of his strong belief in the fifth commandment that he is morally justified in acting on it in this particular situation. The flaw of utilitarianism exposed by the story, as Williams sees it, is that it disconnects all reasons for what we should do from what we ourselves believe that we should do, even when these beliefs are well-considered and deeply embedded in our personality. In Williams' terms, it fails to respect our moral *integrity*. In this, we also see the connection to SNR, since if Jim's moral opinions had included the idea that it may be morally acceptable to kill one innocent person in order to save nineteen others, the reason for William's claim that Jim is justified to decline the commander's offer would disappear and the same goes if another person with other moral opinions would find herself in Jim's shoes.

[11] Williams B 1973, "A Critique of Utilitarianism", in Smart JJC & Williams B, *Utilitarianism – For and Against*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[12] Alexander Solchenitzyn, as quoted in Glover 1975, "'It Makes no Difference whether or not I do It'", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 49 (supp.): 171-190, p. 138, would certainly seem to have been inclined to reason along such lines.
[13] See, e.g., Kagan (*op.cit.*, chapter 3), and Bennett J 1995, *The Act Itself*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, chapters 4-8.

Williams' idea that strong convictions and personal projects of people can make for moral entitlements otherwise not accessible contrasts itself with the existentialist picture of people able to recreate themselves, their world-view and, in effect, their moral entitlements on a whim from case to case. In Williams' description of Jim, it is essential that his commitment to the ban on murder is a deep and strong one and, for this reason, an integral part of who he is. The notion of integrity employed by Williams is thereby strongly connected to an idea of personal identity where people are seen as much more comprehensive and robust over time than what is suggested by the more radical forms of existentialism. This aspect of Williams' version of SNR is shared with the bearing idea of narrative ethics, where our moral obligations and entitlements, as well as out identity, are to a great extent determined by our "personal narrative" – who one is and what one should do is, somewhat simplified, that which fits best with the story of one's life.[14] And, obviously, since different people may be expected to carry with them quite different stories giving rise to moral reasons to do quite different things in very similar circumstances, the step to SNR is not a long one.[15]

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[14] Heavily inspired by French philosopher Paul Ricoeur 1994, *Oneself as Another*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. However, being a term in fashion, the notion "narrative ethics" has been used in philosophical discussion to denote also a host of other ideas, which have in common only the idea that fleshed out narratives are seen as much more important from a moral point of view than abstract moral principles and the types of brief examples often used in philosophical ethical inquiry. One of these is the idea that narratives may be an important tool for moral decision making. Another one is that narratives are essential for moral education, in particular, the development and cultivation of virtues. A third one is the idea that, when investigating empirically what moral convictions people have, using narratives is of methodological value. Narrative ethics is, furthermore, sometimes used as a term for the study of ethical issues arising in the activity of telling stories (journalism, the writing of novels, the making of movies, etc.). In the present case, however, I am referring to none of these ideas, although I do not want to deny that, perhaps, the type of narrative ethics I am considering may lend support to some of the other ideas just mentioned. For explorations of Ricoeur's brand of narrative ethics and his philosophy in general, see, e.g., Cohen RA & Marsh JL 2002 (eds.), *Ricoeur as Another: The Ethics of Subjectivity*, Albany: SUNY Press; and Hahn LE 1995 (ed.), *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, Chicago: Open Court.

[15] Besides the difference between, on the one hand, this line of thought and Williams' ideas and, on the other, the existentialist views, there is also an important difference between narrative ethics and the existentialist ideal on the one hand and, on the other, Williams view with regard to personal identity. For the latter, the person is a fixed entity out of which flows the type of moral reasons connected to SNR while, for the former, these reasons are parts of an ongoing *construction* of the person. In spite of these

Group relative SNR claims that the fact that a person belongs to a group of people where a particular moral opinion is commonly or traditionally embraced implies that this person has a special reason to act in accordance with this opinion that is lacking with respect to people who do not belong to such a group. The most important difference to agent relative SNR is that, according to group relative SNR, a single person need not herself embrace the opinion in question in order for this extra moral reason to apply to her – the important thing is that she belongs to the group in question.

This brand of SNR is also somewhat more homogenous than the family of agent relative SNR in that proponents of this sort of idea all connect to what is often referred to as *communitarianism*. The basic idea is that what is right or wrong, good or bad, arise out of, is constructed by and applies to specific social, political and/or cultural circumstances. In one particular set of such circumstances a particular moral opinion may be embraced as a result of such mechanisms while in another set of such circumstances this opinion need not be embraced at all.

To be true, there are quite different brands of communitarianism, some of which have less to do with the thought just described, but rather concentrates on opposing the idea that a good society can be described solely in terms of some set of formal principles of government and/or justice. In addition, the good society requires that its members share some particular set of social values.[16] However, besides this, there is also a strong trend among communitarian thinkers to claim that these values can only be applied to the social group in question. Thus, the validity of the values with regard to the members of this group is determined by the fact that they are in fact embraced by the group in question.[17]

differences, however, there remains a striking similarity between all three lines of thought in that moral action is basically perceived as a form of authentic self-expression.

[16] This aspect of communitarianism may be seen as the parallel in political philosophy to the anti-universalistic ideas in ethics touched upon above.

[17] The idea has been suggested in different versions in, for example, McIntyre A 1981, *After Virtue : A Study in Moral Theory*, London: Duckworth; Taylor C 1992 *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; Taylor C 1994, *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press; and Waltzer M 1985, *Spheres of Justice: A Defence of Pluralism and Equality*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

3. THE ARGUMENT FROM MR TO SNR

Acknowledging the fact that the various forms of SNR are rather different, it should be no surprise that not all of them have been connected to MR, at least not in any strong or explicit sense. However, for those that have been so connected, the argument hinted at is of a sort that, with suitable alterations in detail may be generally applied to all forms of SNR. Something similar may be said with regard to the various versions of MR: the argument just referred to may be constructed in a fitting way for every version of MR in relation to at least some version of SNR. In this section, I will try to spell out this argument in its strongest and most convincing form, noting as we go along the various changes in detail that may be used to accommodate various special versions of MR and SNR respectively.

The starting point of this argument is the idea captured by the Nietzschean slogan that 'God is dead!' – i.e., the abandonment of any belief in objective moral facts and/or knowledge. There is no single independent reality to be tracked by our moral convictions, a fact in turn seemingly leaving us with two options: Either we can abandon altogether the idea of valid moral opinions, or we can embark on the project of constructing a reality which, although not objective, may nevertheless be tracked by moral beliefs. This latter idea leads quite easily to some form of MR, since either different people and/or groups of people may construct different moral realities, or the reality that is constructed may track different moral opinions depending on further factors. Depending on what, more exactly, gives room for such variations – the actual moral reality constructed, standards of knowledge of this reality, or the tools of language employed to describe it – we end up with either ontological, epistemological or semantic MR. To some extent, at least, we may of course also get combinations such positions.

However, whatever version of MR we end up with, there seems to be an argument connecting it to some form of SNR that immediately suggests itself. The basic form of this argument is most easily explained by starting out with a kind of ontological MR that works on the individual level. That is, the idea that each one of us construct our own moral reality that moral opinions are about and in virtue of which they are true or false "for us". This reality is ultimately constituted by what we believe in moral matters, although different theorists may here want to employ additional qualifications on our beliefs in order for them to be able to do this constitutive work (such as requirements of internal coherence). However, for me to hold a moral opinion is still seen as a

necessary condition for it to be true "for me" (at least in the weak sense that this opinion must cohere with other opinions held by me). However, in order to spell out the argument leading from this form of MR to SNR, let us for the moment set the just mentioned type of additional requirements aside (or, alternatively, assume that they are met).

On the basis of this kind of idea, it now becomes all but far-fetched to think along the following line: The only way for a moral opinion to be valid with regard to me is for it to be true "for me". Furthermore, what makes a moral opinion true "for me" is that I hold it. Therefore, the moral reason to act in a particular way provided by such a true opinion can only be valid for me (or for others that hold the same opinion). Therefore, those who do not hold this opinion lack such a reason. However, these people may hold other moral opinions not held by me that are thereby true "for them" and that, therefore, provide them with reasons to act in accordance with these opinions. But these latter reasons are not valid with respect to me, since they arise out of moral opinions that are not true "for me". In consequence, a true moral opinion only provides reasons to act in accordance with it with respect to those people who hold this opinion. Thus, we have derived agent relative SNR from one brand of MR.

On the basis of this, we may work out variations of this general pattern of reasoning with regard to other types of MR and SNR. For example, an argument starting out from a type of ontological MR that localises the construction of reality on a social rather than individual level may instead be similarly connected to some type of group relative SNR. Keeping ourselves at the individual level, more specific conceptions of how the ontological construction goes about may lead to an argument suggesting particular types of agent relative SNR but excluding others. For example, while the above sketched argument fits well with the existentialist brand of SNR, employing requirements of coherence and similar additional constraints may instead suggest an SNR more in line with narrative ethics or Williams' views. Moreover, parallel arguments may be constructed on the basis of epistemological or semantical MR, but then the derived SNR has, of course, to be adjusted accordingly, so that it speaks about moral reasons connected to knowledge and/or meaning rather than truth. Regarding epistemology, this may seem fitting for the type of SNR developed within christian ethics and the type of communitarianism building on virtue ethics, since these traditions have rarely questioned the idea of objective moral

truth. However, I will not go into all these details in the present context.

Before moving on to the next section, it may be asked what evidence there is for the claim that any supporter of SNR would use the above sketched type of argument in order to support her position, or that any supporter of MR would be keen on using it for supporting SNR. This may vary quite a lot depending on what supporter and what version of the argument we are talking about. For those christian ethicists that embrace situationism, at least a part of the reason seems to lie in a form of epistemological MR: although there exist objective moral truths (determined by the will of God), every individual has to approach their view of what these truths are in their own way – to develop their own unique path to God (and if they so do, they are free of sin). For the existentialists, however, there seem to be quite strong connections between some form of ontological MR and their acceptance of SNR – at least in the case of Nietzsche and Sartre, for whom the view of the world in general as being "up for grabs" for each one of us seems to be the basis for their respective versions of the ideal of authenticity. Also in the case of the narrative ethicists, a similar idea seems to be lurking, although for these thinkers, the freedom to create the world as one wants is much more constrained than for the existentialists. In the case of Williams, it is more unclear to what extent his acceptance of SNR has to do with subscription to any form of MR. However, in one paper he has indeed defended what has been called "appraisal relativism" – i.e., the view that if a person holds a set of beliefs and convictions, S1, such that it is not a real option for this person to abandon this set for another such set, S2, the person's beliefs and convictions cannot be appraised in terms of truth, moral permissibility, rationality etc. from S2, but only from the standards given within S1. To be a real option, in turn, a move from S1 to S2 has to be able to involve applying the standards of S1 to S2 and must not mean that the person would "lose his grip on reality".[18] One way of applying this to the example with Jim is to say that Jim cannot adopt the utilitarian way of thinking either due to the fact that Jim's present moral standards cannot make him accept the utilitarian view, or because his moral stance is so much a part of who he is that abandoning it for a utilitarian one would make him lose his grip on reality, or both. This in turn implies Williams' brand of SNR, since

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[18] Williams B 1975, "The Truth in Relativism", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 75: 215-228.

Jim's choice in the situation can only be appraised from the moral opinions he in fact holds. When it comes to the group relative versions of SNR, finally, the connections to MR seems to be of two distinct kinds. For communitarians like McIntyre who build their ideas on Aristotelian virtue ethics, the move is to underline the epistemological MR inherent in the idea of attaining moral knowledge through the teaching of the virtues of the 'master' to whom one is a disciple and expand this to a social context, where the 'master' is a tradition or a culture rather than an actual person. From this, one may then take the step to SNR by claiming that this makes the reasons one has to act in accordance with one's judgements of what to do relative to the standards of moral knowledge of the culture to which one belongs. In other cases, however, communitarian ideas seems to be feeding off a MR localised on the ontological level: what is right, wrong etc.is constructed within cultures and social groups and opinions about this can therefore only be true relative to such settings. From this, the step to SNR is taken much in the same way as the existentialists infer agent relative SNR from their type of ontological MR: The only standards of judgement applicable to a person are those valid for the culture to which this person belongs.

4. THE ARGUMENT CRITICISED

My own impression from personal experience is that moral relativist ideas as well as arguments like the one sketched in the preceding section exercise a peculiar pull on many people, not least those interested in global social and cultural studies, as well as those engaged in global politics or the politics of multicultural societies. In some cases, this may be due to a confusion between SNR and tolerance theories or the mistaken belief that tolerance theories may only be defended on the basis of MR (which is assumed to imply SNR). However, many of the people attracted to MR and SNR (and, as we have seen above, this includes quite a few sophisticated thinkers), indeed seem to accept the latter on the basis of the former quite regardless of their attitude to tolerance theories. That is, they believe in some form of MR and believe the argument from MR to SNR to be a valid one. This belief, however, is mistaken – or, at least, so I will now argue.

Regarding epistemological and ontological MR, the just mentioned pull of the argument from MR to SNR rests, I will claim, solely on a confusion between, on the one hand, the notion of the validity of a

moral opinion and, on the other, the notion of the content of such an opinion. Regarding semantical MR, the situation is somewhat more complicated. Either semantic MR is taken to imply ontological MR, in which case the just mentioned objection applies, or semantic MR stands by itself, in which case, either SNR becomes an impossible position, or the inference of SNR from MR rests on a confusion between, on the one hand, the meaning of moral language and, on the other, the normative content of moral opinions.

To make things simple, let us first consider the type of individualistic ontological MR used above to formulate the argument and its agent relative SNR counterpart. Consider two persons, P1 and P2, who hold two incompatible moral opinions $mo1$ and $mo2$,[19] respectively. According to the MR we are considering, P1's acceptance of $mo1$ makes $mo1$ true "for P1", while P2's acceptance of $mo2$ makes $mo2$ true "for P2".[20] However, since P1 does not hold $mo2$, since P2 does not hold $mo1$ and since $mo1$ and $mo2$ are incompatible, $mo1$ is not true "for P2" and $mo2$ is not true "for P1". Now, what SNR claims is that, under these assumptions, $mo1$ applies to P1 but not to P2 – i.e., the truth of $mo1$ makes for a reason that P1 should act in accordance with this opinion, but does not make for a similar reason with regard to P2 – while $mo2$ applies to P2, but not to P1. The logic of the argument from MR to SNR is that these restrictions regarding the *applicability* of the respective moral opinions follows from the restrictions with regard to their respective *validity* or *truth*. However, this seems to me to be a mistake, since the question about whether or not a particular moral opinion is true is another question than the one about what this opinion prescribes – its content.

Admittedly, the truth of *any* opinion is partly determined by its content (this holds independently of the question whether some form of ontological relativism is true or not). However, this does not imply that the content of a true opinion has to be subject to the same kind of qualifications and requirements that has to be met for it to be true. Assume that the content of $mo1$ is an absolute moral ban on murder: "it is always wrong to murder people" ($mo2$, in effect, permits murder in some circumstances). According to the assumptions made above, this

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[19] They are incompatible in the sense that one of them prescribes or permits actions that are banned by the other. For example, $mo1$ may be the opinion that lying is always wrong, while $mo2$ may be the view that lying may be right in particular circumstances.

[20] In the case that additional requirements of, for example, internal coherence are included in MR, we may assume these to be met.

ban is true "for P1" but not "for P2". However, this fact does not imply that what is thereby true "for P1" is the opinion "it is always wrong to murder people for those who believe it to be always wrong to murder people". The content of the opinion that is true "for P1" is still "it is always wrong to murder people", and this prescription applies to everyone, regardless of whether or not they believe in it or not and, therefore, regardless of whether it is true "for them" or not. So, in effect, it is true "for P1" that should P2 murder someone, this would be wrong. Or, in terms of moral reasons, it is true "for P1" that there is a reason for the claim that everyone, P2 included, should not to murder people. And, of course, a similar case can be made for the claim that $mo2$, applies to P1 as well as P2.

If we now instead consider epistemological MR, the situation has to be changed so that P1 has epistemic reasons to believe in $mo1$ but not in $mo2$, while P2 has epistemic reasons to believe in $mo2$, but not in $mo1$. Again, it seems clear to me that this difference with regard to the epistemic reasons valid for P1 and P2 does not imply any change in the content of their respective opinions. P1 has reasons to believe it to be always wrong to murder people, and this does not imply that he has such reasons to believe in the opinion "it is always wrong to murder people for those who believe it to be always wrong to murder people".

Moreover, the arguments just outlined seems equally applicable to the types of epistemic and ontological MR that work on the social level and their group relative SNR counterparts. If we assume $mo1$ to be true "for a group, G1", to which P1 belongs and $mo2$ to be true "for another group, G2", to which P2 belongs, this does not imply that what is true "for the members of G1" (P1 included) is the opinion "it is always wrong to murder people for those who belong to a group where it is accepted that it is always wrong to murder people".

What, then, if we instead consider semantical MR – i.e., the idea that the meaning of moral opinions is relative to individuals or groups? Some thinkers seem to believe that semantical MR implies ontological MR and in that case we may apply the argument outlined above. However, what if we consider semantical MR in its own right? If so, we run into problems repeating the argument as stated above. For, according to semantical MR, $mo1$ and $mo2$ then have different content depending of whether we assume the perspective of P1 or P2. This, in turn, implies that we cannot assume $mo1$ and $mo2$ to be unequivocally incompatible, since when P1 believes an act to be wrong this means something else than when P2 believes an act to be wrong. Assume, for

example, that P1 applies a subjective naturalist analysis of moral language, while P2 applies an expressivist one. In that case, P1 interprets *mo1* as the psychological description "I disapprove of murder" and *mo2* as "I disapprove of murder, unless in some circumstances where I approve of it". P2, on the other hand, interprets *mo1* as something like "boo for murder!" and *mo2* as "boo for murder in some cases and hooray for murder in other cases!". This, in turn, means that, in the eyes of P1, P2 does not even hold a moral opinion at all, and the same goes for P2's assessment of P1. In a sense, this situation may seem to lead to a collapse of the prerequisites for the argument from MR to SNR, since there is no independent reason to claim that P1 or P2 hold any moral opinions at all, even less opposing ones. However, there remains the possibility of relativising the argument to the respective semantical perspectives of P1 and P2, so let us try out this last possibility.

Consider, first, the semantical perspective of P1. According to this, P1 holds the belief "I disapprove of murder", while P2 holds the belief "I disapprove of murder, unless in some circumstances where I approve of it". If SNR could be inferred from this state of things, we would have to claim that the disapproval described by the respective psychological descriptions only concern murder committed by people with regard to whom the respective psychological descriptions are true. That is, the content of *mo1* would have to be transformed into "I disapprove of murder committed by people who disapprove of murder". But this does simply not follow from the premises, where it is assumed that the content of *mo1* is "I disapprove of murder". The fact that this meaning of *mo1* is relative to the semantical perspective of P1 does in no way change this fact. We reach a corresponding conclusion if we instead applies the semantical perspective of P2, where P1's opinion is interpreted as "boo for murder!", i.e., the content of *mo1* is a negative attitude towards murder. Again, this provides no reason to ascribe to P1 the attitude "boo for murder committed by people who have a negative attitude towards murder". In consequence, what we learn is that attempts to infer SNR from semantical MR at best rests on a confusion between semantical relativity regarding the meaning of moral language and agent relativity regarding the normative content of moral opinions.

5. FINAL REMARKS

The fact that SNR cannot be inferred from MR is, of course, compatible with any claim to the effect that both (some version of) MR and (some

version of) SNR are true.[21] However, what we have learned is that, in order to sustain such a claim, we need arguments that support these two positions independently of each other. I will close with some remarks regarding the attractivity of such a prospect for supporters of MR and SNR respectively.

Regarding supporters of MR, it is hard to see any particular reason to try to establish SNR as a complementary position. As mentioned, some people seem to think that support of SNR provides (additional) reasons for tolerance theories and if such theories are found attractive, this idea may lead to a temptation for supporters of MR to argue in favour of SNR. However, as mentioned in passing above, this idea seems to be essentially flawed. First of all, it seems plainly false that SNR lends support to tolerance theories since, according to SNR, we have reason to be tolerant only to the extent that we believe this to be desirable. Thus, the recognition that others may have reason for doing things that we ourselves lack implied by any acceptance of SNR does not in any way imply that the reasons of others should be respected, accepted or tolerated. Moreover, as we have seen, in some cases it seems that establishing SNR would be at odds with the project of supporting MR. This is the case of semantical MR where, as we saw above, it becomes in one sense impossible even to formulate SNR. Support of SNR, therefore, would have to involve abandonment of semantical MR.

Supporters of SNR, on their part, may find some type of MR attractive since they are attracted to tolerance theories and believe MR to provide reasons for these. However, as just noted, for a supporter of SNR, tolerance theories should not appear as particularly attractive as such, since these theories suggest reasons for tolerance that are neither agent- nor group-relative. Even more important, however, there seems to be strong albeit somewhat different reasons for supporters of SNR to avoid different brands of MR.

First, if I am right when suggesting that SNR is incompatible with semantical MR, this is, of course, a powerful reason for any supporter of SNR to avoid this brand of MR. Secondly, it seems to me that ontological MR should appear as rather unattractive to SNR-supporters, since ontological MR makes the validity of any SNR relative: SNR may only be true "for" some group or person. Epistemological MR, however, does not seem to pose any particular problem for supporters of SNR,

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[21] In light of my argument, this may be the most charitable interpretation of Williams' appraisal relativism.

since all it says is that while one person (or the members of a certain group of people) have epistemic reason to believe in (some brand of) SNR, such reason may be lacking with regard to some other person (or the members of some other group).