

THE PLACE OF TRUTH IN MORAL DISCOURSE*

by

Jason Hannan

This paper examines the place of truth in moral discourse: the communicative practice of resolving differences of moral judgment. It is commonly argued that truth does not have a place in ethics and that moral disagreements can be resolved only by non-rational modes of persuasion. There are two familiar theses that lend themselves to this conclusion: moral relativism and emotivism. The first is a conceptual argument about standards, whereas the second is an empirical argument about meaning. Both enjoy considerable currency in contemporary thinking about ethics. In this paper, I question the theses of moral relativism and emotivism. I argue that truth does indeed have a place in moral discourse. By drawing on the work of philosophers Hilary Putnam and Huw Price, I argue that truth has an inescapable place in moral discourse and that a rational approach to resolving moral disagreements is therefore justified.

1. Introduction

The concept of truth can elicit strikingly different responses. For those in the natural sciences, for example, the concept of truth is vital and indispensable. Belief in truth gives point and purpose to the scientific enterprise. Without it, science as a practice would cease to be meaningful. The concept of truth is therefore understandably defended by scientists and a great many philosophers of science with considerable passion and vigor. In the humanities, however, the concept of truth is often regarded with open suspicion and contempt. Truth is frequently dismissed as an antiquated metaphysical illusion, one without which our world would presumably be better off. One common refrain in the humanities is that truth is an effect of power and that the appeal to truth is tantamount to the exercise of coercion.¹ It is therefore thought that a positive account of truth ought not to be accorded any serious weight.

Between the natural sciences and the humanities, then, to take two distinct academic domains, one finds a fundamental opposition concerning the status of truth.² One view or the other, in more or less sophisticated form and in more or less explicit terms, seems to prevail in most every academic field and discipline. The rival and competing attitudes toward truth can be described according to a number of familiar oppositional terms: objectivism versus relativism, objectivism versus subjectivism, realism versus antirealism, realism versus constructionism, and so forth; the list could easily be extended. The controversy over truth is frequently presented as a choice between two incompatible commitments. Depending on one's field or discipline, that choice is sometimes forced and inescapable.

There are, admittedly, different domains of inquiry – scientific, legal, moral, literary, and aesthetic – and the nature of the controversy over truth varies accordingly. When that controversy concerns moral inquiry, the feelings of skepticism and cynicism tend to be far more pronounced. For many, the very idea that there could be such a thing as moral truth seems utterly preposterous. Even analytic philosophers, who are otherwise notorious for their staunch defense of objectivity and foundationalism, summarily dismiss the possibility of moral truth as metaphysical nonsense. G.E. Moore (1903/1993; 1912) long ago argued that 'good' was a non-natural property and that moral judgments were therefore insusceptible to proof or disproof. His student, C.L. Stevenson (1944), similarly rejected moral inquiry as a truth-apt discourse, insisting that moral assertions express mere emotions, desires, commands, and prohibitions. Bertrand Russell, perhaps the most famous of analytic philosophers, stated rather flatly that there is 'no property, analogous to "truth", that belongs or does not belong to an ethical judgment. This, it must be admitted, puts ethics in a different category from science' (Russell 1944/1999:148). Similarly, Willard Van Orman Quine, an immanent critic of analytic philosophy, argued that moral inquiry, unlike scientific inquiry, suffers from a 'methodological infirmity' (1981:63) that precludes the possibility of rationally resolving moral disagreements.

Given these views, it is not surprising that analytic philosophy largely confines itself to the purportedly neutral study of moral language, rejecting normative moral inquiry itself as a philosophically bankrupt enterprise. One could, moreover, find similarly dismissive views in the work of cultural anthropologists and Continental philosophers.³ Given the prevalence of such views, it is fitting to ask whether there is any merit to a rival view, one that affirms the possibility of moral inquiry as a rational and truth-apt discourse.

This paper concerns the place of truth in moral discourse: the communicative practice of resolving differences of moral judgment. It begins with the assumption that moral disagreements are an all-too-common feature of pluralistic societies, in which people of different cultures and traditions often cannot secure even provisional agreement over basic moral concerns. It further assumes that the public sphere is the principal arena in which the members of democratic societies can engage in moral discourse and attempt to persuade one another rationally to adopt one or another point of view or course of action. At the same time, it acknowledges that the commitment to public moral discourse faces a challenge by those who advance negative views concerning the possibility of moral truth. Just as there are those who affirm that rational, non-coercive moral debate is vital to the health of a functioning democracy and therefore deserving of our care and attention, there are others who maintain that such debate, especially when conducted across cultural boundaries, is bound to fail and even that such debate is altogether undesirable. How should one respond to this type of argument?

The aim of this paper is to assess the two principal theses in which this argument appears: relativism and emotivism. Relativism is a millennia-old doctrine that has historically found expression in countless philosophical and not-so-philosophical arguments. Emotivism, by contrast, is a relatively more recent doctrine that has similarly found expression in various forms. Both relativism and emotivism challenge the claim that truth has a place in ethics. Although there have been notable refutations of relativism and emotivism, both

doctrines seem to hold a lasting appeal. Both enjoy considerable currency in contemporary thinking about ethics. Both will therefore be given careful treatment.

The significance of our judgments concerning the merits of the twin doctrines of relativism and emotivism ought to be made clear by the consequent form of moral deliberation that naturally follows from those judgments. If we reject the possibility of moral truth, then our natural inclination will be to adopt some non-rational mode of moral persuasion. If, however, we affirm the possibility of moral truth, then our commitment will be more likely to lie with some form of rational deliberation aimed at securing correct or, at the very least, rationally superior moral judgments. The distinction, as Misak (2004a) rightly notes, is between non-cognitive and cognitive modes of moral discourse.

Cognitive modes of moral discourse are curiously opposed by two otherwise incompatible contemporary movements. They are opposed, in the first instance, by that amorphous community of disillusioned Continental intellectuals who regard the systematic use of reason as metaphysical, tyrannical, and dangerously utopian. On this view, the 'force of the better argument' can never derive from impartial criteria; reason supposedly rests on biased foundations. A successful argument is therefore thought to be little more than an act of coercion. It is not uncommon for Continental intellectuals to regard faith in reason as a modern form of idolatry, one that blinds us from seeing the inextricable link between truth and power. Such blindness, they insist, can easily regress into dogmatism, authoritarianism and, ultimately, tyranny.⁴

The cognitive mode of moral discourse is regarded with similar hostility and suspicion by a growing culture of fideism in the West. That culture is represented only in part by the adherents of dogmatic religious traditions. As Alasdair MacIntyre rightly notes, 'there are plenty of secular fideists' (1988:5). What typifies the fideist, whether religious or secular, is an unquestioning allegiance to certain first principles, next to which the use of reason either falls second or is

rejected as altogether irrelevant. Fideists see rational argumentation 'not as expressions of rationality, but as weapons', which can easily be deployed by the rhetorically skilled and gifted to 'dominate the dialectically unfluent and inarticulate' (MacIntyre, *ibid*). Faith is therefore given to tradition and authority, which for the fideist serve as the final and ultimate court of appeal.

There is, then, a strong concordance between two very different cultural movements concerning the value of rational moral discourse. The first rejects truth completely and therefore regards the search for truth as barren. The second resolutely affirms truth, but insists that it can only be found through tradition and authority. The consequence of both views is a like impatience for rational argumentation. The two movements therefore unwittingly collaborate toward a common end, namely, the undermining of cognitive modes of moral discourse. One poses a challenge in theory, whereas the other poses that challenge in practice. If, however, it can be shown that a commitment to truth is an inescapable part of ordinary human communication, then the cognitive approach to moral discourse will at least have some basic foundation. That is precisely what this paper intends to accomplish.

2. Relativism and Incommensurability

Moral relativism is, in the words of philosopher Donald Davidson, a 'heady and exotic doctrine' (2001:183). As a theoretical concept, it has notable defenders amongst philosophers, literary critics, and anthropologists. It also assumes the form of a moral charge, one that is frequently leveled not just in the specialized forums of academic debate, but also in the more public forums of social and political debate. To be accused of moral relativism is to be branded as somehow morally defective or impaired. It almost invariably touches a strong chord, regardless of the particular context in which the charge is made. Moral relativism seems to have become a part our public vocabulary, which

perhaps explains its power to generate so much offense and controversy.

As stated earlier, the doctrine of relativism is hardly new. In the Western world, it extends back at least as far as the fourth century BCE; specifically, in the thought of the ancient Greek Sophists. Plato records one of the most famous expressions of relativism in his *Theaetetus*, in which Protagoras is attributed with the famous saying, 'Man is the measure of all things'. It was precisely the subordination of truth to rational argument, rather than the subordination of rational argument to truth, that earned the Sophists so much notoriety during their time. Both Plato and Aristotle regarded the Sophists as a public menace and therefore attempted to refute them by demonstrating how their trade amounted to deceptive argumentation (McCoy 2008; Schreiber 2003).

It was not until the late sixteenth century that the Renaissance philosopher and humanist, Michel de Montaigne (d. 1592) developed the first modern account of moral and cultural relativism. According to Maria Baghramian (2004), Montaigne could properly be described as '[t]he most notable proponent of both skepticism and relativism in the early modern period' (51). Having studied numerous travel journals in the hopes of improving his understanding of human cultures and to expand French humanism's celebrated *discours sur l'homme*, Montaigne starkly concluded that '[e]ach man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice, for indeed we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in' (Montaigne 1958:150). Baghramian notes that, under the influence of Montaigne, the relativist impulse could be found in several notable figures of the French Enlightenment, including Voltaire, Diderot, and Montesquieu (58).

The doctrine of relativism was also developed by several thinkers of the counter-Enlightenment. These notably included Giambattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamann, Johann Gottfried von Herder, and Wilhelm von Humboldt (Baghramian, 66). Vico, for example, argued that morality is not fixed and timeless, but rather historically situated in a

great multiplicity of social and cultural contexts. Similarly, Herder maintained that every cultural community has a distinct identity and collective consciousness. Although cultures are shaped and influenced by specific historical circumstances, the binding force of a culture is language. Herder believed that cultures were hermetically sealed off from one another by virtue of the internal system of meanings imposed by language. Hence, the members of one culture could not use their local standards and frames of reference to judge or even understand another culture. The relativism of Vico and Herder exerted considerable influence upon twentieth century liberalism, due in no small measure to the popular biographical studies produced by Sir Isaiah Berlin, himself a prominent liberal intellectual whose own brand of political philosophy was heavily indebted to Vico and Herder's relativist views (1976, 2000).

In more recent academic philosophy, one finds influential accounts of moral relativism in the work of Richard Brandt, John Ladd, J.L. Mackie, Gilbert Harman and David Wong. In his study of Hopi ethics, Brandt (1959) observes that there are countless rituals and practices amongst the Hopi that cannot but be unintelligible to an outsider. Any attempt to understand a particular action or practice by the standards of an outside culture is bound to lead to a tragic misunderstanding. Although one might regard a particular practice internal to Hopi culture as morally reprehensible, one would not reach such a moral judgment if one were to reason through the moral categories afforded by the Hopi worldview. On this basis, Brandt believes that we have no means for comparing the different ethical systems of human cultures. In much the same vein, Ladd's (1957) study of Navajo ethics leads him to conclude that there are no cross-cultural standards on which to base strong moral judgments (1973).

Mackie (1977) argues that there are no objective values. Rather, right and wrong are 'invented' to deal with evolving human situations. Although he does not reject the possibility of a practical ethics, he does argue that moral assertions do not correspond to anything in the natural world and are therefore always an error, that is to say, false.

Mackie is therefore commonly associated with the so-called 'error theory' of ethics. Harman (1977, 1996) takes a slightly different approach, insisting that moral imperatives cannot be supported by reasons. According to Harman, there were no reasons for Hitler *not* to have carried out his program of mass-extirmination, just as there are no reasons today for an ordinary office worker not to steal from his or her employer. Each individual has a private, internal system of moral justification, such that no external moral reasons can be brought to bear against his or her choices. One could prevent a certain type of behaviour by appealing to practical consequences, but not by appeal to moral reasons. Harman therefore believes that moral discourse aimed at resolving differences of normative judgment is bound to be empty. Wong (1984) takes a more moderate approach. He affirms that there can be true moralities, but that each morality is limited to a particular community. Although we may very well regard certain moral imperatives as having universal value, there nonetheless are certain cases of moral disagreements that cannot be resolved by appeal to a 'single true morality' (Wong 1984:188).

In twentieth century cultural anthropology, one also finds influential accounts of moral relativism in the work of Franz Boas, Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, and Margaret Mead. According to Cook (1999:51-55), Boas had incorporated cultural relativism as a key methodological principle in his anthropological research and insisted that all anthropologists do the same. Boas had taken to task certain predecessors, such as E.B. Tylor, for understanding and evaluating human cultures according to the standards of Western societies. Boas objected to this practice on the grounds that it was simply bad anthropology. Boas's cultural relativism, it should be noted, was not specifically concerned with meta-ethical conclusions.

Herskovits (1972), himself a student of Boas, maintained that our standards of moral evaluation are always determined by our culture. He firmly believed that moral absolutism has no empirical basis. Such absolutism presupposes a fixed and timeless morality, the very idea of which is undermined by the astonishing diversity of human cultures.

Cultural relativism is therefore the only sensible attitude toward morality. In a more openly ecumenical spirit, Benedict argued that 'a more realistic social faith' would acknowledge and embrace the 'equally valid patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence' (1934:278). Benedict's views cross from mere description of what is and is not possible in moral discourse to what ought to be the case in the face of moral diversity.

Although the fields of academic philosophy and cultural anthropology have distinct methods and objects of inquiry, there is considerable theoretical overlap concerning the subject matter of ethics. According to Michelle Moody-Adams (1997), both groups are typically committed to two distinct types of relativism. First, they typically share a commitment to *descriptive cultural relativism*, according to which all cultures are fundamentally different and therefore generate fundamental moral conflicts (Moody-Adams 1997:15). Descriptive cultural relativism is a decidedly empirical claim, as it 'purports to state an observable fact' (ibid). Second, relativists in both fields typically share a commitment to *meta-ethical relativism*, according to which there is no method for rationally and impartially adjudicating rival and competing moral claims (ibid: 16). Meta-ethical relativism, although supported by empirical research, is a decidedly theoretical claim. There is, in addition, a third type of relativism to which cultural anthropologists, such as Ruth Benedict, are typically committed, namely, *normative ethical relativism*. According to this view, all cultures are equal and should therefore be given equal treatment (ibid: 17). Normative ethical relativists champion the principle of tolerance, which they justify on the basis of the purported equality of cultures.

Moody-Adams points out that those cultural anthropologists who make this third commitment see moral relativism as a powerful weapon against Western ethnocentrism. In their view, acceptance of moral relativism implies a commitment to a democratic and egalitarian ethos. Relativism is therefore regarded as an important step to global peace and harmony. As Moody-Adams notes, those cultural anthropologists who uphold normative ethical relativism worry that 'a willingness to

engage in moral criticism of another culture may be the entering wedge of the imperialist wedge – the beginning of an attempt to *impose* disputed values forcefully on those who accept that culture' (1997:24-25; emphasis in the original). By defending the equality of cultures, they supposedly preempt and neutralize the potentially damaging effects of cultural criticism. Hence, there is a clear political motive behind their relativist convictions.

A slightly different account of the relativist thesis is offered by Alasdair MacIntyre (1999). According to MacIntyre, there are four consecutive stages to the relativist thesis. The first stage is to point to the multiplicity of 'culturally embodied systems of thought and action, each with its own standards of practical reasoning and evaluation' (MacIntyre 1999:81). In this stage, the relativist argues that not only do rival systems of thought and action often result in rival and incompatible moral judgments, but also that the modes of reasoning and justification internal to each system are themselves different and incompatible. The moral judgments of any given system are therefore deficient by the standards and criteria of another. In the second stage, the relativist argues that there are no timeless and universal criteria or methods of inquiry independent of all such systems by which to undertake an impartial evaluation of rival and competing judgments or claims to truth. As MacIntyre points out, unless one can demonstrate the existence of such criteria or methods – a task that has thus far proved entirely futile – it is difficult to disagree with the relativist up to this point.

The third stage of the relativist thesis is to argue that the very acknowledgement of the multiplicity of systems of thought and action 'provides grounds for putting in question and altering one's view of the justification of one's own reasoning and conclusions' (MacIntyre, *ibid*). Put simply, one can no longer confidently have faith in the superiority of one's own standpoint. The fourth and final stage is to reject 'the claims of any substantive conception of truth' (*ibid*). Not only are substantive claims to truth rejected, but the very possibility of a positive theory of truth is itself rejected. It is in this fourth stage that the

relativist characteristically argues for something like the equal validity of all judgments or claims to truth.⁵

As MacIntyre notes elsewhere (1984:8), this type of argument has its parallel in the philosophy of science. It can be found, for example, in the work of the American philosopher and historian of science, Thomas Kuhn. In his much-debated book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962/1996), Kuhn argues that the principal feature of a scientific revolution is not a seamless shift or transition from one scientific 'paradigm' to the next, but rather a fundamental rupture in scientific thinking. When an established paradigm is confronted by a rival and 'incommensurable' paradigm, there are no common premises or decision procedures adequate to the task of rationally resolving their conflicting scientific claims. In such disputes, appeals to deductive logic and conventional forms of evidence or empirical proof characteristically fail. The ensuing breakdown in rational scientific discourse is such that the adherents of rival and incommensurable paradigms are forced to employ non-rational methods of persuasion to win each other over to their respective points of view.

A similar, though far more extreme, argument can be found in the work of Paul Feyerabend, author of such controversial books as *Against Method: Outline of an Anarchist Theory of Knowledge* (1975/1993) and *Science in a Free Society* (1978). Feyerabend believes that society as a whole is being imprisoned by fixed methods of inquiry that thwart creativity and free thinking. He sees fixed methods as oppressive, suffocating, and ultimately debilitating. Feyerabend's subversive tactic of undermining the authority of such methods is twofold: first, by arguing that there is no timeless scientific method and, second, to poke incessant fun at those who cling to or demand fixed methods. Whereas Kuhn's work is primarily historical and descriptive, Feyerabend goes much further and openly endorses scientific anarchy; that is, he refuses to accord a privileged status to any principle or method. In his view, anything goes – literally. It should be noted that the type of pluralism and equality defended by Feyerabend sharply resembles the equality of cultures defended by cultural anthropologists.

Both Kuhn and Feyerabend are among the most notable defenders of the incommensurability thesis. As Richard Bernstein (1983) notes, we can extract from Kuhn and Feyerabend at least three essential features of scientific incommensurability – features that one might presume have a parallel in ethics. First, the adherents of rival and incommensurable paradigms will disagree with one another about the problems to be solved. Second, the concepts of one paradigm have fundamentally different relationships in the organizational matrix of another. Third and most importantly, the adherents of rival and incommensurable paradigms organize their basic experiences of the world so differently that one often cannot even see what the other claims to see. This third feature explains why rational argumentation alone is inadequate to the task of demonstrating the validity of a given paradigm. To get an outsider to interpret the world through one's theoretical lens requires a gestalt switch typical of the conversion experiences that often occur outside the formal domain of science.

Yet another type of relativist argument can be found in Willard Van Orman Quine's (1969) thesis of conceptual relativity. Whereas Kuhn and Feyerabend address the problem of perception and the organization of experience solely within the formal domain of science, Quine argues that human experience in general is determined by a 'conceptual scheme'. According to Quine, there can be no intelligible experience independent of human languages. As each language is structured differently, we cannot have access to those experiences shaped by languages we have not learned. Moreover, there are concepts from one language or conceptual scheme that cannot be afforded a place in a different language or conceptual scheme. To take a concept from one scheme and attempt to talk about it in the language of another would result in a fatal misinterpretation; fatal because the foreign concept would not survive translation. Quine is therefore commonly associated with the so-called untranslatability thesis, according to which translation from one language to another, or one conceptual scheme to another, is effectively impossible. Although Quine's argument does not have any specific ethical or political

conclusions, it has been interpreted as a challenge to the possibility of intercultural communication.⁶

The three types of argument outlined above – the argument for the relativity of systems of thought and action, the argument for the incommensurability of paradigms, and the argument for conceptual relativity – clearly have their articulate and intelligent spokespersons. However, they also have a very famous critic in the form of one of Quine's own students, the philosopher Donald Davidson. In his widely cited essay, *On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme* (1974/2001), Davidson argues that the doctrine of relativism might seem very well irrefutable were it not for one serious problem, namely, that those who defend this 'heady and exotic doctrine' seem to have no difficulty in understanding and describing precisely those alien cultures, scientific paradigms, and conceptual schemes about which we apparently cannot have any understanding or for which we cannot offer any working description. As he puts it, 'Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom', while Quine seems to have no problem giving us 'a feel for the "pre-individuative phase in the evolution of our conceptual scheme"' (Davidson 1974/2001:184). According to Davidson, even to identify relativism as a problem necessarily presupposes a standpoint or perspective that negates the problem itself. Davidson describes the situation as follows:

The dominant metaphor of conceptual relativism, that of different points of view, seems to betray an underlying paradox. Different points of view make sense, but only if there is a common co-ordinate system on which to plot them; yet the existence of a common system belies the claim of dramatic incomparability. What we need, it seems, is some idea of the considerations that set the limits to conceptual contrast. There are extreme suppositions that founder on paradox or contradiction; there are modest examples we have no trouble understanding. What determines where we cross

from the merely strange or novel to the absurd? (Davidson 1974/2001:184)

What is at issue, then, is not conceptual difference, but intelligibility. That we cannot find certain cultures or conceptual schemes fully intelligible should not, Davidson insists, be taken as evidence of either the absence of common standards or of complete unintelligibility. Charles Taylor offers the following interpretation of Davidson's argument:

[T]otal unintelligibility of another culture is not an option. To experience another group as unintelligible over some range of their practices, we have to find them quite intelligible over other (very substantial) ranges. We have to be able to understand them as framing intentions, carrying out actions, trying to communicate orders, truths, and so forth. If we imagine even this away, then we no longer have the basis that allows us to recognize them as agents. But then there's nothing left to be puzzled about. Concerning nonagents, there is no question about what they are up to and hence no possibility of being baffled on this score. (Taylor 2002:291)

Although he does not cite Davidson, the literary critic Terry Eagleton expresses a very similar point by stating that

only someone with whom you can communicate can affirm their difference from you. Only within some kind of common framework is conflict possible. [...] Difference, therefore, presupposes affinity. (Eagleton 2003:159)

Brice Watcherhauser, a commentator on the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, offers still another argument in this vein: 'Even to be aware of others as occupying a different normative space of inquiry requires that their space and ours not be completely sealed off from one another' (Watcherhauser 2002:64).

At the heart of Davidson's argument, then, is the contention that all disagreement is necessarily parasitic upon some larger, generally unacknowledged, background of agreement. The more emphatically we disagree with one another, the stronger the degrees of cultural or conceptual overlap that afford the very possibility of such disagreement. If this argument is correct, then it throws the theses of cultural relativism, incommensurability of paradigms, and conceptual relativity in question – and this even prior to any empirical evidence to the contrary. The very concept of relativism would no longer make sense, for it unwittingly presupposes what it explicitly denies, namely, common standards for comparison and evaluation.

MacIntyre (1988) concurs on this point. He notes that moral relativism in the post-Enlightenment era began as a challenge to modern liberalism's claim to have achieved a neutral and impartial standard from which to determine the validity or lack of validity for a given moral claim. Relativism rejects this possibility and therefore insists that no one particular moral claim can be judged superior to a competing moral claim. As MacIntyre observes, relativism unwittingly collaborates with the Enlightenment mode of reasoning, to which it is in principle opposed, by assuming that either there are objective standards for comparative evaluation or there are no standards at all for such evaluation. What relativism does not allow is the possibility of contingent standards of evaluation *internal to competing systems of thought*. Yet, in pronouncing the equal validity of competing claims to truth, relativism presupposes a neutral and impartial standard from which to pronounce such validity. It is, after all, unclear how equality could be determined in the absence of any standards of evaluation. The relativist thesis precludes the possibility of such standards, rendering judgments of equality effectively impossible. In the absence of such standards, though, the relativist has robbed him- or herself of the possibility even to speak about moral disagreements. At most, he or she can only acknowledge a multiplicity of moral claims. Beyond that, however, silence is the only option. As MacIntyre puts it, to be a relativist is 'to be in a state of intellectual and moral destitution, a condition from

which it is impossible to issue the relativist challenge' (1988:367). The relativist thesis is therefore 'not so much a conclusion about truth as an exclusion from it and thereby from rational debate' (368).

It should in fairness be stated that Davidson and MacIntyre's rejection of the relativist thesis does not logically imply that rival and competing claims to truth can be rationally resolved and, if so, how. MacIntyre, for one, acknowledges that the inescapable degree of conceptual overlap required for meaningful disagreements might very well be 'insufficient to resolve those disagreements' (1988:351). If, however, Davidson and MacIntyre's respective arguments against relativism are sound, at the very least, they would afford the possibility of an initial starting point for moral inquiry. They would give the very idea of such inquiry point and purpose, neither of which is possible if the relativist thesis is uncritically taken at face value. However, as I shall argue later, a viable theory of inquiry requires that all disagreements are, in principle, rationally resolvable.

3. Emotivism

As Hilary Putnam (2002) notes, the roots of emotivism originate in two key philosophical distinctions central to the thought of David Hume. Hume had insisted that 'matters of fact' should be distinguished from 'relations of ideas', thereby giving rise to the famous analytic-synthetic distinction.⁷ According to this view, matters of fact are true by virtue of being objectively true, that is to say, true regardless of what we as perceiving subjects might apprehend. Relations of ideas, on the other hand, are true by virtue of their internal logic and definition. For example, the claim that the sun is larger than the earth would be a matter of fact, and therefore true regardless of whether there were any perceiving subjects to apprehend it. On the other hand, the claim that all squares have four sides is true by virtue of the definition of a square. Hume argued that empirical claims can ultimately be justified by

appealing to either matters of fact or relations of ideas as foundational premises.

What Hume emphatically rejected, however, was the possibility that a normative claim could logically derive from an empirical claim. He insisted that no 'ought' can ever derive from an 'is'. Moral philosophers might imagine that they could provide for their moral beliefs something akin to the naturalistic explanations found in the natural sciences. Such philosophers might very well imagine that 'good', 'bad', 'right', and 'wrong' are natural or intrinsic properties which exist independently of perceiving subjects. Hume, however, held such philosophers to be in grave error, arguing that what they held to be natural or intrinsic properties were, in fact, expressions of innate moral sentiments. Judgments of value, therefore, had to be understood as fundamentally different from judgments of fact, a distinction that came to be known as the fact-value dichotomy.⁸

In the early twentieth century, the logical positivists sought to demarcate legitimate domains of inquiry by imposing final and ultimate standards of truth and meaning. They argued that the only legitimate types of inquiry were those based on empirical – that is to say, observational – evidence. Any type of truth-claim that could not be confirmed on the basis of empirical evidence had to be discarded as metaphysical, barren, and meaningless. The realm of truth was therefore limited to that which could be detected by the senses, a criterion descending directly from Hume. On this view, not only were such domains of inquiry as theology and metaphysics held to be meaningless, but philosophical ethics was notably also held to be effectively meaningless and therefore devoid of truth-aptness. Rudolf Carnap, one of the leading figures of the Vienna Circle, expressed this point in *The Unity of Science*, which served as a veritable handbook of positivist principles:

All statements belonging to Metaphysics, regulative Ethics, and (metaphysical) Epistemology have this defect, are in fact unverifiable and, therefore, unscientific. In the Viennese Circle, we

are accustomed to describe such statements as nonsense (after Wittgenstein). This terminology is to be understood as implying a logical, not say a psychological distinction; its use is intended to assert only that the statements in question do not possess a certain logical characteristic common to all proper scientific statements; we do not intend to assert the impossibility of associating any conceptions or images with these logically invalid statements. Conceptions can be associated with any arbitrarily compounded series of words; and metaphysical statements are richly evocative of associations and feelings both in authors and readers. (Carnap quoted in Putnam, 2002:18)

Carnap was an accomplished philosopher of language in addition to being a philosopher of science. Although his writings do not contain many discussions on ethics, they were the inspiration for the positivist theory of emotivism.

At its core, emotivism holds that moral assertions are not claims to truth. Rather, moral assertions are no more than expressions of personal preference. Precisely because expressions of personal preference cannot be the object of disagreement, a cognitive mode of moral inquiry is not a possibility available to us. We must therefore live with the uncomfortable fact that no moral standpoint is rationally superior to another, for there are no substantive claims to be vindicated. All we have are competing preferences and emotions.

Among the earliest advocates of emotivism were the Cambridge intellectuals, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, the former a philosopher of language and the latter a distinguished literary critic. Together, they developed a general theory of meaning (Ogden and Richards 1923), which borrowed from the field of psychology and which was not exclusively concerned with the meaning of moral assertions. On the question of moral assertions, however, they accepted G.E. Moore's contention that moral terms such as 'good' and 'bad' did not correspond to any natural property. They therefore concluded that such

terms could only be expressions of psychological states, which presumably were devoid of propositional content.

The classical account of emotivism, however, was articulated by C.L. Stevenson (1944), a student of Moore's. Stevenson's study distinguishes between different types of disagreement, arguing that disagreement in the natural sciences is amenable to rational resolution through the use of reason, logic, and evidence. Moral disagreement, however, is not similarly amenable. The principal characteristic of moral disagreement is a clash of competing wills and non-cognitive feelings, such that no reason, logic, or evidence can be brought to bear against a rival moral point of view. Whereas disagreement in science stems from differences of 'belief', disagreement in ethics stems from differences in 'attitude', the latter again being categorically devoid of propositional content. As Stevenson puts it,

The two kinds of disagreement differ mainly in this respect: the former is concerned with how matters are truthfully to be described and explained; the latter is concerned with how they are to be favored or disfavored, and hence with how they are to be shaped by human efforts. (Stevenson 1944:4)

Although Stevenson affirms the possibility of moral beliefs, he maintains that such beliefs are predicated upon non-rational attitudes. As such, moral beliefs cannot be held in the same category as scientific beliefs, which are presumably rational to the core, even if potentially false.

The consequence of this argument is that moral assertions are not, in fact, assertions at all. By definition, assertions are claims to truth.⁹ According to Stevenson, however, although moral claims commonly take the form of assertions, in actual linguistic practice they function as the expression of commands, prohibitions, desires, feelings, and personal preferences. His 'working models' for the analysis of moral discourse include the following oft-cited examples:

- (1) 'This is wrong' means I disapprove of this; do so as well.
- (2) 'He ought to do this' means I disapprove of his leaving this undone; do so as well.
- (3) 'This is good' means I approve of this; do so as well.
(Stevenson 1944:21; emphasis in the original)

What Stevenson provides, then, is a theory of meaning, albeit a theory of meaning for a particular type of utterance. The significance of that theory concerns the central feature that distinguishes moral claims from scientific claims. As Stevenson says,

Ethical statements have a meaning that is approximately, and in part, imperative. The imperative meaning explains why ethical judgments are so intimately related to agreement and disagreement in attitude, and helps to indicate how normative ethics can be distinguished from psychology and the natural sciences. (Stevenson 1944:26)

As a clash of imperatives cannot be resolved by rational argument, persuasion of a decidedly non-rational kind is therefore central to moral discourse. Stevenson even goes so far as to distinguish the legitimate 'persuasive methods' of a bona fide moralist from the illegitimate techniques of a propagandist (243-253; 332-335). Stevenson's study clearly indicates the practical consequences of adopting an explicitly non-cognitive view of moral discourse: the demotion of rational argumentation.

Another influential account of emotivism can be found in the work of A.J. Ayer (1952). Like Stevenson before him, Ayer maintains the moral disagreements are fundamentally different from disagreements in the natural sciences. For Ayer, facts do have a place in moral discourse. Moral judgments are tied to, though not necessarily logically derived from, facts. There cannot, however, be such a thing as a moral fact. So,

for example, one may say that because arson can lead to the death of innocent people, we therefore ought not to commit arson. In this case, a moral judgment is predicated upon an empirical fact. According to Ayer, though, the judgment itself is not a fact. Disagreement in moral discourse is possible only insofar as facts are concerned. Two people may legitimately disagree about whether or not arson can lead to the death of innocent people. As for competing value judgments, however, there is no possibility of disagreement or 'formal contradiction' (Ayer 1952:22). In the face of clashing moral judgments, 'there is no sense in asking which of the conflicting views is true. For, since the expression of a value judgment is not a proposition, the question of truth or falsehood does not here arise' (ibid). Ayer allows for the possibility of assertions concerning one's feelings, but rejects the possibility that moral assertions could have propositional content. So, for example, I might legitimately assert, 'It is my belief that arson is bad'. Such a sentence would, on Ayer's account, have propositional content and therefore be true. If, on the other hand, I were to assert, 'Arson is bad', there could be no propositional content to affirm as true; it would be no more than the expression of my personal feeling about arson.

Related to, though in substance quite different from, emotivism is Richard Rorty's deeply controversial view that truth is not a norm of inquiry in ordinary linguistic practice and that it ought not to be regarded or treated as such. A staunch critic of analytic philosophy, from its defining methods and principles to its ultimate aims and intentions, Rorty has long argued that holding truth as a norm of inquiry is not unlike faith in a false deity. By holding ourselves to a norm or standard that, like God, does not exist, we are guilty of unwittingly subscribing to metaphysics. Intellectual maturity demands that we shed the false preconception that truth somehow underlies inquiry. Instead, the only standards to which we in practice should hold ourselves are those of the different and changing audiences with whom we communicate. Justification, according to Rorty, is always justification *for an audience*. The audience is therefore our only relevant standard. As he puts it,

The need to justify our beliefs to ourselves and our fellow agents subjects us to norms, and obedience to these norms produces a behavioral pattern that we must detect in others before confidently attributing beliefs to them. But there seems to be no occasion to look for obedience to an *additional* norm – the commandment to seek the truth. For...obedience to that commandment will produce no behavior not produced by the need to offer justification. (Rorty 1998:26)

Not only is truth, then, not an inherent norm of inquiry, in practice a commitment to that norm makes no difference. For Rorty, a difference that makes no difference is a difference without value or meaning. Rorty maintains that there is no difference in practice between a commitment to truth and a commitment to justification. The former is merely a misguided, practical burden that fails to improve inquiry.

The parallel between emotivism and Rorty's negative views on truth concern the practical consequences for justificatory reasoning. Despite Rorty's claims to the contrary, critics have pointed out that abandoning the commitment to truth does indeed lead to at least one obvious practical difference, namely, the collapse of the distinction between assertions and expressions of preference, and the inevitable shift toward non-cognitive modes of communication (Price 2003; Misak 2004a). Rorty himself has acknowledged that he sees little difference between logic and rhetoric, or between 'convincing' and 'persuading' (Rorty 2006:70).

As stated before, there is an enduring appeal to the emotivist theory of the meaning of moral assertions, as well as to Rorty's view on truth. One seems intuitively correct, whereas the other poses a robust philosophical challenge to an ideal it has become increasingly fashionable to attack. However, a fair assessment of both views strongly suggests critical shortcomings that provide sufficient grounds for rejecting them.

Hilary Putnam (2002) has shown that the fact/value dichotomy on which logical positivism and, later, emotivism were based is

philosophically incoherent. As he points out, Carnap sought in vain to find the basic units of truth and meaning that could serve as the fundamental building blocks of all knowledge. Carnap initially believed he had successfully found those basic units in 'facts'. A fact, on his view, was a collectible item that supposedly exists apart from a theory-laden vocabulary or interpretive lens. Carnap held that we could identify facts through the five senses, which served as a neutral court of appeal. The senses could effectively determine without a shadow of doubt whether or not a given claim was factually accurate. This belief, of course, had two obvious consequences. First, the range of claims that could be adjudicated by the five senses was extremely narrow, being limited to sense impressions generated by the physical environment. Secondly, it excluded even those claims that concerned the physical environment, but which could not be grasped without a theoretical vocabulary. So, for example, it might be argued that we do not require language to apprehend the existence of a tree. However, we certainly do require language to apprehend the existence of atoms, subatomic particles, molecules, different types of energy undetectable by the senses, and so forth. Carnap was thus forced to acknowledge that we do indeed require a theoretical vocabulary to adjudicate countless empirical truth claims and that sensory observation alone was manifestly inadequate to serve this vital adjudicatory function. His search for a final and ultimate criterion of truth, therefore, proved to be in vain.

Putnam, however, points out an even more serious omission on the part of Carnap and his logical positivist colleagues: the inescapable intertwinement of judgments of fact and judgments of value. Whereas Carnap had insisted on expelling judgments of value from all inquiry, Putnam has shown that, in practice, there can be no absolute separation between fact and value. According to the principle of verification – a principle central to not only Carnap, but to pragmatist philosophers like Charles Peirce and William James – without standards and criteria for determining or verifying the truth of a given assertion, we have no reason to regard that assertion as a claim to truth. The verification

principle, however, raises a number of critical questions. For example, on whose authority do we select the relevant standards and criteria for verifying a given claim to truth? In the event of a disagreement as to the relevant standards and criteria, on what basis do we resolve such disagreements? That is to say, by what standards and criteria do we resolve disagreements about standards and criteria? If theories are designed to adjudicate rival and competing claims, how do we resolved disputes about rival and competing theories?

As Putnam notes, the search for a universal algorithm adequate to the task of theory-selection has proved entirely elusive. Carnap searched in vain for such an algorithm. Karl Popper also notably tried, but failed. The reason for this failure, Putnam points out, concerns the very principle of a neutral algorithm and its impossible requirement of a complete divestment of value judgments. Each and every attempt to verify the truth of a given truth claim will ultimately rest on standards which themselves have not been subjected to verification. If we attempt to verify or validate our operative standards, we could only do so by appeal to further standards, still. The principle of verification then only reintroduces itself at every level of meta-analysis. It does so again and again, leading to an infinite regress for which there is no conceivable terminus. Putnam has shown that among the foundational standards upon which we adjudicate rival and competing claims to truth are, indeed, value judgments. Such judgments are, of course, epistemic value judgments and not ethical judgments of the kind we associate with moral discourse, but they are value judgments nonetheless.

Epistemic values in theory-selection have notably included 'coherence', 'plausibility', 'reasonableness', 'simplicity', and 'elegance' (Putnam 2002:141). In selecting one theory over another on the basis of simplicity or elegance, we in effect hold that we *ought* to select the theory with greater simplicity or elegance. There are, moreover, judgments that one would not ordinarily associate with scientific inquiry. For example, Paul Dirac, one of the founders of quantum mechanics, famously argued for 'beauty' as a criterion for the truth of a scientific or mathematical theory. Werner Heisenberg also reported the

vital role that aesthetic insight played in his discovery of quantum theory. According to a study by Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar (1990), a Nobel laureate in physics, aesthetic judgments have played a key role in the most quantitatively rigorous scientific disciplines.

Putnam, of course, was not the first to point out the intertwinement of fact and value. This observation had already been the defining principle for the American Pragmatists. As Putnam points out, Charles Peirce, the founder of American Pragmatism, held epistemic value judgments to be "'admirable" in the way of scientific inquiry' (Peirce quoted in Putnam 2002:135). Other pragmatist philosophers, such as William James, A.E. Singer, and C. West Churchman, had long argued that facts and values presuppose one another. Moreover, non-pragmatist philosophers, such as Hans Reichenbach and Morton White, rejected the search for a neutral algorithm as inherently self-defeating. White, in particular, challenged Quine's view that values are non-cognitive and that they therefore have no place in scientific inquiry (ibid. 136-137).

An acknowledgement of the intertwinement of judgments of fact and value has two significant consequences. The first is the breakdown of the fact/value dichotomy. The second is the breakdown of Hume's long-standing principle that no 'ought' can ever derive from an 'is'. Facts are not only theory-laden; they are also and especially value-laden. It is therefore impossible to construct knowledge on the basis of theory- and value-independent premises. There is, however, a third consequence of particular significance for the purposes of the present argument: the positivist premise on which the emotivist theory of ethics rested can no longer be regarded as valid. If fact and value are intertwined, there is no valid reason for thinking that disagreements in scientific and moral inquiry are fundamentally or radically different. There is no basis for thinking that disagreement in science can be resolved by appeal to purely impartial standards. There is, similarly, no basis for thinking that disagreements in ethics stem from purely arbitrary preferences. If moral judgments do indeed presuppose facts, then moral inquiry cannot be the purely arbitrary practice it has been

held to be by emotivist philosophers. Moreover, if we accept that value judgments are indeed legitimate standards, then it is equally invalid to claim that moral inquiry is bereft of standards.

The recognition of the intertwinement of fact and value does not, of course, in itself suggest that differences of value can be easily resolved by appeal to black and white standards. It does not suggest that moral inquiry resembles anything like what Carnap had envisioned for scientific inquiry. Rather, as Putnam has argued, the distinction is not between absolute arbitrariness and absolute impartiality, yet another long-standing distinction that Putnam's own pragmatism would dismiss as badly outmoded. The values and standards to which we appeal in resolving rival and competing claims to truth are always *operative* and *contingently valid*, regardless of the given domain of inquiry.

Putnam's critique of the fact/value dichotomy, of course, is only leveled at one foundational premise of the emotivist theory. It does not address Rorty's broader contention that truth is not a norm of inquiry, a contention whose strong implications extend far beyond moral inquiry in particular to inquiry *in toto*, including scientific and legal inquiry.¹⁰ A more direct and serious challenge both to emotivism and to Rorty's views on truth has been made by the pragmatist philosopher Huw Price. In a detailed analysis of the role of assertions in ordinary linguistic practice, Price (2003) has convincingly demonstrated that truth is indeed a norm to which language users are inescapably bound. Without a commitment to truth in practice, the bulk of human communication as we know it would cease to be purposeful or intelligible.

Price begins his critique by acknowledging that Rorty accepts that there are indeed norms in ordinary linguistic practice, but that truth is not one of those norms. According to Rorty, the most significant norm in human communication is that of justification. Purportedly in the spirit of pragmatism, however, Rorty holds that adding a third norm, that of truth, makes no practical difference to communicative practices. Rorty does endorse what he calls the 'cautionary use' of truth, according to which speakers might very well acknowledge that justification is not

the end of inquiry. If justification is relative to an audience, and if the audience evolves, then justification itself might very well evolve. This does not, however, mean that we hold ourselves to an audience-independent norm called 'truth'.

As Price rightly observes, Rorty's contentions about truth are clearly empirical and therefore empirically testable. If it is the case that adherence to the norm of truth brings about no significant behavioural consequences, then this could conceivably be confirmed by asking what communication would look like without a commitment to truth. Price notes that part of the problem in even asking questions about truth stems from our temptation to think of truth in strong metaphysical terms. We want badly to say what truth is. We want an analytic definition of truth with which to recognize it. This deep-seated impulse to capture the essence of truth is exemplified in realist accounts of truth that treat it as a natural property, analyzable in principle like any other natural property. Truth, however, is quite unlike natural properties precisely because any attempt to analyze it inevitably makes use of it. Truth informs and defines the very inquiry with which we seek to understand it.

Price also distances himself from the disquotationalist theory of truth, according to which truth is merely a 'grammatical device for disquotation', that is, for incorporating the truth predicate to a given proposition (2003:171). To say that a particular proposition is true is merely to add extra words to the proposition according to a particular grammatical format. Although greater emphasis is added to the original proposition, the meaning is substantially the same. Aside from the addition of words, no significant change of communicative practice is brought about. Disquotationalism is decidedly anti-realist in that it denies that truth is a substantial property that could conceivably be identified with something. Price argues that although disquotationalism rightly avoids the philosophical pitfalls of realism about truth, it fails to account for the significance of truth in ordinary linguistic practice.

In contrast to Rorty, Price maintains that a pragmatist approach to truth would examine its role in actual linguistic practice. Rather than

asking what truth consists of, pragmatism would ask 'explanatory' questions about its function, genealogy, and behavioural consequences. Prior to asking those questions, however, Price first defines the two other norms of human communication. The first of these is the norm of *subjective assertibility*, defined as follows:

A speaker is incorrect to assert that p if she does not believe that p; to assert that p in these circumstances provides *prima facie* grounds for censure, or disapprobation. (Price 2003:173)

The principle of subjective assertibility is simply that of sincerity. Although the conventions governing the consequences of breaching this principle vary from culture to culture, the norm is nonetheless inescapable. Price describes this principle as the 'weakest relevant norm' of communication, since it has little to do with impersonal truth.

The second norm is that of *personal warranted assertibility*, or justification. Put simply, a speaker will have available to him- or herself any given number of reasons for making a particular assertion. Those reasons inevitably vary according to circumstance. We can therefore maintain that under a given set of circumstances, a speaker was justified in making a particular assertion. Price defines the principle of personal warranted assertibility as follows:

A speaker is incorrect to assert that p if she does not have adequate (personal) grounds for believing that p; to assert that p in these circumstances provides *prima facie* grounds for censure. (Price 2003: 174)

The important point is that warranted assertibility is relative to personal circumstance, or what a speaker can rightly assert '*by her own current lights*' (ibid; emphasis in the original). Price distinguishes personal warranted assertibility with communal warranted assertibility, according to which what a speaker can rightly assert is accountable to the standards of a community. What might be justified on a personal basis might not be

so justified on a communal basis. In any case, in ordinary linguistic practice, the norm of justification is doubtless stronger than that of sincerity, as its behavioural consequences are more significant.¹¹

As Price argues, adherence to subjective assertibility and warranted assertibility, whether personal or communal, is insufficient to explain what we do when we seek the truth of a given matter. For one thing, upon second order reflection, we can easily see that what we thought was justified under certain circumstances might well turn out to be unjustified under other circumstances.¹² It is precisely this observation that gives substance to the hope of *improving* our beliefs. Without an additional norm to guide communication, a norm stronger than the first two, the very idea of improving our beliefs would be wholly unintelligible. As Price puts it, 'It would be as if we gave a student full marks in an exam, and then told him that he would have done better if his answers had agreed with those of other students' (174).

A third norm would have stronger normative implications and stronger consequences for breaching it. This third norm is that of truth, which Price defines as follows:

If not- p , then it is incorrect to assert that p ; if not- p , there are *prima facie* grounds for censure of an assertion that p . (Price 2003:175)

What distinguishes the third norm from the first two is the consequence of breaching it. If we assert p , we hold those who assert not- p to be in error, which implies that they stand in need of correction. A disquotationalist like Rorty might argue that introducing the third norm amounts to no more than repeating the original assertion with the addition of the truth predicate. Price argues otherwise. To those who assert not- p ,

[O]ur response is not merely re-assertion, or assertion of the negation of the original claim. If it were, it would involve no commendation or criticism of the original utterance. This non-normative alternative is hard to see, I think, because the norm in

question is so familiar and so basic. As a result, it is difficult to see the immense difference the norm makes to the character of disagreement. (Price 2003:176)

To appreciate fully the implications of Rorty's views on truth, we would have to imagine a speech community that did not adhere to the third norm; a community in which incompatible assertions could at most be given greater emphasis through the grammatical addition of the truth predicate, but for whom incompatibility provides no motivational grounds for continued dialogue aimed at securing a rational resolution.

In a speech community of this kind, assertions would not function as claims to truth; that is to say, what would ordinarily be classified as assertions would not be assertions at all. They would be no more than 'an expression of the speaker's opinion'. As Price rightly observes, 'The relevant idea is familiar in the case of expressions of *desires and preferences*' (ibid: 177; emphasis added). Although Price does not specifically mention emotivism, the type of community we are being asked to imagine is precisely the type of community described by emotivists, at least with regards to moral utterances. Price likens this community to a group of 'dedicated lunchers' at a restaurant, whose primary mode of communication is the expression of personal preference and whose language 'atrophies to the bare essentials' (ibid). We can expect to find the first and second norms, but not the third, for it would not even be recognized. Censure or disapprobation would be limited to a violation of the first two norms, but no one would seek to align their personal preferences with something called truth. There would be no intention for improving the accuracy of one's beliefs.

Price has elsewhere described the members of such a community as 'Mo'ans', those who perform a speech-act he calls 'merely opinionated assertion', or MOA (1998). The members of a Mo'an community would rest contented with sincerity and consistency of belief. There would be no drive or proclivity to improve one's beliefs by bringing them closer to the truth. One might be criticized for being insincere or inconsistent,

but not for making a false assertion. The very categories of truth and falsity would have no place in their conceptual imagination.

Part of the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of imagining how these dedicated lunchers could communicate with one another is due precisely to 'our almost irresistible urge to see the situation in terms of our own normative standards' (2003:178). Imagining such a linguistic community would not be unlike imagining a community whose members did not use verbs. We could begin the thought experiment, but only to realize that it is impossible even to complete it. The experiment smuggles in aspects of communication which themselves would not be possible without the key component of the third norm. That is to say, the three norms of communication are interdependent. In stronger terms, we might say that the first two norms are parasitic upon the norm of truth.

The most obvious practical difference between a Mo'an community and any actual linguistic community is that Mo'ans would be incapable of disagreeing with each other. The expression of competing preferences does not provide grounds for disagreement, for there would be no substantive assertion or claim to truth about which two or more parties could legitimately disagree.¹³ Contrary to what Rorty claims, then, the loss of the third norm would indeed bring about serious behavioural consequences. It would fundamentally change the nature of human communication. In order for a Mo'an community to be brought in line with actual linguistic communities, they would have to adopt the third norm. That is, if one asserts p , one would have to hold those who assert not- p in error 'independently of any grounds for thinking that that person fails one of the first two norms of assertibility' (Price 2003:179).

Price distinguishes between two accounts of the third norm: *passive* and *active*. According to the passive account, recognition of the possibility that our beliefs might be false 'create[s] the conceptual space for the idea of further improvement' (ibid: 180). According to the active account, the third norm provides the motivational ground for

continuing the dialogue and seeking to resolve differences of opinion. As he puts it,

The third norm makes what would otherwise be no-fault disagreements into unstable social situations, whose instability is only resolved by argument and consequent agreement – and it provides an immediate incentive for argument, in that it holds out to the successful arguer the reward consisting in her community's positive evaluation of her dialectical position. If reasoned argument is generally beneficial – beneficial in some long-run sense – then a community of Mo'ans who adopt this practice will tend to prosper, compared to a community who do not. (Price 2003:180-181)

This is not, of course, to suggest that disagreement will always result in continued dialogue. As a motivational factor, it may not result in one and the same reaction from every speaker. That, however, does not negate its motivational character. The motivation lies in the fact that, in practice, we do indeed want to be correct and want others to acknowledge that we are correct.

The third norm thrives on our natural instinct for bivalence, the principle that assertions are either true or false. This natural instinct is confirmed by practical experience, a 'primitive incompatibility between certain behavioral commitments of a single individual, which turns on the impossibility of both doing and not doing any given action A' (Price 2003:182). For example, we can either pay the fine for a parking violation or risk having our car impounded. Our practical experience tells we cannot do both, therefore feeding our conceptual yearning for bivalence.

Price describes the lesson of the Mo'an experiment as follows: 'Without truth, the wheels of argument do not engage; disagreements slide past one another. *This is true of disagreements about any matter whatsoever*' (ibid: 185; emphasis added). If Price is correct, then moral discourse lies perfectly within the cognitive mode of communication, for if disagreements matter, then of necessity, truth itself matters. Price

likens the mutual attempt to resolve a disagreement to a game, the goal of which is the rational vindication of one's standpoint. Each time we enter into assertoric dialogue – the type of dialogue Mo'ans are incapable of even recognizing – we evaluate the assertions of others and arrive at judgments concerning their truth or falsity.¹⁴ These are precisely the sorts of judgments that emotivists have overlooked in moral inquiry, and which Rorty has denied in inquiry in general.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have endeavored to show that truth has a place in moral discourse. My argument began with the premise that our views concerning the possibility of moral truth necessarily influence and shape the practice of moral discourse. Skepticism about the possibility of truth places an obvious barrier before the demands of systematic inquiry. I have argued that the two greatest challenges facing a cognitivist approach to moral inquiry are the theses of relativism and emotivism. I have tried to show that, despite what might be argued to the contrary, relativism and emotivism suffer from certain flaws which render them untenable arguments for a non-cognitive approach to moral discourse.

Relativism, along with its sister concept of incommensurability, both reveal upon careful scrutiny certain conceptual difficulties that render the argument not so much false as incoherent. The arguments of both Davidson and MacIntyre, though simple in structure, straightforwardly highlight that incoherence. Emotivism, on the other hand, is an empirical argument and, as such, liable to empirical disproof. Putnam has examined the positivist origins of emotivism and shown that the negative view concerning the place of truth in ethics stems from a misunderstanding about the relationship between facts and values. As Putnam has shown, fact and value are intertwined; it could not be any other way. Price, on the other hand, has offered a detailed examination of the place of truth in ordinary human

communication. According to Price, the concept of truth is presupposed in each and every discourse. The conclusion, then, is that truth does indeed have a place in moral discourse.

At this point, an important explanatory note is in order. Although the aim of this paper has been to affirm a place for truth in moral discourse, it has not endeavored to offer a model of moral discourse for rationally resolving moral disagreements. That is an altogether separate, and doubtless very challenging, enterprise. I would argue that a viable moral discourse would be attentive to the place of truth in actual linguistic practices and seek to ground agreement in the norms implicit in those practices. That is, of course, easier said than done. The seeds for this type of linguistically grounded model of moral discourse can be found in Price's argument. One might also argue that they can be found in Robert Brandom's theory of inferentialism.¹⁵ We are fortunate, however, to have a working version of precisely such a model in Misak (2000). Needless to say, however, if it cannot be denied that truth does indeed have a place in moral discourse, then there would seem to be no valid objection to adopting a formal method of argumentation.

*10 Scissons Road
Kanata, ON K2M 2X3
Canada*

Notes

- * I would like to thank Michael Dorland, Chris Dornan, and Marc Furstenau for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
- 1. Rightly or wrongly, this type of argument is commonly attributed to Michel Foucault. See, for example, Foucault (1980, 1984) for examples that lend themselves to this view.

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2. This is not, of course, to deny that there are indeed positive theories of truth in the humanities. It is merely to affirm the prevalence of negative theories that reject the possibility of truth.
3. Examples of such Continental philosophers include Friederich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Derrida. For a discussion of their openly negative views on truth, see Engel (2002).
4. The term 'terror' is in fact used repeatedly by Lyotard (1984) to describe the force of the better argument and the type of society in which systematic reason reigns supreme.
5. For a further elaboration of the third and fourth stages, see MacIntyre (1988:349-369).
6. See, for example, Reboul (2006), who draws clear implications from Quine's thought for the recent clash of civilizations discourse.
7. It should be noted that, although Hume inspired the analytic-synthetic distinction, it was formally and systematically developed by Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Pure Reason* and was, until fairly recently, held to be unquestionable in analytic philosophy. The legitimacy of the analytic-synthetic distinction, however, was effectively undermined by Quine in the 1950s (see Quine 1951). Few analytic philosophers today apparently still hold to that distinction.
8. This is not to say that Hume rejected moral philosophy as barren. Hume was, like Lord Shaftesbury and Francis Hutcheson before him, a moral sense theorist (Gill 2006; Hutcheson 1993). He greatly admired Shaftesbury and maintained that moral disagreements could be resolved by appeal to innate moral instincts shared by all humans (Hume 1998:83-89). The difference between the moral sense theorists and, for example, the natural law theorists, concerns the object of moral judgments. The former claimed that moral judgments refer to properties of the mind, whereas the latter claimed that moral judgments refer to properties outside the mind.
9. The debate over the nature of assertions is old and the scholarly literature on the topic is vast and impossible to review here. From Frege's foundational work in analytic philosophy in the late nineteenth century, to the speech-act theory of J.L. Austin and John Searle, to Robert Brandom's recent theory of semantic inferentialism, the concept of assertion seems to be as vital to the philosophy of language today as it ever has been. The common thread throughout this long and multifarious debate, however, is the view that assertions ultimately entail a commitment to truth. For a good

overview of the concept of truth and its relation to belief and assertion, see Engel (2002) and Williams (2002).

10. Putnam has critiqued Rorty's contentions about truth elsewhere (2000, 2004). I have chosen not to review this critique, one of a great many such critiques by several leading philosophers who have taken serious issue with Rorty's more extreme claims. See, for example, the essays collected in Brandom (2000). For the purposes of the present argument, I have chosen to focus instead on Price (2003), which in my view stands as the most cogent refutation of Rorty's negative view of truth to date.
11. It is worth noting that Putnam formerly held the view that truth is 'idealized rational acceptability', or what can be rightly asserted under ideal epistemic conditions (1990). According to Misak (2000:49), the the concept of truth as idealized warranted assertibility is often attributed to Charles S. Peirce. There is one obvious problem with identifying truth with what is assertible under idealized epistemic conditions: it is entirely unclear what those ideal conditions could possibly be. Putnam has revised his views due precisely to this objection. However, as Misak (2004b) has shown, although one can attribute this deeply problematic concept of truth to Peirce, it is nonetheless possible to extract from Peirce a viable, non-metaphysical theory of truth that avoids the pitfalls of the notion of idealized warranted assertibility.
12. As Engel (2002) writes, 'justification is context-relative and defeasible: one can have a justification for p at t and in circumstances c , but cease to be justified at t' and c' . The justification must be in some sense stable and undefeasible [sic]' (29). It should be noted that equating truth with justification only introduces the problem of relativism.
13. Note the similarity to Ayer's description of rival and competing moral claims. Whereas Ayer's account is limited to moral discourse, the stronger claim made by Rorty extends to all forms of discourse, including scientific discourse.
14. Robert Brandom's (1994, 2000) highly complex, but much-discussed theory of semantic inferentialism is a systematic account of this game; what Brandom calls the game of giving and asking for reasons.
15. Brandom, in fact, revealed this much in his debate with Jürgen Habermas (Brandom 2000b:370-373).

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