TRAMES, 2020, **24(74/69)**, 3, 459–483

META-ETHICAL PLURALISM AND DISAGREEMENT

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Abstract. Some theorists in meta-ethics have recently defended so-called 'meta-ethical pluralism', which denies that ordinary moral discourse is uniform, instead claiming that it contains several different concepts of morality. But critics have objected that such a theory cannot adequately explain both moral and meta-ethical disagreement, because the use of, or focus on, different concepts, respectively, means that speakers in these contexts would frequently end up talking past each other instead of having a genuine disagreement. In response, I will argue that, in both cases, pluralism leaves more room for disagreement than its critics have thought: in ordinary moral discourse, speakers could still disagree about content that is communicated as a matter of pragmatics rather than semantics; and in meta-ethics, they could dispute both how moral discourse is to be conceptualized, and which concept is best. And that undermines any immediate inference from the presence of disagreement to the falsity of pluralism.

Keywords: meta-ethics, moral language, meta-ethical pluralism, philosophy of disagreement, moral disagreement, disagreement in meta-ethics

DOI: https//doi.org/10.3176/tr.2020.3.11

1. Introduction

The debate over how to understand moral concepts has gone on for a long, very long, time, and although its participants do seem to have moved a bit closer to each other in some respects (with cognitivists and noncognitivists, for example, both trying to incorporate the insights from each other's work, such as the importance of moral motivation and moral reasoning, respectively), arguably the broad battle lines have not moved much, and the same brute conflicts of intuitions are ever-present.

In light of the persistence of such conceptual disagreement (among other reasons), some theorists in meta-ethics (mainly Francén Olinder 2010, 2012 and Gill 2008, 2009) have recently argued that we should abandon the idea that ordinary moral

discourse is uniform, that it can vindicate one of the traditional accounts in meta-ethics. Instead, they argue, different parts of ordinary discourse – utterances made by different speakers, or in different contexts – may involve *different* meta-ethical commitments, and the traditional accounts may be right about some of these parts, but at the expense of ignoring others. In order to get the full picture, we should, they maintain, instead adopt *meta-ethical pluralism*, the idea that moral discourse involves several concepts of morality.

But if such an account is correct, some critics (e.g. Johansson and Olson 2015 and Sinnott-Armstrong 2009) have objected, it becomes a mystery how many disputes in both ordinary moral discourse and meta-ethics could involve genuine disagreement. Starting with the former, if different speakers were to employ different moral concepts, then that would seem to imply that they are talking about entirely different things – compare two speakers talking about a financial bank and a river bank. For example, if one speaker, saying of an action that it is morally wrong, means that it is *objectively* wrong (i.e. its moral status is independent of anyone's actual views on the matter), but another speaker, claiming instead that it is morally right, means merely that it is *conventionally* right (i.e. according to the moral norms of his society), then they do not really seem to disagree: instead, their statements seem to be perfectly consistent, and the speakers seem to be talking past each other.

And, the critics go on, pluralism would also call into question disagreement in meta-ethics: if proponents of different theories are not offering competing analyses of the same concept but are rather targeting *different* concepts of morality, then their dispute again does not seem genuine – to use the bank example again, imagine two philosophers arguing over the correct analysis of the word 'bank' while focusing on financial banks and river banks, respectively. If competing theorists are not analyzing one shared concept of morality but are rather focusing on different concepts, they, too, would seem to be talking past each other, and that is at least highly counterintuitive to many.

As it happens, however, both objections rely on assumptions that can be, and have been, questioned. To begin with first-order moral disagreement, it turns out that explaining it is not only a problem for pluralism, but for certain other theories in meta-ethics as well. For example, if moral claims are relativized to societies (cultural relativism), or if their content varies by context (moral contextualism), then disagreement between societies, or across contexts, again seems (critics argue) to have been lost. And the solutions offered to help those theories, I will argue, can be taken up by pluralists as well. In a nutshell, the argument is that, even if speakers will sometimes fail to disagree about the *literally* expressed (that is, semantic) content of what they are saying, they may still have a disagreement about content that is communicated *differently*, as a matter of pragmatics (*why* they are saying it): for example, speakers may each use their different moral concepts to express (pragmatically) where they stand with respect to an action, leading to a so-called 'disagreement in attitude'. And such disagreements are perfectly consistent with the semantics of their claims not conflicting.

And likewise, the idea that conceptual analysis in meta-ethics proceeds in the 'top-down' manner (analyzing a single, clearly delineated concept) hypothesized by

critics of pluralism has been challenged: it may instead operate in a more 'bottom-up' kind of way, where the focus is on trying to discover what, if anything, particular uses of certain terms in a certain area of discourse have in common. And if that is how things work, meta-ethicists who operate with different concepts could still be having a genuine disagreement – namely, about how a certain area of discourse is to be conceptualized. And meta-ethicists could also still dispute which moral concepts are *best* for various purposes, which ones we *should* adopt.

Of course, such strategies may well fail, and if they do, pluralism will fall with them (or will at least have to look elsewhere for a solution) – and there are many other objections unique to it (not discussed here) as well (e.g. the 'challenge from unity' described by Francén Olinder (2012), the objection that moral terms fail standard tests of ambiguity (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009), and the argument that pluralism does not go far enough, because it still hopes to find commonalities at lower levels of generality (De Mesel 2016)). However, provided the strategies do not fail in any decisive manner, the simple inference from the presence of disagreement to the falsity of pluralism is undermined, and that is at least a small victory for the account.

I will make my case over four sections. In the first section, I will explain in some more detail what meta-ethical pluralists are committed to, exactly, and will quickly go over some arguments for their position. In the second section, I will then explain why many have thought that accounts like relativism and contextualism ('content-relativism' for short) are unable to account for many seemingly legitimate cases of first-order moral disagreement, and how pluralism faces much the same problem, but in a more radical form. In the third section, I will go on to discuss how content-relativists have tried to overcome this challenge, and will argue that pluralists can help themselves to similar resources to explain the cases of lost disagreement. Finally, in the fourth section, I will discuss the other disagreement-based objection mentioned, concerning disagreement not in ordinary discourse but in meta-ethics, and will argue that plausible rescue strategies are again available.

2. Defining meta-ethical pluralism

Before discussing the details of meta-ethical pluralism, I should first explain what it is supposed to be a theory *of*. Pluralism, as I will understand it here, is a theory in *moral semantics*: in other words, it is an account of what our moral terms *mean*. And more specifically, it is an account of what they *ordinarily* mean – not of what they mean in a highly specialized context like a certain area of philosophical discourse, for example. In other words, pluralism offers to give an analysis of ordinary uses of moral terms, which concept(s) they are associated with. How does it propose to do so?

Although he does not make use of the term 'pluralism' to describe his position, the view I have in mind is most clearly stated in the work of Michael Gill (2008, 2009). Meta-ethics, he argues, has traditionally proceeded on the assumption that ordinary moral discourse is *uniform* (the 'uniformity assumption'), that all ordinary

uses of moral terms have particular commitments in common that give us conditions that are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for their application.[1] Some have argued, for example, that all moral judgments are about the norms of a speaker's society (cultural relativism); others claim that they concern universal standards that bind everyone regardless of what standards they actually hold (moral objectivism); and so on and so forth. Pluralists argue, instead, that ordinary uses of moral terms have *no* universal features in common.

However, it is important to note that the rejection of the uniformity assumption is compatible with several different views in meta-ethics, and what I mean by pluralism is only one of them. Following Gill (2008, 2009), we may call any view that rejects the uniformity assumption – that is, any view that maintains that no classical analysis (in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions) can be given of moral discourse as a whole (because it lacks the uniformity required for that: there are no substantive commitments that all moral claims have in common) – a form of 'variabilism'. Pluralism, as I will understand it here, goes beyond variabilism by contending, in addition, that classical definitions, corresponding to several different concepts of morality, *can* be given for more specific parts of moral discourse. Or as Gill puts it: "while some parts of ordinary moral discourse are most accurately analyzed as involving a certain meta-ethical commitment, other parts of ordinary discourse are most accurately analyzed as involving the meta-ethical commitment that has traditionally been taken to be its meta-ethical competitor" (Gill 2009: 216). (Other, non-pluralistic variabilist theories include family resemblance theories (e.g. De Mesel 2016), Loeb's (2008a, 2008b) moral incoherentism, Pölzler and Wright's (2020) anti-realist pluralism, and possibly also Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley's (2012) view that moral judgment is 'disunified'; and Finlay (2019) argues for ambiguity in metanormative theory, about concepts of normativity, rather than in meta-ethics narrowly construed.) For example, to continue with the above example, perhaps some moral claims are best understood in a relativist way (when two speakers have contrary opinions about a controversial issue but do not think either of them is in the wrong, say – there may, in their view, simply not be one right answer), but others are best taken in an objectivist manner (for example, when two speakers both agree that torturing a baby for fun is *just wrong*, and anyone who thinks differently is making an error). Hence the pluralism: different moral claims may be about considerably different things (the norms of a society vs universally binding norms) and may even express different mental states (beliefs vs nonrepresentative states like desires).

It is important to note, however, that it does not follow from this – and pluralists typically do not believe – that moral judgments have nothing in common: there may, for example, be important family resemblances between them because they have a similar kind of role or function. (Francén Olinder (2012: 600) is particularly explicit about this, arguing that what moral concepts have in common is their *practical role*: "the idea is that moral beliefs and concepts are attributed (roughly)

[1] He further argues that it has assumed – wrongly, in his view – that ordinary usage is *determinate*, always gives us reason to prefer one meta-ethical account over another, instead of being imprecise enough to allow for both. I am more skeptical of that possibility, however, and I will not discuss it here.

based on their practical role rather than on their content or character".) And indeed, in this respect my analogy of ambiguities in moral discourse to the equivocation between river banks and financial banks – though easy to understand – is a bit misleading, because if there are such ambiguities, they are plausibly cases of *polysemy* ("identically spelled and pronounced words with distinct but closely related meanings" (Finlay 2019: 189)), as illustrated by the distinction between healthy food (i.e. *for* a particular organism) and a healthy organism (i.e. a property *of* the organism), rather than, as in the bank example, of *homonymy* ("identically spelled and pronounced words with unrelated meanings" (ibid.: 189)). So, although pluralism is no doubt committed to a significant amount of equivocation, it need not imply that, as Finlay puts it, moral discourse is "a Frankenstein's monster stitched together out of unrelated parts" (ibid.: 189). However, if moral judgments do share a role, it cannot be given a precise definition in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, and there will be no universal features that all moral judgments share. Rather, as Gill (2008: 395) writes, pluralists maintain that moral discourse "is something of a hodgepodge – more of a miscellany than a system", with lots of overlapping similarities but no shared essence.[2] And as we will see later, such resemblances play an important role in pluralists' reply to the first objection.

It is also important to distinguish, following Gill (2009), between two types of variation: variation in usage between different speakers (how they are each disposed to use moral terms), and variation between different contexts (how speakers use terms in particular contexts). Gill's version of the theory embraces both sources of variation, but Francén Olinder (2012) mainly seems interested in variations of the former kind, in line with his relativistic starting point (he believes pluralism to be analogous to ethical relativism in condoning the contrary claims of different speakers). I will follow Gill in wanting to leave room for both, but due to my focus on disagreement, which typically takes place between speakers in the same context, I will mainly be focusing on conceptual variation between speakers (the first type of variation mentioned by Gill). However, assuming that disagreement can also travel between contexts, the same argument can plausibly be made for variation between contexts. In any case, different variations in this area will lead to different versions of pluralism.

In order to give readers a rough idea of why some theorists have found pluralism such an attractive option in meta-ethics, I will now briefly go over some arguments for the theory.

The proponents of pluralism have given at least three arguments in its favor. As I already hinted above, their main argument for pluralism (see Francén Olinder 2012 and Gill 2009) is probably that it can explain why meta-ethical debates have proven to be so persistent: meta-ethicists have wrongly assumed uniformity where

[2] This idea – of a rough characterization of moral discourse that falls well short of a classical definition – can be developed in different ways. Francén Olinder (2012), for example, seems to accept something like a prototype theory (see e.g. Park 2013). But others may be more skeptical of the existence of a shared prototype and may argue that the resemblances are more like those between family members, where similarities tend to be rather unsystematic.

there is diversity, so it is no surprise that they got stuck – if there is no single theory to converge on, then a lack of convergence is only to be expected. A second, related argument for pluralism (from Gill 2009) is that it can explain why so many people have found competing theories in meta-ethics attractive: if they describe different parts of ordinary moral discourse, then several such theories may correctly identify some aspects of our moral thought and talk, even if their assumption of uniformity also leads them to miss other such aspects. Finally, as the main proponents of pluralism (Francén Olinder 2012, Gill 2009, and Wright 2018) all highlight, the theory can easily explain the variety we find in both the usage of moral terms and first-person reports of meta-ethical commitments, because if we have several concepts of morality, such variety is only to be expected, instead of a problem to be explained away (as it is for many of its competitors). And this kind of argument has been further bolstered by empirical research from the emerging area of 'folk meta-ethics', studying the meta-ethical intuitions of ordinary folk, which has found both (i) that there is a persistent minority (or, according to some (e.g. Pölzler and Wright 2020), a majority), the size of which varies with their age (Beebe and Sackris 2016) and personality traits (Feltz and Cokely 2008), with anti-realist intuitions (see e.g. Goodwin and Darley 2008, Nichols 2004, and Wright et al. 2012), and (ii) that people's meta-ethical intuitions vary with their context, pushing them more towards anti-realism if the issue in question is seen as controversial (Beebe 2014, Goodwin and Darley 2012, and Wright et al. 2012), the perceived moral distance between the parties to a dispute is high (Sarkissian et al. 2011; also see Sarkissian 2016), and the setting of the participants is cooperative rather than competitive (Fisher et al. 2017).

Of course, these arguments are hardly decisive: the first two arguments for pluralism may, for example, seem to overgeneralize (which conceptual disputes in philosophy, after all, have been satisfactorily resolved?), and the variety in moral discourse may either be challenged (e.g. because the data is too unreliable (Beebe 2015)) or explained away (e.g. because the findings are actually consistent with a particular account in meta-ethics (as Sarkissian 2016 argues for moral relativism)). And more generally, other meta-ethical theories may provide better overall explanations of the available evidence. But I hope the arguments at least help illuminate why some theorists have found pluralism so compelling. Gill sums it up well: "A clean meta-ethical theory, one that takes a singular stand on each of the oft-disputed meta-ethical questions and claims that that stand applies to all the observable moral phenomena, may be more elegant. But the clean meta-ethical theory may do a worse job of describing how we actually use moral terms. Our use of moral terms may itself be very messy" (Gill 2009: 223).

Now that we know what pluralists are committed to, and why people have found it an attractive theory, we can move on the objections against it, starting with the objection that it can't give us an adequate explanation of moral disagreement. I will first sketch a general version of the objection – that also applies to, and indeed has mainly targeted, other, more familiar theories in meta-ethics – and will then argue that it is particularly threatening for pluralism, because the variation it embraces is unusually radical.

3. The argument from disagreement

Imagine, to use R. M. Hare's (1952) famous example, that a missionary, aiming to spread his Christian faith to unbelievers, visits a distant island, and – after meeting the locals – learns that they happily engage in cannibalism, a practice he finds abhorrent and believes they should end immediately. It seems clear that there is a disagreement here: the natives are in favor of cannibalism, saying things like "Killing outsiders in order to collect their scalps is *good*", but the missionary is strongly opposed, arguing that "killing and cannibalizing people for such reasons is very much a *bad* thing". (To simplify matters, I will assume here that the missionary and the cannibals either speak the same language, or – if they do not – at least share concepts that can be translated into each other's languages with minimal loss of meaning.) And in order for this to make sense, Hare argues, they must mean *the same thing* by 'good' and 'bad': if their meanings would diverge – for example, if their judgments were relativized to their different value systems – they would seem to be talking past each other rather than disagreeing.[3]

Hare's argument has proven to be popular, especially – though certainly not exclusively – among his noncognitivist allies. (Arguments of a similar nature have been defended by Blackburn 1984, Egan 2012, Gibbard 1990, Horgan and Timmons 1990, 1992, Lasersohn 2005, Moore 1922, and Smith 1994.) The main target of this kind of argument is a type of relativism in the semantic domain that Finlay (2017) calls 'content-relativism', according to which different speakers sometimes "use the same moral sentences … to say different things" (ibid.: 187). For example, suppose that to say that an action is 'morally good' is to say that it conforms to the standards of a speaker's community (cultural relativism), or that it conforms to certain standards that are determined by his context (moral contextualism). In that case, when a different speaker claims that the action is morally bad, thus saying that it fails to conform to the standards of *his* community, or fails to promote certain standards that are a function of *his* particular context, the content of his claim may be perfectly consistent with what the first speaker is saying, and therefore the disagreement between them seems – critics argue – to have been lost. In order to preserve the disagreement, advocates of the argument believe, we should instead endorse 'content-absolutism', according to which "different speakers always use the same sentences to say the same things" (ibid: 188). If the missionary and the cannibal always use 'good' and 'bad' with the exact same meaning (either in a descriptive sense, as referring to the same property, as cognitivist absolutists argue, or in an attitudinal sense, as expressing the same kind of attitude, as noncognitivist absolutists claim), then, critics argue, we get the right result: the content of their claims will conflict, and as such we will have captured the disagreement between them.

[3] Although it does not strictly speaking concern disagreement, variations in the usage of moral terms between contexts *by the same speaker* give rise to a similar problem, in that they raise the question how those judgments are related to each other – how they could come into conflict, for example, and how we could draw inferences from them in different contexts (cf. Johansson and Olson 2015). I expect that my solution to the disagreement problem will also help assuage these closely related worries, but for reasons of space, I will not explicitly make that argument here.

For this argument to work, however, its proponents need to make one crucial assumption: in order to rule out relativistic explanations of disagreement, the argument must presume that moral disagreements are to be understood as what Plunkett and Sundell (2013) call 'canonical disputes', where "the speakers disagree over the *literally expressed content*[4] of what they are saying" (ibid.: 6). That assumption has seemed obvious to many, but, as we will see, it can be questioned.

With the terminology in place, the argument can now be roughly stated as follows:

> P1. Disputes like (i.e. that are relevantly similar to) those between the cannibal and the missionary express genuine disagreement.
> P2. If a disagreement is to be genuine, there has to be a conflict between the literal contents of the claims made by its members – that is, the dispute has to be *canonical*.
> C1. So: genuine moral disputes must be canonical disputes. (From P2)
> P3. People who are engaged in a canonical dispute must mean the same thing by the relevant terms – otherwise their claims are very unlikely to be inconsistent.
> C2. So: speakers in genuine moral disputes must mean the same thing by their words. (From C1 and P3)
> P4. Content-relativism is committed to denying that speakers in disputes like those between the cannibal and the missionary mean the same thing by their words.
> C3. Therefore: content-relativism is committed to denying that such disputes express genuine disagreement. (From P4 and C2)
> C3. It follows from P1 and C3 that content-relativism must be false.

Most content-relativists accept P1 and would probably agree with P3 and P4 as well. However, as we will see, they have objected to the second premise: in their view, the disagreement – though genuine – can be explained in a different, 'non-canonical' way. (Or alternatively, our *intuition* that the disagreement is genuine can be thus explained. For example, Finlay (2017) insists that his primary aim is not to *validate* the intuition so much as to offer an explanation for why we have it, thus depriving the first premise of its support.) Before we move on to their replies, however, let me first explain how the argument applies to pluralism.

The most common examples of content-relativism are probably the relativist and contextualist views mentioned above. But on a broad understanding of the term, pluralism can also be seen as a version of content-relativism (cf. Finlay 2017: 187, fn. 1): after all, if pluralists are right, different speakers – operating with different moral concepts – will sometimes clearly use the same sentences to say different things. For example, imagine that the missionary is an objectivist; so when he says that cannibalism is 'wrong', he is saying that it has some objective and unchanging property of wrongness. Now imagine that the cannibals are noncognitivists: when they praise cannibalism, they are merely giving voice to their approval of the practice.

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[4] The italics in this quote are theirs. In what follows, unless otherwise noted, the use of italics in quotes will always be taken from the relevant author(s).

In that case, the content literally expressed by these speakers' claims will clearly fail to conflict: while the missionary is talking about objective moral properties, the cannibals are not talking about anything moral at all but are merely expressing their approval of cannibalism.

What distinguishes pluralism from the other versions of content-relativism is simply that it is more *radical*, as can be illustrated by David Kaplan's famous distinction between the 'character' and the 'content' of an expression. The *character* of an expression is its contextually invariant meaning; its *content*, on the other hand, is what it picks out relative to context. For example, to borrow Plunkett and Sundell's (2013) example, imagine a contextualist account of the word 'tall': we can then suppose that its character is "something like *having a maximal degree of height greater than the contextually supplied threshold*" (ibid.: 9), and that its content varies accordingly with context. Now, with that distinction in mind, what distinguishes pluralism from the standard accounts is that it holds that not only the *content* of terms like 'good' and 'bad' varies, but their *character* too. A cultural relativist may argue, for example, that the character of 'morally good' is something like "conforming to the moral standards of the community of the speaker", and that its content varies accordingly. A pluralist, on the other hand, will posit variation not only in content but in character too: for example, perhaps some speakers assume a relativist understanding of the term and others an objectivist one, and speakers may also switch between the two in various contexts.

Now, clearly, if variation in meaning as a result of 'mere' contextual features is supposed to pose a major threat to moral disagreement, the problem will be even starker for a view that argues that speakers switch between entirely different concepts.[5] Cultural relativists and contextualists, even granting that moral disagreement needs to be understood in canonical terms, are at least capable of explaining disagreement when the contextual features are held constant: for example, disagreement within the same moral community, or relative to the same contextual standards. But to its critics, pluralism has seemed like an invitation to semantic anarchy. As Merli (2009) has argued, it seems obvious that "[r]eal agreement and disagreement requires conceptual common ground" (ibid.: 536), requires that speakers share concepts: for example, if one speaker, saying that 'banks' are great, is talking about river banks, while another speaker, objecting to this claim, is talking about financial institutions, they are clearly talking past each other. So, if pluralists are to explain disagreement in the absence of conceptual common ground, they will be going against arguably one of the basic assumptions in the philosophy of disagreement. Moreover, insofar as one of the concepts in a pluralist account is itself an instance of content-relativism (e.g. cultural relativism), pluralism will inherit all of the problems of that account on top of all the difficulties that are unique to it. So if the 'problem of lost disagreement', to borrow Finlay's (2017) term for the objection, was difficult to answer for standard versions of content-relativism, it seems to pose an even greater threat to pluralism,

[5] I am assuming here that the 'character' of an expression is what individuates concepts, is what distinguishes one concept from another. Others may wish to draw the line differently, and if so, I would have to restate some of my claims a bit. But that should not affect the main substance of my argument.

which not only posits *more* variation but also endorses variation of a *more radical kind* – one that many have thought to be fundamentally incompatible with genuine disagreement. It is unsurprising, then, that some critics have rejected it on exactly those grounds, complaining that "[i]t is not clear how agreement or disagreement works if meanings really do vary in the way that [pluralists] claim" (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009: 244).

However, as we will see, I think its odds may be better than expected, because the solutions that were (primarily) designed with the standard forms in mind can also help pluralism.

4. Pragmatics to the rescue

Most of the solutions on offer turn on the distinction between semantics and pragmatics. Their proponents (I will mainly focus on the work of Finlay 2014, 2017, Khoo and Knobe 2018, and Plunkett and Sundell 2013) agree with those endorsing the canonical account of disagreement that disagreement involves *some* kind of incompatibility between contents, regarding a shared subject matter, accepted by different people, but – they emphasize – those contents needn't be *literally expressed*: as Plunkett and Sundell (2013: 13) write, "theorists take a wrong turn as soon as they conflate the question of whether a disagreement is *genuine* with the question of how the information on which a disagreement centers happens to be communicated". Our claims, Plunkett and Sundell point out, can communicate or express more than what they *literally* say or mean (Finlay 2017: 190), and we can locate the disagreement in the former rather than the latter – that is, in the *pragmatics* rather than in the semantics of claims.[6] In other words, they argue that there can also be *non-canonical* disputes, in which speakers (i) literally express compatible contents, but (ii) nevertheless have a dispute over content that is not literally expressed but *otherwise* communicated. And – they go on – "taking a dispute to be canonical is not always the best – let alone only – non-debunking explanation of the intuition of genuine disagreement" (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 7). That is certainly one possible interpretation of disputes – no one denies that much, and quite possibly most, disagreement centers on the literal content of claims – but it is not the only one, and that undermines any quick inference from disagreement to sameness of meaning. In order to establish that a particular dispute requires that speakers mean the same thing by their words, content-absolutists must first show that the dispute is indeed a canonical one – and that (not the presence of genuine disagreement) is what is doing the real work in their argument.

[6] How the distinction between semantics and pragmatics is best understood is, of course, controversial, and I will not aim to resolve that issue here. Instead, I will simply follow the usage of the authors that I mentioned at the start of this section, especially that of Stephen Finlay, who summarizes his position as follows: "semantics concerns the information or signification associated by convention with words and sentences themselves, while pragmatics concerns the information or signification generated by the fact that a speaker utters a particular sentence in a particular context" (Finlay 2014: 117). My argument is therefore a conditional one: on *this* understanding of the distinction, such-and-such a reply is available to pluralists – how exactly it would work on different accounts is something I will leave open.

It may be wondered, however, why we should think there are such disputes in the first place. But Finlay (2017), Khoo and Knobe (2018), and Plunkett and Sundell (2013) convincingly argue that non-canonical disputes are, in fact, commonplace. For example, imagine the following exchange:

(a) *Cody*: John ate some of the cookies.
(b) *Sally*: No, John ate *all* of the cookies. (See Khoo and Knobe 2018: 123)

The literal contents of these claims are clearly consistent: that John ate all of the cookies is perfectly consistent with him eating some of them. However, the first claim plausibly further communicates that John ate some *but not all* of the cookies, and it is this claim that Sally disagrees with.

Or consider the following example of a seeming conflict in attitudes:

(c) *John*: I want to go on a beach vacation this summer.
(d) *Mary*: No, I prefer the mountains.

Here again (assuming for the moment that these claims literally express the relevant preferences – other (e.g. subjectivist) interpretations are possible, but face similar problems) there is no conflict in the literal content of their attitudes: that John wants to go to the beach is entirely consistent with Mary wanting to go to the mountains – they can just each go their own way. What they are disagreeing about is instead where to go for vacation *together*, and here John's wanting to relax on the beach clearly clashes with Mary's desire to hike in the mountains.

It may now be objected that, even if there are many plausible instances of non-canonical disputes, what we really need is some reason to think that they are commonly found in the *moral* domain – that is, a reason to think that *moral* disagreements can plausibly be understood as disputes over non-literal content. As it turns out, however, there is some evidence from folk meta-ethics for the idea of non-canonical moral disputes being intuitive to many: Khoo and Knobe (2018) have probed people's intuitions on the matter, and have found that "there are moral conflict cases in which people are inclined to say both (a) that the two speakers disagree and (b) that it is not the case that at least one of them must be saying anything incorrect" (ibid.: 109). For example, when speakers from very different cultures make contrary claims (in their example, that it is either wrong or permissible to stab a random passersby), many people hold that neither of them is mistaken (and so their claims cannot be inconsistent), but that they still disagree in an important sense. And in Khoo and Knobe's view, this not only strengthens the case for a non-canonical understanding of (some) moral disagreements, but actually *counts against* any account that rules them out, as it conflicts with people's intuitions. Of course, it is possible to defend an alternative explanation of Khoo and Knobe's results (e.g. that participants are confusing truth with justification or blameworthiness), and future experiments might refute their findings. However, their work does provide at least some support for the idea that non-canonical moral disputes are intuitive to at least a significant subset of ordinary speakers. (For some more data in support of non-canonical disputes in the moral domain, see Finlay 2017: 189.)

In short, the general strategy of conceiving of (some) moral disagreements as non-canonical disputes, over content that is not literally expressed by moral claims but otherwise communicated, seems like a promising direction for content-relativism. However, there are several different ways of pursuing this general strategy, and it still remains to be seen whether any of them provides a promising exit route for content-relativism (and meta-ethical pluralism in particular) once its details have been fully fleshed out. In what follows, I will focus on what I consider to be the most promising of these approaches: the 'quasi-expressivist' account of Stephen Finlay (2014, 2017). (For two alternative, so-called 'metalinguistic' approaches, see Khoo and Knobe 2018, and Plunkett and Sundell 2013; for an argument that quasi-expressivism is superior to metalinguistic approaches, see Finlay 2017: 192.)

The basic idea behind quasi-expressivism (QE) is that expressivists are right that conflicting attitudes towards an action are central to many moral disagreements. We already saw one example of such a conflict (over vacation plans) above, and there are many other plausible instances of such disputes: whenever two speakers communicate preferences that cannot both be satisfied at the same time, but do not think that their difference of opinion is due to some factual mistake, we seem to get a 'mere disagreement in attitude'. For example, two people may have conflicting preferences for which house to buy, or whether to have children: in such cases, neither party may be making any sort of mistake, but they still seem to disagree in an important sense – indeed, such disputes, where a solution cannot be found but has to be negotiated, are arguably some of the most important in our lives, and Khoo and Knobe's (2018) study suggests they may also occur in the moral domain (though as I mentioned above, they argue for a different, 'metalinguistic' interpretation of non-canonical disputes themselves).

However, QE differs from expressivism in at least two ways. First and foremost, although the accounts agree on what *kind* of disagreement certain central cases of moral disagreement involve, they disagree about how it is *communicated*: according to QE, attitudes are expressed not as a function of the *semantics* of moral terms but rather as a function of their *pragmatics*, and as such QE is not committed to motivational internalism (that is, unlike expressivism, it needn't say that being appropriately motivated is essential to moral claims). How does this work? The idea is roughly that the pragmatics of our use of moral terms – what moral claims communicate beyond their semantics – is a function of speakers' (discernible, so that their communicative intent is salient to their audience; see Finlay 2014) intentions in using those terms: *why*, to what ends, they say the things they do. And QE argues that those intentions are typically *practical*: moral language is most commonly used to express where speakers stand with respect to an action – and in contexts where such intentions are salient, the speakers' claims pragmatically communicate their attitudes towards the action as a result. And interestingly, the pluralists themselves have made some suggestions that go well with this approach. For example, Loeb (2008a) – who is not strictly speaking a pluralist, but defends a different form of variabilism that faces similar problems – suggests that there may be "enough overlap among our linguistic dispositions for it to be useful to employ the moral vocabulary

even if in important respects we are not all talking about the same thing" (ibid.: 364). In particular, we may both "be committed to trying to do whatever it is that morality turns out to require, and, more generally, morality as each understands it may play a very similar role in [our] lives" (ibid.: 364). And Gill (2008: 401) brings up the possibility that "people using moral terms in meta-ethically different ways can nonetheless disagree (or at least come into conflict) with each other about some first-order moral issues", which again sounds similar in spirit to quasi-expressivism.

Let me give an example to illustrate the point. Suppose that, as Finlay (2014) argues, when the missionary from our case study says that 'killing is bad', he is claiming that it conflicts with certain ends that he has in mind (e.g. the sanctity of human life); the cannibal, by contrast, maintains that it *does* advance certain other ends (e.g. male vigor). Why should we think that these claims (though consistent) express opposing attitudes? Well, typically, when people, calling a certain action 'good' or 'bad', talk about the relation in which that action stands to a particular end that they have in mind, they do so because it is *important* to them in some way, because the relevant end *matters* to a speaker and/or her audience (either positively, because they desire it, or negatively, because they disapprove of it). So, all things equal, when the missionary says that cannibalism violates certain moral standards, we have *prima facie* good reason to believe that he upholds those standards: why else would he bother to talk about them? And of course, the opposite is true for the cannibal: he values opposing ends that cannibalism is conducive to – hence the conflict between their attitudes.

However, QE also differs from expressivism in a second way: although both accounts agree that *many* moral disputes center on a conflict of attitudes, QE holds that some moral disputes will instead involve disagreements of the *cognitive* sort, dealing with conflicting beliefs about the world. QE therefore endorses a *disjunctive* account of disagreement, on which speakers can disagree in different ways in different contexts[7] – and they may also express multiple conflicting mental states in the *same* context that could each potentially become a focal point for disagreement. And which conflict will be the central one in a certain context in turn depends on speakers' purposes in making those claims (that is, on the pragmatics of moral claims): "Intuitions of disagreement will be sensitive to whatever is the most salient kind of disagreement expressed in the context" (Finlay 2014: 229). In other words, whether – and in what way – two claims conflict depends on their *point*, and the point of a moral claim need not always be (merely) to express where the speaker stands with respect to an action. For example, sometimes the point may instead be to give *advice* to another agent on how to achieve certain ends (this would lead to what Finlay 2014 calls 'instrumental disagreement'), or to determine which action would best promote a certain end in light of certain information ('rational disagreement').

[7] One obvious difficulty facing such an account is that it seems to abandon the intuitive unity of disagreement. It does not seem to us like we are sometimes disagreeing in one sense and sometimes disagreeing in a different sense: rather, we are just *disagreeing*, full stop. I will not aim to solve this issue here, but to say one thing in response: it is open to disjunctivists to argue that, though there are different kinds of disagreement, they are still instances *of disagreement*, and as such share certain common features (whatever they are) of that kind.

And in such cases a preference may not always be expressed – and even if it is, it need not be what the disagreement centers on: some other conflict may be more important. For example, a progressive liberal and a religious conservative may dispute whether or not homosexuality is 'unnatural', even though this end (i.e. an action being natural) is valued only by the latter. Such disagreements are importantly different from the thoroughly 'practical' kinds of conflicts discussed above, turning on conflicts between beliefs instead of attitudes, but they are no less genuine for it. Of course, even granting that, it is still open to debate whether such disputes deserve to be called *moral* disagreements: perhaps only disagreements of a distinctively practical sort deserve that title, and instrumental and rational disagreements do not fall into that category. But regardless of their title, the important point for our purposes is simply that such disagreements can be important and genuine, and that content-relativists are perfectly capable of having them.

Now that we have a good understanding of the workings of QE, we can finally move on to the central question of how it can help pluralism deal with the disagreement objection. Its extension to pluralism is, in fact, quite simple: even if speakers use different moral concepts – a relativist versus an objectivist moral concept, for example – their use of those concepts may have very similar, overlapping *points.* In other words, they may have similar *intentions* in using those concepts: in particular – to start with the first prong of QE – both may very well use their different concepts to (among other things) express their stance towards an action. For example, if a speaker claims that an action is objectively wrong, she will normally, without any indications of unorthodox usage, be understood as disapproving of that action, because typically, when someone notes the perceived wrongness of an action, she does so not just to state some cold, hard fact, but also to show her disapproval. And something similar is plausibly true of other possible moral concepts, like a relativist one. Given that human beings are social animals whose moral preferences are shaped and nurtured by their various communities, it would not be surprising to find a strong link between relativist claims and moral motivation: if a speaker claims that an action conforms to the moral standards of her community, she normally does not intend merely to describe the logical relation in which the action stands to certain communal standards but also wishes to indicate her approval of the action – that's why she is invoking them. So even if objectivists and relativists, say, are indeed not talking about the same thing – even if their dispute lacks conceptual common ground – it is still possible for them to disagree in one important sense of the word, to engage in a practical conflict, so long as their intentions in using their different concepts are relevantly similar: that is, so long as the concepts have a similar practical role.

As suggested by the second prong of QE, however, not all moral disputes need be of this practical sort: some may instead center on conflicts between beliefs, and this gives pluralism even more flexibility in allowing for disagreement. For example, even if – given their different concepts – there is no conflict between the literal contents of the claims of a relativist and an objectivist (about the objective and conventional moral status of an action, respectively), they could still have a disagreement regarding certain beliefs that are *reliably associated with* their respective concepts. In saying

that the action is right or wrong, they will typically further reveal their sincere belief that the action promotes, or is in conflict with, certain relevant ends or standards, whose meta-ethical status can often be bracketed, resulting in what may be called a ‘merely first-order’ dispute. And this could then, in turn, become the focal point of their disagreement – which, tongue in cheek, we may call ‘quasi-end-relational’ disagreement[8], to mark the fact that it is communicated via pragmatics.

An objectivist may, for instance, argue that eating meat is morally okay, implying that it does not conflict with certain ends that are salient in the discussion – it does not cause great suffering for no good reason, say; and his relativist interlocutor may disagree with the latter claim, insisting that it *does* violate the moral ends at issue in their discussion. In this case, there seems to be a genuine disagreement between them – not so much about whether eating meat is ‘wrong’ (at least not directly) but rather over the related claim whether it promotes or conflicts with certain ends that both speakers consider ‘immoral’ in their different senses. And this kind of move seems to be available even to expressivism: for example, by expressing her approval of a certain action, a speaker will further convey to her audience that she believes the action to be consistent with her values – why else would she approve of the action? – and that assessment may in turn be challenged by her audience. And of course, if the disagreement occurs *within* a particular meta-ethical framework – for example, when two relativists disagree over whether a certain action conforms to the moral standards of their community – pluralists will have no difficulty explaining it.

In general, following Finlay (2019), we can broadly distinguish between two kinds of moral claims: ‘robust’ moral judgments, “made from a relevantly motivated perspective” (ibid.: 207), and therefore expressing (either directly or indirectly) that the speaker has a certain preference, and ‘formal’ judgments that merely – or at least primarily – concern an action’s moral status within a particular meta-ethical framework and/or the relations between certain actions and particular ends. (Finlay, taking his end-relational theory as a starting point, only counts judgments of the latter kind as ‘formal’, but for purposes of pluralism I think both fit nicely into that category, given their similar role.) And both kinds of judgments, it seems to me, can – by pragmatic means – sometimes cut across the traditional conceptual fault lines, in the sense that, even when judgments involve different concepts, they can still be similarly robust or formal, say, and therefore invite genuine conflict in those aspects.

Before moving on to the final main section, let me briefly address some objections skeptical readers may have to the above solution for pluralism. First, it could be

[8] Finlay himself (who defends an end-relational theory of morality, and normativity more generally) told me in private conversation that he is not a fan of this label, because, as he understands it, linguistic phenomena of a ‘quasi’-kind are not (or at least not directly) just phenomena that are communicated pragmatically but are rather phenomena that are very similar to but not quite the real thing, and he believes that does not apply to disagreements of this kind. I personally think there are enough similarities with ordinary end-relational disagreement (from their content to their similar role in communicating the basis for speakers’ attitudes) to justify the label, but nothing of importance hangs on this: I am using it mainly because it establishes a memorable symmetry between the two kinds of non-canonical disagreement that pluralists can help themselves to, quasi-expressivist and quasi-end-relational.

objected that, even if pluralists can plausibly explain how there can be genuine disagreement in *some*, perhaps even many, cases where people seem to intuitively disagree, if people really operate with different concepts, it seems rather unlikely that they would *never* be talking past each other. After all, we can hardly expect people's use of moral concepts, and their intentions in doing so, to be perfectly transparent. And this, the objection continues, counts against pluralism, even if it does not strictly refute the theory: all things equal, a theory that does not have to explain away seeming cases of disagreement is to be preferred.

There may be something to this objection – having to explain away intuitive cases of disagreement is no doubt a cost for a theory – but I doubt it will weaken the theory very much, because it is not implausible that ordinary speakers sometimes *do* talk past each other: sometimes their conversational ends, their intentions in using a concept, may really be so different that a productive conversation is going to be impossible. For example, if the aims of a relativist and an objectivist in a discussion are primarily *theoretical* rather than practical – that is, if their primary aim is really to establish whether an action conforms to the standards of their society or is objectively right or wrong, respectively – then they *do* indeed seem to be talking past each other. If pluralism would have the implication that such cases are very common, that might be a problem for the view, but (i) that would require further argument, and (ii) the idea that *some* disagreements can be dissolved when we take a closer look at them is not implausible: intuitions can be wrong. Indeed, both Francén Olinder (2012: 595) and Gill (2008: 401) have stressed that, in some cases, rejecting the first premise of the argument from disagreement (i.e. that the relevant disagreement is genuine) may well be justified.

A second, related objection is epistemological in nature: even if pluralists using different moral concepts could in theory have genuine disagreements by the method described above, it may be objected that this kind of apparatus is far too complicated to be of any use to ordinary speakers. Can we really expect ordinary speakers to reliably navigate all of the many meta-ethical parameters postulated by pluralists, and to determine the pragmatics behind their use as well? A methodology this convoluted seems to make it incredibly difficult to figure out what is at issue in a moral disagreement, and whether it is genuine, which greatly damages its credentials as an account of moral discourse.

This is again a fair point, but there are some things pluralists can say in response. First, although the linguistic mechanisms may seem very complex in the abstract, ordinary speakers arguably do not need to have a very tight grasp of the finer details of the account in order to spot the relevant meta-ethical parameters when they are important to a dispute: instead, we may speculate that they can typically rely on shortcuts, in the form of conversational cues, to figure out both what concept is at issue and what the conversational ends of the speaker are (cf. Gill 2008: 395). For example, if a speaker is very emotional, typically her aims are going to be practical; if a speaker insists that this is just how *she* feels, her relativistic beliefs may be central to the discussion; and so on. And second, perhaps the exact semantics of speakers' claims is frequently not central to moral disagreement: for example, in a

clash between an objectivist and a relativist, their views in meta-ethics may often be less important than the conflict between their attitudes towards a certain action. What typically matters the most, one may think, is that the disagreement is *practical* in nature, that each is trying to convince the other to change their ways, to modify their stance on a certain issue and move to their side of the discussion, not the details of *in what way* it is practical exactly.

But that reply leads to a third objection: if the semantics of moral terms plays such a modest role in determining what is at stake in a disagreement – if concepts' practical role and/or association with first-order beliefs is often more important – it becomes something of a mystery why speakers are using the concepts they do (according to pluralism). Why would they not use a concept that allows them to do either or both of those things *directly*, through its semantics? What merit is there in instead using different concepts of morality? In other words, if there is this much uniformity in speaker's *aims* in using moral language, why is its semantics so much more diverse?

In response, pluralists will have to insist that, although what moral concept speakers are using may not *always* be relevant to their discussion, it is relevant *often enough* to justify the use of the concept. No one concept, they could argue, can do all the jobs that we want moral concepts to do, and we need a variety of moral concepts for that reason. For example, perhaps some moral concepts are best for efficiently communicating our preferences, but others get across much better *why* (on what grounds) we have the attitudes that we do, and to which standards they should be held: for example, whether they should be judged by conventional standards or are thought to be entirely independent of such things. Such information can both be relevant to the question how, if at all, a disagreement can be settled, and can help influence others in particular ways (e.g. arguing that there is one right answer to some question may help to better motivate others to take drastic measures against non-compliers, whereas restricting its scope may promote tolerance). Admittedly, however, these suggestions are all rather speculative and light on detail, and if pluralism is to be a mature account in meta-ethics, a better, far more thorough answer to this question is clearly needed.

For now, though, I will assume that an answer can be found and will move on to the second disagreement-based objection against pluralism: that it cannot explain disagreement in meta-ethics.

5. The argument from meta-ethical disagreement

The objection (which is again championed by Johansson and Olson 2015), in a nutshell, is that, just as pluralists are (in their view) incapable of accounting for intuitive cases of disagreement in ordinary moral discourse, they also cannot explain plausible instances of disagreement *in meta-ethics*, between proponents of different meta-ethical theories, about what the right account of moral discourse is. If, they write, different theorists "each use 'moral opinion' to express different concepts,

[they] seem not to be disagreeing about a common topic, namely what falls under the concept of a moral opinion. They seem rather to be talking past each other in that the [first theorist] gives an account of what falls under his … concept of moral opinions and the [second theorist] gives an account of what falls under his … concept of moral opinions" (Johansson and Olson 2015: 595).[9] In short, the argument contends that pluralists not only cannot explain first-order moral disagreement, but are similarly unable to account for disagreement on a higher level, about how moral concepts are to be characterized: instead of disputing a common subject matter, Johansson and Olson argue, theorists are each talking about the particular concept that they are interested in, and are therefore simply talking past each other. In other words:

> P1. Disputes in meta-ethics (and moral semantics in particular) are typically genuine.
> P2. If a disagreement in meta-ethics is to be genuine, theorists must be targeting the same moral concept in their analyses – otherwise, they will be talking past each other.
> P3. If pluralism is correct, many theorists are not targeting the same concept.
> C1. So: if pluralism is correct, many meta-ethical disputes do not express genuine disagreement. (From P2 and P3)
> C2. It follows from P1 and C1 that pluralism must be false.

Although biting the bullet (i.e. granting to the critic that pluralism implies that many meta-ethical disputes are not genuine) is plausibly more defensible for meta-ethical disagreement than it is for first-order moral disagreement (arguably, the idea that theorists have been talking past each other due to certain mistaken assumptions about their field – in particular, of them targeting the exact same concepts – is not quite as damning: the precise aims of a certain area are often not fully transparent to its practitioners, and are indeed often a topic of lively debate), I will grant P1 for the sake of the argument – and I will grant the critics P3 as well. However, I think there are excellent reasons for pluralists to reject P2: meta-ethicists plausibly *can* disagree substantively about a common topic, even if they fail to pinpoint the exact same concept.

How so? In a nutshell, they can dispute how *ordinary moral discourse* is to be characterized, along the lines of the 'ostensive' approach sketched by Finlay (2019). On this kind of approach, what meta-ethicists are doing is not to determine what falls under a shared and more-or-less clearly defined concept of a 'moral opinion' (the 'top-down' approach), but to conceptualize a certain area of discourse, pinpointed by paradigmatic samples that theorists more-or-less agree upon, in terms of certain shared features (the 'bottom-up' approach). In other words, what they are doing is to "look to one or more samples of expressions or judgments to pick out some underlying

[9] The quote has been slightly edited to turn it into a general argument against pluralism, but originally it was framed in terms of internalism and externalism, as Johansson and Olson are objecting to Francén Olinder's (2010) argument here, and these are his targets for pluralism in that paper. Their argument can easily be generalized, however, and that is what I will be doing here.

common characteristic, the identity and nature of which is open to dispute" (ibid.: 195), to characterize moral discourse in a certain way based on examples from ordinary practice. And that is clearly something theorists can do without them having to target the same concept, because – on this view – it is ordinary practice, not a shared concept, that is the principal[10] starting point of conceptual analysis.

Of course, if pluralists are right, this approach, as defined above, is strictly speaking doomed, because there *are* no common characteristics to be found. But different theorists can still perfectly well dispute how moral discourse ought to be characterized: standard approaches argue that it has some common characteristic – be it talking about certain things in the world or fulfilling some non-cognitive function – and pluralism argues that it does not, favoring profusion over harmony. But although they come to different conclusions, they share a common subject matter.[11] The standard accounts argue that ordinary moral discourse should be given a uniform analysis, and offer different suggestions; but although the fact that the assumption of uniformity is mistaken may entail that their mutual disputes are to some extent *misguided* – mistaking a part for the whole – they are no less genuine for it.

To illustrate this line of argument, we can look towards other kinds of pluralism in philosophy and ask ourselves whether *they* would undermine disagreement about the relevant topic. For example, consider pluralism as a *normative* position – about which things have 'intrinsic value', say: are worth having for their own sake. Suppose value pluralism – often called the 'objective list theory' – is true: more specifically, suppose that both pleasure and perfecting human nature are intrinsically valuable. If that is true, clearly disputes between hedonists (arguing that only pleasure has intrinsic value) and perfectionists (claiming that only perfecting human nature matters for its own sake) are a bit misguided: *both things* matter intrinsically, so why try to put each other down? Even so, there is still a genuine disagreement between them: hedonists argue that *only* pleasure matters, and perfectionists make the same argument for their proposal. In short, they give conflicting answers to the question *which things have intrinsic value*, and that they mistakenly assume that *only one of them* can be right does not make their disagreement any less valid – only, perhaps, a bit pointless. And I think something similar may be true for pluralism in meta-ethics: even if both parties in a dispute are partly right, their claims of exclusivity commit them to error – and disagreement.

[10] In reality, I suspect there will be an interplay between 'top-down' and 'bottom-up' methods: paradigmatic samples matter, but so do higher-level constraints on what moral opinions could be. But as long as theorists can more-or-less agree on such higher-level platitudes as well, I do not think this kind of 'reflective equilibrium' threatens pluralism: if the combined samples and constraints can roughly pinpoint the discourse of interest, we get a shared subject matter.

[11] To be fair, this kind of approach does require that theorists are indeed focusing on roughly the same kinds of paradigmatic samples: if they are instead trying to characterize entirely different areas of discourse, they will still end up talking past each other. That assumption seems fairly plausible to me (cf. Finlay 2019: 196-197), especially if moral discourse is understood holistically (meaning that, even if proponents of different theories focus on slightly different samples, they intend them to be, not isolated cases, but representative instances of a much wider area of discourse), but it can be disputed.

To be fair to pluralism's critics, though, I should note that, if this kind of approach is correct, it is true that some meta-ethical claims may have to be either restated or reinterpreted. For example, imagine two meta-ethicists each arguing that their account offers the best analysis of the concept of a 'moral opinion'. If they do indeed have different concepts in mind, then it is true that their claims may not really conflict. However, if their dispute is restated, or reinterpreted, in terms of their respective accounts providing the best analysis of ordinary moral discourse, then there is a genuine disagreement between them. In my view, the costs of such reframing are tolerable – and if Finlay (2019) is right, there may well be independent reasons to favor the bottom-up approach anyway – but others may take a different view.

If this still does not convince the critic, however, there is one more possible area of disagreement to be found. Some theorists (e.g. Burgess and Plunkett 2013a, 2013b) have recently argued that, in addition to the traditional disputes in semantics, there can also be important disagreements in so-called *conceptual ethics*, which asks not what terms and concepts speakers *do* use to think and talk about the world, but which they *should* use. For example, they may dispute what the threshold for a certain contextual term should be (e.g. where the threshold for 'spiciness' should be set when cooking a meal (Plunkett and Sundell 2013: 14-15)), or whether we should be using one concept or another for certain purposes (e.g. should we include animals in the concept of an athlete? (ibid.: 16-17)). And some have suggested that such disagreements may also be important in meta-ethics.

For example, Gill (2008, 2009) stresses that he defends pluralism merely as an approach in what he calls *descriptive* meta-ethics, which attempts "to analyze ordinary uses of moral terms" (Gill 2008: 394). But, he goes on, we can also ask questions in *prescriptive* meta-ethics, which aims "to articulate the way of using moral terms that is *normatively the best*" (ibid.: 394, italics added), and he is open to there being "excellent reasons to prefer one, uniform way of using moral terms to any other" (ibid.: 394), corresponding to one of the traditional meta-ethical positions. So even if we assume that pluralism undermines traditional debates in moral semantics (about which meta-ethical account is the right one), we could still discuss, for example, which positions go well with a scientific worldview, which are more internally coherent, and which have more desirable real-world effects (Gill 2009: 233). And Plunkett and Sundell (2013) add that we could also discuss which concept is best suited to do a particular kind of *job*, e.g. of playing "a certain functional role in thought and practice, a role that includes matters of how to treat others, what to hold each other responsible for doing, and how to live more generally" (ibid.: 21). In other words, in addition to debating which concept of morality best *describes* moral discourse, theorists in meta-ethics can also debate which concept it would be *good* for us to adopt for various reasons, and there is nothing holding pluralists back from engaging in these kinds of disputes. And to some extent, as Gill (2009: 221, note 6) suggests in a footnote, this is plausibly something meta-ethicists have been doing all along: they may often agree that they are ignoring some uses of moral terms, but emphasize that their theory captures the *important* uses, the ones that they

think, for whatever reason, matter the most. Indeed, it could even turn out, as some authors have suggested, that it is pluralism that does best on this score. For example, Wright (2018) argues that a prescriptive case can be made in favor of pluralism, in particular one variously committing speakers to objectivism and relativism: our objectivist commitments may be helpful for motivating us to take a stand against behavior on which there is consensus, and to not act in those ways ourselves, while our nonobjectivist commitments may increase our tolerance towards disputed behaviors, so their moral status can be debated and negotiated respectfully. And Joyce (2012) similarly argues for a position of 'meta-ethical ambivalence', in which we acknowledge the conceptual legitimacy of alternative positions and occasionally switch between them to learn from their insights (e.g. that we cannot have the strong normativity described by objectivists, but can still have the weaker forms posited by relativists).

Of course, understanding meta-ethical disputes in this way has an obvious downside, in that it conflicts with what most meta-ethicists *think* they are doing, and what meta-ethical disagreements are thought to be about. And I agree that this is a cost: all things equal, not having to explain away theorists' self-understanding of their disputes and practices is clearly preferable to being forced to do so. However, although this may weaken pluralism to some degree, the important point for our purposes is that, even if pluralism would undermine some traditional disputes in meta-ethics, it leaves a lot of room for disagreement outside those confines. And that means the objection is unsuccessful, at least in its strong form: a less ambitious version of the objection – one that merely aims to show that pluralism faces higher explanatory costs in this area than other accounts – might still work. But that is a far weaker argument.

6. Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that two disagreement-based objections against pluralism – that it cannot satisfactorily explain moral and meta-ethical disagreement, respectively, because speakers in both contexts would frequently end up talking past each other, instead of having a genuine disagreement, due to their use of different concepts – fail to refute the theory. My overall strategy was the same in both cases: to argue that pluralism leaves more room for genuine disagreement than its critics seem to have thought. In response to the first objection, I argued that, even if there will sometimes fail to be a conflict in what moral agents are literally saying, they will often still disagree on a different level, due to the pragmatics of their claims: what speakers are using the relevant expressions *for* (e.g. to convey where they stand with respect to a particular action). And in response to the second objection, I argued that meta-ethicists can disagree both about how moral discourse, as identified through examples from ordinary practice, is to be characterized, and about which moral concept is the *best* concept along several dimensions, ranging from its practical role to its metaphysics.

So where does this leave us? Are pluralists in the clear, having completely overcome both problems of disagreement that we have discussed? Not quite: what the replies show, I think, is that, in both ordinary moral discourse and in meta-ethics, there *are* ways for pluralists to explain disagreement that are not obviously unacceptable. And that undermines any *immediate* inference from the presence of disagreement to the falsity of pluralism. Moreover, the similarity of their replies suggests that, even if pluralists have a bit more explaining to do than the more familiar versions of content-relativism, they are not obviously far worse off, and that is a good result for such a radical theory.

However, I can see at least three ways in which the objections can be revived. First, and most obviously, the suggested strategies for explaining disagreement on which the replies rely may fail for some reason, may have some fatal and irreparable flaw, and if they do, pluralism will fall with them – or will at least have to look elsewhere for an answer. Second, and relatedly, it may be objected that, even if pluralism can give us disagreement *of some kind*, it does not give us disagreement *of the kind that we want* in moral and/or meta-ethical disputes. Finlay's quasi-expressivist strategy relies heavily on the idea that many moral disputes center on a 'conflict of attitudes' instead of a straightforward conflict between what speakers believe, for example, and I suspect that will be unacceptable to many theorists. And finally, that it is *possible* for pluralists to explain disagreement does not mean that it offers the *best* explanation: compared to other, more orderly strategies in the field, it seems fair to say that the pluralist strategy is rather complex and convoluted, and even if that does not automatically disqualify the theory, it is no doubt a cost. If another theory can explain the same data without positing a mishmash of concepts, such a theory is clearly to be preferred. But making such an argument – that the overall explanatory strength of pluralism is inferior to that of other accounts – will require a much closer look at pluralism than it has gotten thus far, in order to identify what its strengths and weaknesses are and how they compare to those of other theories. It will require, in other words, a sustained argument that other theories explain the overall evidence *better,* and that is much harder than pointing to disagreement and promptly ditching the account. Pluralism may well fail in the end, but it will not go down without a fight.

Acknowledgments

Work on this article was supported by grants PUT1630 and IUT20-5 from the Estonian Research Council. For helpful comments and discussion, I am grateful to audiences at the *Disagreements: from Theory to Practice* conference in Tartu, and at work-in-progress seminars at the University of Southern California and the University of Tartu. I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for their valuable feedback on an earlier draft. And I owe special thanks to Stephen Finlay and Francesco Orsi, whose thorough and detailed feedback on previous versions of this paper, and generous advice and encouragement, helped make this article possible.

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