

Work in progress. Please don't cite or quote without permission.

How to Be a Relativist About Normativity

Sharon Street
New York University

1. Introduction

“There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” When Hamlet says this to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he is endorsing a global form of relativism about normativity. *Nothing at all*, Hamlet says, is good or bad except relative to thought. And while he doesn't make the philosopher's distinction, it's clear that Hamlet has in mind a version of “agent” as opposed to “assessor” relativism. Things are good or bad *for an agent* relative to *that agent's* thought. Denmark is a prison for Hamlet in virtue of his, Hamlet's, thinking. Denmark is *not* a prison for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, in virtue of their thought on the matter.¹

Normativity I'm understanding here to include both practical and epistemic normativity, though my focus in this paper will be almost exclusively on the former. The domain in question may usefully be characterized as the domain of truths about *normative reasons*, including not only reasons for action but also reasons for belief. While “reasons talk” is my language of choice for talking about normativity, nothing about the argument of the paper ultimately depends on it.² If you prefer to take a different normative concept as basic—Hamlet, for example, speaks in terms of *good* and *bad*—you should feel free to do so; the arguments of the paper could be adjusted accordingly.³

Hamlet was a smart guy. Still, it's safe to say that his view on normativity does not command widespread acceptance. Among philosophers, many are glad to accept a *local* relativism about *restricted* normative domains such as the domain of etiquette. But it's commonly assumed that a *global* relativism about normativity is subject to quick refutation. After all, if thinking makes it so whether something is good or bad, then doesn't that mean we can think anything we like about normative matters, and not be mistaken? And doesn't that, in turn, mean that there are no objective standards governing *any* debate, including the very debate at hand—namely whether Hamlet was *correct* that nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so? It's the classic worry about any global form of relativism, namely that it is self-undermining.

Einstein was probably smarter than Hamlet. In any case, relativism about mass and time order, as laid out in Einstein's special theory of relativity, commands almost universal acceptance among those who've had the chance to study it. There are of course major differences between the two kinds of relativism. For one thing, Hamlet's view asserts the relativity of goodness and badness to *thought*, whereas Einstein's view asserts the relativity of mass and time order to the *reference frame of the observer*, which has nothing to do with the observer's thought. Still, most would agree that there is some meaningful sense in which both views count as relativist.

It's hard to say what that sense is. Both views assert the variation of truths about a certain subject matter (mass and time order; goodness and badness) with respect to a certain parameter (the observer's reference frame; the agent's thought), but that can't be all it takes for a view to count as a relativist. We all think that truths about what season it is vary with respect to the hemisphere, for example, yet we wouldn't call ourselves relativists about the seasons.⁴ As Paul Boghossian notes, a view's counting as “relativist” seems to have something to do with the *unexpectedness* of the variation with respect to the specified parameter.⁵

Luckily, we don't need full clarity on this for our purposes. It's enough to note that there seems to be a meaningful sense in which Hamlet's view and Einstein's view both count as relativist, such that—as Boghossian suggests, and as I'll be exploring—it might be useful, for the sake of trying to formulate a coherent version of relativism about normativity, to examine the parallels between the two cases.

The question I'm interested in is this. Hamlet's view, though obviously it needs refinement, strikes many of us as right. It's a deeply plausible thought that nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so. Not in some easy sense, of course—obviously I can't just think any normative thought I like and thereby make that thought true—but in some deeper, more ultimate sense. The idea is that when push comes to shove, if there are large enough differences in the thought of two agents, and in particular enough differences in their normative attitudes, then very different things—Denmark, life itself—can be good or bad for them, with no absolute fact of the matter about who is right. Normativity ultimately depends on the evaluative perspective of a subject; it is conferred on the world by the thought of living creatures who *take* things (sometimes very different things) to be good and bad.

These are vague statements, but they set the agenda for the paper. Is there a philosophically tenable version of Hamlet's view? I think there is, and to explain it, it will be useful to start with the arguments of someone who thinks there isn't. In an illuminating set of recent writings, Paul Boghossian argues that it's surprisingly difficult, perhaps even impossible, to give a defensible formulation of global relativism about normativity.⁶ I think Boghossian is mistaken to think that there is no tenable formulation, but I agree with so much of what he says on the subject—so many of his critical points about how *not* to be a relativist about normativity—that his discussion provides an excellent starting point for mine. There is one argument in particular of Boghossian's that I wish to focus on—an argument which explores the analogy, or lack thereof, between relativism about mass and time order and relativism about normativity. Noting the success of Einstein's relativism about mass and time order, Boghossian suggests that we might try to develop a compelling version of normative relativism on the model of the mass and time order case. He concludes, however, that something is crucially different about the two cases, such that the model that works for mass and time order won't work for normativity.⁷

Against Boghossian, I'm going to argue that the model supplied by the case of relativism about mass and time order *can* be transferred rather seamlessly to the normative case. I will argue that, contrary to a widespread stereotype of the view as an “anything goes” position that is incompatible with any semblance of an objective subject matter, a global relativism about normativity no more undermines the idea that it's possible to be mistaken about normative reasons than Einstein's relativism about time order undermines the idea that it's possible to be mistaken about which came first, dinosaurs or iPhones. There are truths about normative reasons and truths about mass and time order; the claim is just that they relativize to an extra parameter in a way you might not have thought. Not only does global relativism about normativity not undermine itself, it is a plausible, attractive position, and indeed probably the *correct* one (yes, the relativist can say this), though it is impossible to make the full case here.

2. *Boghossian's account of relativism about simultaneity*

Boghossian regards Einstein's special theory of relativity as a paradigmatic example of a successful relativistic thesis, and he looks to this case for the purpose of developing a template that might assist us in the formulation of relativist views about other domains. Boghossian focuses specifically on the case of relativism about simultaneity, and I'll do the same. “Einstein, we may all agree,” Boghossian writes, “discovered that a relativism about simultaneity is true. What kind of a discovery was that?” (p. 53).⁸

Boghossian's first point is that relativism about simultaneity cannot be understood as a purely semantic discovery.⁹ In particular, Boghossian says, it's implausible that, prior to Einstein, in uttering sentences of the form "e1 is simultaneous with e2" ordinary competent speakers would have *meant* the content *e1 is simultaneous with e2 relative to the (salient) frame of reference F* rather than the content *e1 is simultaneous with e2*. "Plausibly," Boghossian says, "pre-Einsteinian speakers attached absolutist meanings to their discourse about time order and had no awareness of the need to relativize their time order claims to frames of reference. Otherwise, it would be hard to explain why Einstein's views came as a surprise or why he couldn't have arrived at them by doing some semantics. So, at least in this case, relativism should not be equated with some claim about meaning" (p. 54).

After examining some related possibilities, Boghossian concludes: "The moral of this discussion is twofold: first, that a relativism about simultaneity is best construed as a *factual* claim; and, second, that it's best construed as a *revisionary* claim to the effect that, while the semantics of simultaneity discourse might lead one to think that there are two-place simultaneity facts, in reality there are only three-place simultaneity facts" (p. 56).

Boghossian offers the following summary of how to understand a relativistic thesis about simultaneity (p. 56):

- (a) The central predicate of simultaneity discourse is the predicate "is simultaneous with." (Identification)
- (b) This predicate appears to express the concept of a two-place relation and to denote a two-place relation. (Semantical Appearances)
- (c) These semantical appearances are in fact correct. (Appearances Correct)
- (d) However, no such two-place relation is instantiated in the world; instead the only instantiated property in the vicinity is a three-place relation: e1 is simultaneous with e2 relative to variable frame of reference F. (Error)
- (e) Because of this fact we should no longer make judgments of the form e1 is simultaneous with e2 but only judgments of the form e1 is simultaneous with e2 relative to the (salient) frame of reference F. (Recommendation)

3. Boghossian on the transfer to the normative case

Boghossian is happy with this as an account of relativism about simultaneity. But he thinks it doesn't help the relativist about normativity. The above account, he writes, "provides a good model for the famous cases drawn from physics. But it doesn't provide a good model for understanding the sorts of relativism that have most interested philosophers, relativisms about such normative domains as morality and epistemic justification" (p. 57). Why not, according to Boghossian?

Boghossian focuses on the case of morality. Moral relativism on the above model, he says, would be the view that we should not judge simply that *Slavery is wrong*, but only that *Slavery is wrong relative to some particular moral code M*, where moral codes are sets of general propositions specifying alternative conceptions of moral right and wrong (p. 58).

The problem with this, Boghossian argues, is as follows: "The trouble is that claims like *Slavery is wrong* are clearly *normative* and that is crucial to their role as moral judgments; whereas claims like *Slavery is wrong relative to some particular moral code M* are merely logical remarks about what does and does not follow from a particular moral code. Even people with starkly conflicting moral perspectives could endorse a claim like *Slavery is wrong relative to some particular moral code M'*" (p. 58).

He elaborates: “Intuitively, someone who asserts that *It’s not the case that slavery is wrong* would be sharply disagreeing with the person who utters *Slavery is wrong*. But if we are restricted to claims like *Slavery is wrong relative to some moral code M*, we seem unable to capture that disagreement. Someone asserting *It’s not the case that slavery is wrong relative to moral code M* would simply be disagreeing about the logical properties of M and not about the wrongness of slavery. And if he were to assert *Slavery is wrong relative to (his own) moral code M**, he would have expressed no disagreement with *Slavery is wrong relative to moral code M*, since both of [these claims] could be true. Either way, we seem unable, on the view on offer, to explain how there could be genuine disagreement about normative matters” (p. 58).

I agree with Boghossian that this formulation of moral relativism is unattractive and should be thrown out. But I think Boghossian too quickly concludes that a viable relativism about normativity can’t be fashioned on the model of relativism about simultaneity. To see how it can be, we need to look again at the simultaneity case and notice a different way of thinking about it.

4. *An alternative account of relativism about simultaneity*

In his account of relativism about simultaneity, Boghossian commits himself to views on the *concept* of simultaneity. According to Boghossian, prior to Einstein, ordinary competent speakers “attached absolutist meanings to their discourse about time order”; the word “simultaneous,” as uttered by them, expressed “an absolutist concept” (p. 54). As Boghossian understands the case, it was, so to speak, “built into” ordinary speakers’ pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity that the simultaneity of two events is an absolute matter, not a relative matter.

Thus, on Boghossian’s account, the discovery of relativism about simultaneity was in part a discovery about the world—a discovery, as he puts it, that there was only a certain three-place relation where one might have thought there was a two-place relation—but it was also a discovery that mandated the abandonment of an old, confused concept—a concept of simultaneity that had the assumption of absolutism built into it—for a new and improved concept.

This is a reasonable way of thinking about the case and I’m not going to argue that there’s anything intrinsically wrong with it. What I do want to argue, though, is that there is a different, at least equally legitimate way to think about it.

In particular, I’d like to press the following question: Why suppose, as Boghossian does, that the pre-Einsteinian *concept* of simultaneity took any stand on the question of absolutism versus relativism about simultaneity? Why not think, instead, that the pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity was *neutral* on the question of absolutism versus relativism? Boghossian is adamant that *relativism* was not built into ordinary speakers’ pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity (p. 54), and on this point he is surely right. What is a bit puzzling is why he goes the other way and assumes that *absolutism* was built into ordinary speakers’ concept. No doubt pre-Einsteinian speakers all *believed* that the simultaneity of two events was an absolute matter. Had you asked them, surely they would have affirmed it. But why should we regard that assumption as having been part of the very *concept* of simultaneity, as opposed to a universally shared, implicit, substantive assumption—one that no one until Einstein had ever thought to question, but which the concept itself left room to question?

In other words, we have two ways of understanding what happened with the discovery of relativism about simultaneity:

Boghossian’s account:

1. Prior to Einstein, people deployed the absolutist concept *simultaneous*_{ABS}, which had built right into it the idea that the simultaneity of two events is an absolute matter.

2. Einstein discovered that the only instantiated property in the vicinity of this concept was a three-place relation, between a pair of events and a variable frame of reference.
3. So we were forced to abandon the old concept *simultaneous*_{ABS}, trading it in for a new concept of simultaneity, one which doesn't involve the confused absolutist presupposition.

Alternative account:

1. Prior to Einstein, people deployed a concept of simultaneity that was itself *neutral* on the question of absolutism versus relativism.
2. Prior to Einstein, no one had thought to *ask* whether simultaneity was an absolute matter or relative to the observer's reference frame. But that doesn't mean it was built into the *concept* of simultaneity that simultaneity is absolute. (Compare: Before Copernicus, everyone thought that the sun revolved around the earth. That doesn't mean it was built into the *concept* of the earth that this was so.) Instead, we may construe it as having been an unquestioned, universally shared, implicit, substantive assumption that facts about simultaneity are absolute.
3. On this way of looking at things, the pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity served us well, so to speak: It *left room* for people coherently to raise the question whether simultaneity is absolute or relative to reference frame, and that's what Einstein eventually came along and did. He then argued, persuasively, that as a substantive matter about the nature of simultaneity, whether two events are simultaneous is *not* an absolute matter, but rather, surprisingly, depends on the observer's reference frame. The argument for this conclusion is the argument for the special theory of relativity, to be found in physics textbooks.
4. On this way of looking at what happened, the word "simultaneous" was used univocally throughout—in a thin sense that does not itself take a stand on the absolutism/relativism debate. Let's call this thinner concept *simultaneous*_{NEUT}, to distinguish it from *simultaneous*_{ABS}.

For my purposes, I don't need to argue that one of these two accounts is superior to the other. I just need to point out that there *is* this second, at least equally legitimate way of thinking about the simultaneity case. And I see no way around this admission. For even if you prefer the first account, you are going to have to say (as Boghossian does) that there's *something* in virtue of which both the confused, pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity and our revised, present-day concept both deserve to be called *concepts of simultaneity*. And then we can point to whatever *that* is and say that *that* marks out a thinner notion of simultaneity that remained constant throughout the period before and after the discovery. Boghossian himself seems to acknowledge as much at one point, writing: "But what is it to judge that there are no two-place but only three-place *simultaneity* properties? What qualifies these three-place relations to be called 'simultaneity relations' when our original discourse about simultaneity recognized only two-place simultaneity relations? A plausible answer is that the three-place relations play much the same explanatory role as the original (uninstantiated) two-place relations and so can be thought of as three-place versions of the same genus" (p. 56).

Beyond a point, I don't think there's any terrifically interesting dispute here. On either way of looking at things, an important discovery was made and a mistaken assumption was recognized, and that's what matters. The rest is just a question of where we *locate* the mistaken assumption—whether we say that it was built into the pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity itself (as on the *simultaneous*_{ABS} interpretation), or whether we say that it was an unquestioned, universally shared, implicit, substantive assumption about the answer to a question left open by

the concept (as on the *simultaneous*_{NEUT} interpretation). While I think there's a good case to be made for the latter view, I am skeptical that there is any interesting, deep fact of the matter here.

That being said, in the next section, I make a brief case for the alternative account. My purpose in doing so is not to establish that it's the better way to think about the case—again, I don't need that strong claim for my argument—but rather (1) to shore up my point that it's at least an equally legitimate way of thinking about it; and (2) to clarify further what is involved in this way of thinking about the case—and, in particular, to identify the test for concept identity that it's operating with. In this next part of the discussion, the parallels with the normative case will start to emerge.

5. *A case for the alternative account of relativism about simultaneity*

No matter what your ultimate view on the analytic/synthetic distinction, we all recognize, at least in practice, a difference between questions that are settled by the meaning of the words involved, and questions that are not. For example, recently my preschooler and I were contemplating a “Violators will be prosecuted” sign in a parking lot and I was answering a barrage of questions about it. After one of my attempts to explain, my son asked, “*But Mommy, why is a violator someone who breaks the rules?*” The best answer to this question, I thought, and I hope you agree—and in any case the answer I gave—was “That's just what the word means, Sweetheart.” (This seems to be the best answer to about 10% of his questions these days.¹⁰)

So going ahead and accepting at least a rough working distinction here, what's a good test for whether something is “built into” a given concept or not? One time-honored test—and moreover the test that Boghossian himself at times seems to employ¹¹—is this: What possibilities do competent speakers of the language regard, at least on first inspection, as coherent ones? What claims do they meet with linguistic bafflement? What questions do they regard as having an “open feel,” and which do they regard as immediately settled by the meaning of the terms? People coming at things from a metaethical perspective will recognize this as the “open question test” that G. E. Moore famously used to argue that goodness is a non-natural property. Moore's test has been thoroughly discredited as a test for *property identity*, but as a test for *concept identity*, it remains very much in use, seemingly with good reason.¹²

In any case, by this standard of concept identity, was absolutism about simultaneity “built into” the pre-Einsteinian concept? While historians of science are the right people to address this,¹³ it seems likely that when Einstein began asking his questions about whether simultaneity is absolute or whether it might instead be relative to the reference frame of the observer, he wasn't met with uncomprehending stares, worries about incoherence, and people saying “What do you mean, Einstein? It's just part of the *meaning of the word* that simultaneity is absolute.” Presumably they didn't suspect that Einstein was incompetent with the concept *simultaneity* in the way a three-year-old might be incompetent with the concept *violator*. Instead, I assume, people pretty immediately regarded the question he was asking as at least a *coherent* one—surprising and *substantively* baffling, no doubt, but not *linguistically* baffling. It was a question about which it seemed, at least at the outset of the investigation, either side could ultimately be right about. The question had an “open feel.”

To put the point another way, it would have been silly to respond to Einstein's musings by saying, “Wait, it's just part of the *concept* of simultaneity that it's absolute, so what are you even asking here?” The proper response to such a remark would have been, “Well, fine, if you want to regard that as built into the concept, go ahead, but then let's just introduce another concept—*simultaneity*₂, let's call it—one that doesn't settle the question of relativity to reference frame as a matter of meaning—and get on with our inquiry.” But why even bother with this little

detour? Someone who made such a remark would seem to be wasting people's time, failing to grasp the concept of simultaneity in the (neutral) sense it was clearly *already* being employed as soon as people began asking these questions about relativity to reference frame.

Boghossian himself makes a related point in the normativity context, when he argues that relativism about normativity (like relativism about simultaneity) is not a purely semantic thesis. Were we to construe moral relativism as a purely semantic thesis, Boghossian says, then moral relativism “would amount merely to a claim about the nature of moral discourse as we have come to develop it up to that point. And that claim would appear to leave it open that—out there—there are perfectly absolute facts about what ought and ought not to be done, facts that our discourse, as we have come to develop it, fails to talk about, but which some other possible discourse, that we have not yet developed, could talk about. In other words, a purely semantical construal of relativism seems consistent with something that one would have expected any real relativism to foreclose upon, namely, that there are absolute facts of the relevant sort out there waiting to be represented by our language and which we have up to now somehow managed to overlook” (p. 57). I completely agree with Boghossian here. One way to put his point is that if we didn't already have normative concepts that were neutral about whether relativism was true, we'd have to invent them, in order to ask the questions we're interested in.¹⁴ But similarly, I want to say here: If we didn't already have a simultaneity concept that was neutral about whether absolutism was true, we'd have to invent one, so as to ask the questions we're interested in. And that's true not only of those who were confronting Einstein's ideas for the first time, but of us now. For don't we want to leave ourselves conceptual means of posing skeptical questions about Einstein's thesis? Don't we want to be able to entertain the possibility: “Maybe Einstein was wrong—maybe there are absolute facts about simultaneity after all”?

No matter what, then, it seems we're going to need the concept *simultaneity*_{NEUT}. So why not think it was our concept all along? Moreover, why not think, contrary to what Boghossian suggests, that *simultaneity*_{NEUT}, rather than some new concept *simultaneity*_{REL}, is the one we still have today? After all, isn't the neutral concept the one we all came to our first physics class with? When first introduced to the special theory of relativity, we were surprised and fascinated, not linguistically confused. Relativism about simultaneity didn't strike us merely as a semantic point (as it would if our concept was *simultaneity*_{REL}), or as a conceptual impossibility (as it would if our concept was *simultaneous*_{ABS}). All this seems true, anyway, on one perfectly reasonable way of thinking about what's built into a given concept—namely, the open question test, or test of linguistic bafflement—not a precise test that will decide every case, obviously, but one which has a useful place.

Again, though, my goal here is simply to establish that there is this second, at least equally legitimate way of characterizing the discovery of relativism about simultaneity—a characterization which it seems to me Boghossian does not have clearly in view as an option. And it's this second way of thinking about things that I think provides the more helpful model when we turn to the question of how to formulate relativism about normativity.

6. *Transferring the alternative account to the normative case*

I'll start with a schematic statement of how I think we should transfer the model of relativism about simultaneity to the case of relativism about normativity.

Summary of proposed account of *relativism about simultaneity*:

- (A) We understand the *concept* of simultaneity as neutral on the question of absolutism versus relativism about simultaneity.

- (B) *Absolutism about simultaneity*: Whether two events e_1 and e_2 are simultaneous is an absolute matter; in particular, whether e_1 and e_2 are simultaneous does not depend on the reference frame of the observer.
- (C) *Relativism about simultaneity*: Whether e_1 and e_2 are simultaneous is not an absolute matter; in particular, whether e_1 and e_2 are simultaneous depends on the reference frame of the observer.
- (D) *Relativism about simultaneity is correct*. The argument for this conclusion is a substantive argument. It's the argument for the special theory of relativity.

Summary of proposed account of *relativism about normativity*:

- (A') We understand the *concept* of a normative reason as neutral on the question of absolutism versus relativism about normative reasons.
- (B') *Absolutism about normative reasons*: Whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y is an absolute matter; in particular, whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y does not depend on A 's normative attitudes.
- (C') *Relativism about normative reasons*: Whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y is not an absolute matter; in particular, whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y depends on A 's normative attitudes. More specifically yet, whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y depends on whether the conclusion that X is a normative reason for agent A to Y follows from A 's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts.

Example to illustrate contrast: Imagine an ideally coherent Caligula.¹⁵ By stipulation, it follows from Caligula's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts that *the fact that the torture victim is suffering is not a normative reason for Caligula to stop*. According to the *absolutist* about normative reasons, in spite of what Caligula's own thought implies on the matter, the fact that the torture victim is suffering *is* a normative reason for Caligula to stop. The *relativist*, in contrast, says there are no such absolute facts about reasons; the fact that the torture victim is suffering is not a normative reason for Caligula to stop. Nothing is a normative reason for anything else (nothing is either good or bad) except *for* individual agents, in virtue of their own thinking about the matter. If something *is* a normative reason for an agent to do something, that's ultimately because his or her own thinking implies that it is so.

- (D') *Relativism about normative reasons is correct*. The argument for this conclusion is a substantive argument. In my view, the strongest argument is epistemological. On the supposition of absolutism about normative reasons, we are (I would argue, though the point of this paper is not to argue this) forced to conclude that in all likelihood we're hopelessly off track in our views about normative reasons, an unacceptable conclusion.

The account of normative relativism I've just sketched obviously raises many questions. So here it's worth emphasizing that the goal of this paper is not to develop a detailed version of the position just stated, but rather to map out the *general form* that I think any successful global normative relativism must take. Among the many important issues I will not be addressing in this paper are (1) how, in depth, to understand what I'm calling here "normative attitudes"; (2) the ins and outs of the substantive argument, referred to above in (D'); (3) why I go for the specific statement of relativism that I do (after all, it's one thing to reject absolutism, but that doesn't yet

force us to a specific brand of relativism—further argument is required); and (4) how to deal with some of the special hurdles that *epistemic* reasons might seem to pose for the view.¹⁶ In the next section, I will elaborate on (A'). In the remaining sections, I'll further develop the overall position by considering several important objections.

7. *The neutrality of the concept of a normative reason*

The case for understanding the concept of a normative reason as neutral on the absolutism/relativism debate is, if anything, stronger than the case for understanding the concept of simultaneity as neutral. The normative context is, after all, the classic context in which “open question” considerations are regularly invoked to challenge any claim to have found this or that substantive assumption about the good built right into the very concept.

Still, to fill out the picture, some argument here will be useful. First, consider the idea that *relativism* is somehow built into our normative concepts. There once was a time—a very long time ago—when I naively imagined that something along the following lines might be just a beautiful, informative *analysis* of the concept of a normative reason:

For X to be a normative reason for A to Y is for this very conclusion to follow from A's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts.

I was quickly, and rightly, completely disabused of this notion, however, at least in the following sense: It is obviously possible to be a competent speaker and to be convinced this claim is false. If people like Ronald Dworkin, Allan Gibbard, Thomas Nagel, and Derek Parfit aren't competent speakers, after all, then I suppose no one is. But they all think this thesis is false. So relativism is not part of the *concept* of a normative reason, at least on this one, entirely reasonable test of concept identity.¹⁷

What about *absolutism*? Is it built into the concept? Well, no, not on the test we're employing. After all, I like to think I'm a reasonably competent speaker myself, and I think that absolutism about normative reasons is false. Or, in case you doubt *my* competence: Bernard Williams was a pretty competent speaker, and he too thought that absolutism about normative reasons is false. And we could go on and on like this. The bottom line: Competent speakers everywhere regard it as an open question whether absolutism or relativism about normative reasons is correct. QED, the concept of a normative reason is neutral on the relativism/absolutism debate, on the standard of concept identity we're employing.

We saw earlier that Boghossian seems to assume without a great deal of argument that our pre-Einsteinian concept of simultaneity was absolutist. Boghossian similarly seems to assume without a great deal of argument that our present-day *normative* concepts are absolutist, such that to go relativist would be to propose a *revision* to our existing normative concepts. If the case for questioning this assumption is as strong as I've just suggested it is, however, what leads Boghossian to make the assumption?

In part Boghossian seems to be taking his cue from what he calls the “semantical appearances” of normative discourse, in which no doubt we often say that this or that is a normative reason, or is rational, or is to be done or inferred or whatever it might be, *period*, without qualification. But that is no good basis for concluding that the assumption of absolutism is built into these *concepts*. After all, in many other contexts we explicitly relativize while using these same concepts. We say that this or that is a normative reason for you, but not for me, or that this or that would be rational for you to do but not me, and so forth, depending on the subjective states of the person whose reasons are in question. That a store carries mint chocolate chip ice cream is a normative reason for one person to go but not another, for example, in a way that everyone agrees depends in part on the person's subjective states. The interesting and

difficult question, of course, is whether *all* normative reasons are like that—but the point I’m making here is just that our *concept* of a normative reason seems to leave room for that possibility.

Moreover, isn’t that how we want it? Don’t we want to leave ourselves—and moreover, don’t we already clearly have—the conceptual resources to argue about whether there are any absolute truths about how to live? As we saw, against the idea that normative *relativism* is a purely semantic thesis, Boghossian argues: “a purely semantical construal of relativism seems consistent with something that one would have expected any real relativism to foreclose upon, namely, that there are absolute facts of the relevant sort out there waiting to be represented by our language and which we have up to now somehow managed to overlook” (p. 57). As I said, I think he’s entirely correct about this. But it would seem that we could just substitute terms and insert a “no” and make the exact same argument against the idea that *absolutism* is a purely semantic thesis: “a purely semantical construal of [absolutism] seems consistent with something that one would have expected any real [absolutism] to foreclose upon, namely, that there are [*no*] absolute facts of the relevant sort out there. . . .” Much better, then, to regard absolutism as a widely shared substantive assumption about the kinds of reasons there are—one that could turn out to be false, just as absolutism about simultaneity turned out to be false.

Boghossian’s focus on the *moral* case may be another thing that leads him to assume that our normative concepts are absolutist, for certainly when it comes to *moral* concepts there is a strong case to be made that the assumption of absolutism is built into them. That’s essentially Mackie’s famous “semantic thesis,” as we know.¹⁸ But this is also why it’s so philosophically unhelpful, in my view, to focus on *moral* concepts as opposed to general normative concepts. For the semantic thesis, even if true, of course doesn’t help the would-be defender of absolute morality, because there is still the possibility that—as we now have to put it—these concepts, absolutist though they are in nature, don’t pick out anything in reality. Just as establishing that the concept of God is the concept of a necessarily existing being doesn’t establish that God exists, establishing that moral concepts involve the idea of absolute requirements doesn’t establish that anything is absolutely required. No one would disagree with these points when they are put this baldly, but in the heat of debate it’s easy to lose sight of them. Better to sidestep the distractions introduced by moral concepts and ask in more clearly neutral terms: Is anything absolutely a *normative reason* for anything else? Does anything *matter* absolutely? Is anything absolutely *good* or *bad*, or was Hamlet right?¹⁹

8. Boghossian’s objection revisited

With the basic proposal in hand, let’s first see how it handles Boghossian’s original objection to a moral relativism formulated on the model of the simultaneity case. That is to say, one might wonder: Why doesn’t a slightly altered version of Boghossian’s original objection apply to the above proposal too? In other words, why not object: “You’ve lost the normativity here. Claims like *X is a normative reason for A to Y* are *normative* claims—they take a position on how to live—and that is crucial to their role; whereas claims like *The conclusion that X is a normative reason for agent A to Y follows from A’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts* are merely logical remarks about what does and does not follow from a particular set of normative attitudes. Even people with starkly conflicting views on whether X is a normative reason for agent A to Y could endorse a claim like *The conclusion that X is a normative reason for agent A to Y follows from A’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts.*” (Cf. Boghossian on p. 58.)

Here is how the relativist should reply:

Boghossian is entirely correct to argue that these claims don't and can't play the same role; he is entirely correct that one claim takes a position on how to live and the other is a "merely logical" remark that takes no position on how to live.

However, on the version of normative relativism I'm proposing, no claim is being made that these two kinds of claims do or ever could play the same role—nor is it being proposed that we could or ever should substitute the one kind of talk for the other in our discourse. The concept of something's *being a normative reason for A to Y* and the concept of *that conclusion's following from A's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts* are *not* the same concepts—that is being taken as a given in the present context. Moreover, no *revision* of our concepts is being proposed. On the view being suggested, we should *not* seek to eliminate or reform or otherwise alter the concept of something's being a *normative reason* for something else. The concept is just fine the way it is, so to speak. Indeed, we *need* the concept in order to ask the questions we're interested in—about whether anything matters absolutely, or whether, ultimately, things matter only because we take them to matter—in the same way we need a neutral concept of simultaneity in order to ask whether Einstein was right or wrong in thinking that simultaneity is relative to reference frame.

So normativity is clearly by no means "lost" on this proposal. On the contrary, it's as with us as ever, because on this proposal, the relativist thesis itself is understood as a substantive normative claim. In stating the relativist thesis, we are ourselves simply deploying the concept of a normative reason as usual and making a very general claim about what kinds of reasons there are. In particular, we're saying there are no absolute reasons, only agent-relative ones. We're taking a substantive position on what normative reasons every agent has under what circumstances, and asserting that the normative reasons of all agents vary systematically with their normative attitudes in the way indicated.

In the way that we might say that "The fact that they sell mint chocolate chip ice cream is a normative reason to go to that store for anyone who loves that flavor"—where this is clearly a normative claim about who has what reasons under what circumstances—so here we are making a much more general but structurally analogous normative claim that X is a normative reason to Y for anyone whose global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts imply that conclusion. We are also denying many other normative claims—for example, that the fact that the victim is suffering is a normative reason for Caligula to stop torturing him. (Note, however, that the fact that the victim is suffering is a reason for *us* to stop Caligula, assuming your attitudes are anything like mine. And we might furthermore have good reason to *say* Caligula has reason to stop, even though we think strictly speaking that's false.)

9. *Is the thesis of normative relativism absolutely true or only relatively true?*

While this might answer the one objection by Boghossian, one might think that it does so only at the expense of running straight into worse problems, ones that Boghossian raises for other formulations of normative relativism. In particular, since on this proposal, normative relativism is itself being understood as a substantive normative claim, the traditional worries about relativist views—concerning whether, and if so how, they apply to themselves and undermine themselves—start to arise.

Begin by noting that the relativist thesis as stated does *not* include itself in its own scope. The relativist thesis says that *whether X is a normative reason for A to Y* depends on A's normative attitudes. But the thesis neither says nor in any way implies that the truth of that very thesis—i.e., the truth of *whether X is a normative reason for A to Y depends on A's normative*

attitudes—itself depends on A’s attitudes. So the relativist thesis does not, taken by itself, apply to itself and undermine itself.²⁰

Still, in keeping with traditional worries, an objector may insist that the view faces an embarrassing question, namely, what is the status of the relativist thesis itself? In particular, is *that thesis* absolutely true or only relatively true? Either way, the objection goes, the view faces major problems. If the relativist goes absolutist about the truth of her relativist thesis, the worry is that she is making an unprincipled exception: if she admits *this* absolute truth about normative reasons, why not admit others? If, on the other hand, the relativist goes relativist about the truth of her relativist thesis, the worry is that the view undermines itself: if her view is only relatively true, then why should anyone else who doesn’t share her attitudes even be listening to her?

Start with the option of going absolutist. In this context, this would mean saying that the relativist thesis holds absolutely, and in particular, that it holds independently of whether it (the relativist thesis) follows from A’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts.

Because I regard the relativist thesis as itself a substantive normative claim about what reasons there are, I regard this way of going as a non-starter for the relativist, and won’t spend much time discussing it. Boghossian summarizes the point well in the following passage: “Once we have admitted some absolute normative principles, we can no longer pretend to have metaphysical or epistemological scruples against them.... The upshot is that once we have admitted that there are at least some non-relative [normative] principles, it’s hard to see how to stop short of claiming that there are at least as many as there intuitively seem to be” (p. 68).

I think Boghossian is exactly right on this point. Whatever worries inspired one to go relativist about normativity in the first place—and in my case, they’re epistemological, as I’ll explain further below—are going to reassert themselves immediately if you are a normative absolutist at *any* level. So if you’re going to be a normative relativist, you’d better be one “all the way down,” otherwise there’s really no point—in terms of increased naturalistic comprehensibility—in being one at all.

10. Going relativist about the relativism

So let’s turn to the relativist’s other option—that of going relativist about her relativism. If one goes this route, then one accepts that the relativist thesis itself is not absolutely true but rather only relatively true—that is, true for some agent A depending on A’s normative attitudes, and in particular on whether it (the relativist thesis) follows from A’s global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts. But then the objection becomes: If the relativist thesis is itself merely relatively true, then why is the relativist even bothering to assert it, so to speak? What grip does it have on anyone else? The normative absolutist might justly challenge the normative relativist: “Yeah, well, maybe *your* thinking makes it so that relativism about normative reasons is true, but *my* thinking makes it so that *absolutism* about normative reasons is true, and what are you going to do about it?”

Let’s nail down the worry a little more precisely. To do so, it is useful to imagine a character named Abe. I haven’t said much about what an agent’s normative attitudes consist in, but on the view I have in mind, they’re just all of the agent’s views (implicit and explicit, reflective and unreflective) on what normative reasons there are. They are, in other words, just all of Abe’s views of the form X is a normative reason for A to Y.

But this raises the specter: What if, among all of Abe’s views of the form X is a normative reason for A to Y, there are many views like the following:

- *The fact that the torture victim is suffering is a normative reason for even an ideally coherent Caligula to stop...*

and a long list of other views on normative reasons, all of the form:

- *X is a normative reason for A to Y (even though that conclusion is NOT entailed by A's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts)...*

In other words, what if Abe is an *absolutist* about normative reasons? Won't it, in that case, follow from *his* global set of normative attitudes that he and others have normative reasons that do *not* depend on whether that conclusion follows from A's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts? In other words, won't it follow from *his* global set of normative attitudes that absolutism about reasons is true and relativism about reasons is false?

If this is so, then by the relativist's own lights, relativism about reasons may be true for her, the relativist, but false for Abe. Absolutism about reasons—if that is what follows from *Abe's* global set of normative attitudes—is true for Abe. While this isn't exactly a *contradiction*, it's clearly an unwelcome, unstable result. If this is the upshot of the relativist's position, then it seems the absolutist is perfectly justified in saying: "If that's really your view, why should I listen to what you're saying at all? On your own view, so long as I'm convinced enough that absolutism is true, it *is* true for me, and there's not a thing you can do about it. Moreover, why did you initially state your relativist position as if it's true full stop? That was misleading. You should have just said, 'It's true for me that relativism is true.'"

In my view, the right route for the relativist at this juncture is unflinchingly to grab the bull by the horns and argue that the relativist thesis *is* indeed only relatively true—that is, true for some agent A depending on whether it (the relativist thesis) follows from A's global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts—but then argue that the relativist thesis is true *for every A*—that is, for anyone who is engaging in normative thought at all. The normative relativist should argue, in other words, that relativism about reasons *follows from ANY global set of normative attitudes in combination with the non-normative facts*.

How might the relativist make such an argument? Consider the specter of Abe again. Some agents' global sets of normative attitudes will indeed have among them, to start out, many absolutist views about reasons. The claim is going to be that one can't consistently both (1) think that there are absolute truths about reasons; and (2) think that one is reliable about them. The commitment to absolutism, as I've argued elsewhere, brings with it the consequence that one is in all likelihood hopeless at recognizing the absolute normative truths that one posits. Roughly speaking, one surveys the infinite set of ideally coherent normative perspectives and realizes that one has, by one's own lights, no reason whatsoever to think that the causes which undeniably shaped the substantive content of one's views on what matters would have landed one anywhere near the absolute truth of the matter, were there any such truth. But no matter *what* your normative views, you can't simultaneously continue to affirm them while also regarding them as in all likelihood false. So even if you start off with a normative standpoint loaded with absolutist views about reasons, you must ultimately abandon absolutism on pain of thinking those same views are in all likelihood false.

It's interesting to note where we are, dialectically: The relativist pursuing the strategy I am suggesting maintains that it's actually the commitment to *absolutism* about reasons that is self-undermining. If you hold it, the argument goes, you also have to think you're probably wrong in holding the substantive views you hold, since you have reason to think you'd be completely unreliable about *absolute* normative truths if there were any. In other words, right back at you, absolutist, with the charge of self-undermining.

The point of this paper is not to make that argument, however; it's an argument I try to make elsewhere. The point of this paper, rather, is to outline the broad strategy that I think a defensible relativism about normativity must take—a strategy that it seems to me Boghossian and others who have doubted the tenability of normative relativism have overlooked. And I've now finished saying what I think the best strategy is.

In summary, the strategy has three parts:

(i) First, we accept the “open question test” as a reasonable test for concept identity. We employ the open question test to show that our most basic normative *concepts* are neutral on the question of absolutism versus relativism about normativity. In short: The question whether anything matters absolutely isn't a semantic question.

(ii) Second, we understand relativism about normativity as itself a normative thesis in the sense that it uses a neutral normative concept, such as the concept of a normative reason, to state that normativity is always relative to a normative standpoint. It asserts the substantive normative claim that nothing matters, or is required, or is a normative reason, absolutely.

(iii) Third, we accept the challenge that so understood—as a substantive normative claim—normative relativism is itself only relatively true. But then we argue that normative relativism is entailed by every conceivable normative standpoint, including the absolutist's. The general strategy here? Say what is constitutive of the normative standpoint. Then show how, if you occupy it, then by your own lights normative relativism is true.

Accepting the challenge articulated in (iii) is obviously to take on something ambitious. But I actually genuinely think it can be done. And I think it's the normative relativist's only viable option, in any case. Finally, in case it helps, note that while the argument is ambitious, it's not half as ambitious as the arguments we see Kantian ethicists, at least some of them, attempting all the time. For the Kantian ethicists, at least on one reading, are trying to show that *morality* follows from within every conceivable normative standpoint. It's a much more modest thing to try to show that agent-relativism about normative reasons follows from within every conceivable normative standpoint.

11. Conclusion

At the outset I said that relativism about normativity no more undermines the idea that it's possible to be mistaken about normative reasons than Einstein's relativism about time order undermines the idea that it's possible to be mistaken about which came first, dinosaurs or iPhones. Let me conclude by trying to fill out that thought a bit more.

According to relativism about simultaneity, whether e1 and e2 are simultaneous depends on the reference frame of the observer. There is no absolute fact of the matter. But that doesn't mean you can't be mistaken on matters of simultaneity. For one thing, it's a mistake to reject relativism about simultaneity. No matter what reference frame you're in, that thesis holds. For another thing, you can be mistaken about whether e1 and e2 are simultaneous relative to a specified reference frame. No matter what reference frame you're in, the answer to *that* question is the same.

According to relativism about normativity, whether X is a normative reason for A to Y depends on A's normative attitudes. There is no absolute fact of the matter. But that doesn't mean you can't be mistaken on matters of normative reasons. For one thing, it's a mistake to reject relativism about normativity. No matter what your normative attitudes, that thesis holds. For another thing, you can be mistaken about whether X is a normative reason for a specified agent A to Y. No matter what your normative attitudes, the answer to *that* question is the same.

So normative relativism as I've laid it out actually gets us a great deal of objectivity. But the objectivity has its limits, of course. After all, unlike relativism about simultaneity, normative relativism asserts a relativity to *thought*. On the relativist position I've suggested, there is one very important sense in which it is impossible to make a mistake. In particular, so long as an agent is ideally coherent in his global set of normative attitudes, then on the view I've proposed, he can't be mistaken. When it comes to normative reasons, there is no privileged *ideally coherent* normative standpoint on the world, just as when it comes to simultaneity, there is no privileged reference frame. But the key thing not to lose sight of is that ideal coherence is a very tall order.²¹ I've argued elsewhere that one can accept that there is no privileged ideally coherent normative standpoint while at the same time holding on to most of our intuitive normative judgments about *actual human beings* here on planet earth, a place where no one is ideally coherent.²²

So: Hamlet was right that nothing is good or bad but thinking makes it so. But it by no means follows from this that you can think *any* normative thought and be correct. Not at all. That's because the moment you start thinking normative thoughts, you can fail to recognize what your own thoughts imply. And what I've suggested here is that no matter what your normative thoughts, they imply relativism about normativity.²³

Notes

¹ One might question, on the following grounds, whether Hamlet's remark is best read as a statement of *relativism*. Hamlet is not only suggesting that truths about what is good and bad *relativize* to thought; he is also making (what one might think is) the further claim that thought is what *makes* things good and bad. While this distinction sounds significant on first blush, it is not clear to me that in the present context it amounts to an important one. In any case, I won't attend to the distinction in the main text because even on the assumption that there *is* an important distinction here, I think Hamlet is right on both counts, and the paper may be read as attempt to show how one may coherently hold *either* or *both* that (1) truths about good and bad relativize to thought; and that (2) thought is what *makes* things good and bad. As I see it, the argument might equally well have been pitched as "How to Be a Subjectivist..." or "How to Be a Constructivist..." or "How to Be a Global Antirealist...": each way of casting the debate has its advantages and disadvantages. I've opted to present it as an argument concerning the *relativism/absolutism* debate mainly out of a desire to engage with Paul Boghossian's recent work on relativism. My remark that the paper could be pitched in any of the above-mentioned ways will raise eyebrows among some. This is not a remark I can defend here, but obviously a great deal depends on how one defines the terms and where one thinks the most important philosophical issues lie.

² In using "reasons talk" as my language of choice for talking about normativity, I follow many, including, prominently, Derek Parfit in *On What Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). I disagree, however, with Parfit's suggestion that "reasons *are* fundamental" in the sense that (as he suggests) this normative concept with which justifications *must* end (vol. 1, p. 148). Beyond a point I think it's a question of usage. Someone could use "normative reasons" talk in such a way that they find it coherent to ask, "I see that it's what I have *most normative reason* to do, but is that really what I *should* do?" No matter what concept one treats as normatively basic, someone else can fail to treat it as such, and in that case the response can be "fine, whatever, then let's talk about, in your language, what we *should* do."

³ The one thing I do insist upon is that we work with some *general* normative concept (such as *goodness, value, rationality, should, or ought*), and not a concept specific to the moral domain (such as *morally obligatory* or *morally wrong*). To focus on morality, as opposed to normativity in general, introduces philosophically distracting complexities in a way that I'll discuss briefly in section 7. I discuss these matters further in "Reply to Copp: Naturalism, Normativity, and the Varieties of Realism Worth Worrying About," *Philosophical Issues* (a supplement to *Noûs*), vol. 18 on "Interdisciplinary Core Philosophy," ed. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong (2008): 207-228.

⁴ I owe the example to Joshua Knobe.

⁵ For further discussion, see Paul Boghossian, "What is Relativism," in Patrick Greenough and Michael P. Lynch, eds., *Truth and Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 13-37.

⁶ In addition to Boghossian's "What is Relativism," cited in note 5, see his *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and "Three Kinds of Relativism," in Steven D. Hales, ed., *A Companion to Relativism* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), pp. 53-69.

⁷ The argument I'll be focusing on appears in "Three Kinds of Relativism."

⁸ All page references in the text are to "Three Kinds of Relativism."

⁹ Gilbert Harman makes a similar point in Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 4.

¹⁰ Update: I guess it was just a matter of time, but this morning (February 21, 2011) he gave this answer back to *me*. While playing, my son informed me that two Star Wars characters, presently engaged in a lightsaber battle, were invisible. When I asked him why no one could see them, he answered impatiently: “Mommy, that’s what ‘invisible’ *means*.” (Who’s the incompetent speaker now?)

¹¹ See, for example, Boghossian’s discussion of the predicate “...to the left of...” in “What is Relativism,” pp. 14-15.

¹² For discussion and defense of this “Moorean” test of concept identity, see Allan Gibbard, *Thinking How to Live* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), ch. 2.

¹³ While I’m interested to know, and would appreciate reading suggestions on, how Einstein’s initial questions about simultaneity were in fact greeted by competent speakers, the historical reality is ultimately irrelevant to my central claims in the paper, which concern our normative concepts now.

¹⁴ Gibbard makes this point forcefully in *Thinking How to Live*. See chs. 1 and 12, especially p. 13 and p. 240. I am indebted to Gibbard’s discussions here.

¹⁵ The helpful idea of an ideally coherent Caligula is taken from Allan Gibbard’s “Morality as Consistency in Living: Korsgaard’s Kantian Lectures,” *Ethics* 110 (1999): 140-164, p. 145. I discuss the possibility of this character (and others like him) in more depth in “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters,” *Philosophical Issues* (a supplement to *Noûs*), vol. 19 on “Metaethics,” ed. Ernest Sosa (2009): 273-298.

¹⁶ I address some of these matters in other work. For discussion of (1), see “Constructivism about Reasons,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 3, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008): 207-245; “What Is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?,” *Philosophy Compass* 5 (2010): 363-384; and “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason,” forthcoming in *Constructivism in Practical Philosophy*, eds. James Lenman and Yonatan Shemmer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For discussion of (2), see “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value,” *Philosophical Studies* 127, no. 1 (January 2006): 109-166; “Mind-Independence Without the Mystery: Why Quasi-Realists Can’t Have It Both Ways,” in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 6, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011); and “Objectivity and Truth: You’d Better Rethink It,” unpublished manuscript. For discussion of (3), see “Constructivism about Reasons” and “What is Constructivism in Ethics and Metaethics?”. For discussion of (4), see “Evolution and the Normativity of Epistemic Reasons,” forthcoming in the *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, supplementary volume on *Belief and Agency*, ed. David Hunter.

¹⁷ One might still argue that it’s a *non-obvious analysis*, in the sense that it’s a conclusion that falls out of the logic of normative concepts—a conclusion that anyone who deploys normative concepts is committed to by their own lights, though they may not realize it. I think one could make a good case for this, though I’m not going to try to make it here.

¹⁸ John Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

¹⁹ And if you don’t like any of these concepts, fearing they prejudice the relativism/absolutism debate one way or another, then choose or make up your own. This is what Gibbard does in *Thinking How to Live* when he introduces the concept of *the thing to do*. See especially his discussion in ch. 1. Then one may ask the question: Is anything *absolutely* the thing to do? Or in the end are there only relative truths about the thing to do?

²⁰ I am indebted to Jon Tresan for helpful discussion of this point.

²¹ Indeed, some—the Kantian ethicists, on one interpretation—would argue that ideal coherence is such a tall order that one can’t achieve it without embracing *morality*. If this turned out to be true, then relativism about normativity as I’m understanding it would turn out to be compatible with an extremely high degree of objectivity (and admittedly in some sense wouldn’t deserve the term *relativism*, though in another sense I think it would—normative truth would still relativize to *thought*). I’m very skeptical of such Kantian arguments, however, defending what I call a *Humean* as opposed to a *Kantian* constructivism. So my view ends up looking relativist more in the sense you’d expect from the term, implying that if a person hasn’t a moral impulse in his makeup then he isn’t strictly speaking making any mistake in ignoring morality, though as I indicated earlier, *we* still might have good reason to *say* he is (and to lock him up). I discuss these matters further in “Coming to Terms with Contingency: Humean Constructivism about Practical Reason.”

²² See “In Defense of Future Tuesday Indifference: Ideally Coherent Eccentrics and the Contingency of What Matters.”

²³ For helpful discussion of this material, I am grateful to Paul Boghossian, Matt Evans, Laura Franklin-Hall, Joshua Knobe, Nishi Shah, David Velleman, and audiences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Cornell University, the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis, and the Columbia University Undergraduate Philosophy Forum.