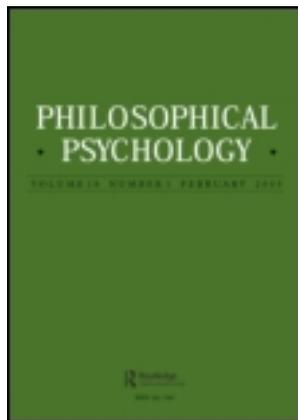


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The meta-ethical grounding of our moral beliefs: Evidence for meta-ethical pluralism

Jennifer C. Wright, Piper T. Grandjean and
Cullen B. McWhite

Recent scholarship (Goodwin & Darley, 2008) on the meta-ethical debate between objectivism and relativism has found people to be mixed: they are objectivists about some issues, but relativists about others. The studies discussed here sought to explore this further. Study 1 explored whether giving people the ability to identify moral issues for themselves would reveal them to be more globally objectivist. Study 2 explored people's meta-ethical commitments more deeply, asking them to provide verbal explanations for their judgments. This revealed that while people think they are relativists, this may not always be the case. The explanations people gave were sometimes rated by outside (blind) coders as being objective, even when given a relativist response. Nonetheless, people remained meta-ethical pluralists. Why this might be is discussed.

Keywords: Meta-Ethical Commitments; Objectivism; Pluralism; Relativism

I. Introduction

The philosophical domain of meta-ethical theory has long been dominated by two major positions: *objectivism* and *relativism*. Roughly speaking, objectivism holds that the moral domain, like the scientific domain, is grounded in universal and fundamental *facts* that exist (largely) independently of people's beliefs, preferences, attitudes, norms, or conventions. For example, actions such as consciously discriminating against someone because of their gender or race would be morally wrong not because people prefer not to discriminate, because they have strong emotional responses against discriminating, or because as a society they have just

Jennifer C. Wright is an Assistant Professor at College of Charleston.

Piper T. Grandjean, University of Wyoming.

Cullen B. McWhite, College of Charleston.

Correspondence to: Jennifer C. Wright, Department of Psychology, College of Charleston, 57 Coming St, Charleston 29424, USA. Email: wrightj1@cofc.edu

come to agree that discriminating is wrong. Rather, there are certain features of discrimination (e.g., cruelty and unfairness) that ground its wrongness—and would do so even if people generally felt ambivalent or deemed such behavior to be perfectly acceptable. Relativism, on the other hand, holds that the moral domain, much like other normative domains (e.g., personal and social/conventional), is ultimately grounded in the beliefs, preferences, attitudes, habits, norms, and/or conventions of people (whether individuals or groups).

Of course, our interest in the objectivism/relativism debate lies not so much in which position is correct, but rather in the degree to which it reflects how people *think about* the moral domain, how they treat their moral beliefs and respond to moral transgressions. People could *believe* morality to be objectively grounded, whether or not this turns out to be the case (as in Mackie's "error theory," 1977). Or, they could be relativists, viewing moral obligations as nothing essentially different from other sorts of social/cultural norms. Understanding the nature of people's meta-ethical commitments could provide important insight into people's moral psychology (e.g., judgments and behaviors), regardless of whether those commitments turn out to be well founded.

Are people meta-ethical objectivists? A common assumption amongst philosophers—whether taken as a sign of intuitive moral competence or as a regrettable flaw—is that they *are* (Blackburn, 1984; Brink, 1989; Mackie, 1977; Shafer-Landau, 2003; Smith, 1994). And there is an extensive body of research, coming from several different sub-disciplines (developmental, educational, and social psychology), that—at least indirectly—supports this assumption. For instance, children, adolescents, and adults all have significantly stronger negative interpersonal reactions towards dissimilar beliefs, values, and practices when they involve moral issues than when they involve other types of issues (Skitka, Bauman, & Sargis, 2005; Skitka & Mullen, 2002; Wainryb, Shaw, Langley, Cottam, & Lewis, 2004; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001; Wainryb, Shaw, & Maianu, 1998; Wright, Cullum, & Schwab, 2008). They are also significantly less supportive of moral diversity than other forms of diversity (Haidt, Rosenberg, & Hom, 2003).

In addition, people of all ages have been found to make important distinctions between moral issues and other types of issues (Cullum & Wright, 2010; Killen & Nucci, 1995; Nichols, 2004; Nucci, 1981; Nucci & Turiel, 2000; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Turiel, 1983, 1998; Wainryb et al., 2001, 2004; Wright et al., 2008). For example, they treat moral wrongs as more serious, less permissible, less response-dependent, more severely punishable, and more universally generalizable than social/conventional wrongs (Turiel, 1983, 1998; see also Davidson, Turiel, & Black, 1983; Goodwin & Darley, 2008; Nichols, 2004; Nichols & Folds-Bennett, 2003; Nucci, 1981; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Smetana & Braeges, 1990). People also treat moral considerations as more important than social or personal considerations, viewing them as carrying more weight in determining appropriate action (Kohlberg, 1969, 1986; Piaget, 1932; Rest, 1979). And, most tellingly, they tend to view moral transgressions as wrong even in the absence of rules and/or in the presence of social sanction (Smetana, 1981, 1983; Stoddart & Turiel, 1985; Turiel, 1983).

Taken together, such research strongly supports the assumption that people are meta-ethical objectivists. Yet recent scholarship exploring people's meta-ethical commitments more directly has brought this conclusion into question. When asked specific questions about morality's grounding (objective versus relative), for example, Nichols (2004) found that even though some people gave objectivist responses (i.e., stating that the wrongness of particular moral transgressions was grounded by objective facts), a significant portion of them did not, stating instead that there was no objective fact of the matter and that, even in the presence of disagreement, all parties could be right. Even more interestingly, Goodwin and Darley (2008) found that while people, on average, tended to give more objective groundings to a selection of moral issues than they did to other issues, they were nonetheless internally inconsistent with this objectivity. That is, when presented with a selection of moral issues (e.g., donating money to charity, assisting in the death of a terminally ill friend, conscious racial discrimination), they gave objective groundings to only *some* of them while giving clearly relative groundings to others. Such results suggest that people's meta-ethical commitments may vary: not only might some people be more objectivist about morality than others, but people might also be more objectivist about *some* parts of morality than others.

As provocative as these recent findings are, they deserve further investigation, as alternative explanations for the discovered variability may exist. One such plausible alternative explanation is that the moral (and non-moral) issues employed in these studies were identified as such by the researchers, not by the people being questioned. This is important because recent studies on moral conviction and tolerance (Cullum & Wright, 2010; Wright et al., 2008; Wright, forthcoming) have found that people of all ages disagree (both within and between age groups) about what qualifies as a *moral* issue. And whether or not someone considers a particular issue to be moral strongly influences—and is influenced by—the way they think about it (Cullum & Wright, 2010; Wright, forthcoming), and would arguably influence the type of grounding they would provide.

In other words, it could be that the reason why people gave relativist groundings for some of Goodwin and Darley's (2008) moral issues (e.g., abortion, assisted suicide, donating money to charity) was that they did *not* actually consider them to be moral issues. If this is the case, then when given the opportunity to classify issues as moral (or not) for themselves, people may reveal themselves to be consistently meta-ethical objectivists.

To investigate this, the studies reported here returned to the Goodwin and Darley (2008) methodology, however this time allowing people to classify the issues into the various domains for themselves. Only after this were they asked to provide the grounding (relative versus objective) for each issue, thereby allowing us to determine whether people more consistently express objectivist meta-ethical commitments when given the opportunity to self-identify moral issues, or whether they are in fact meta-ethical pluralists.

We hypothesized that having people self-identify moral issues would produce a more robust meta-ethical objectivism—however, contrary to our hypothesis,

we discovered that even when people identified which were moral issues, they still varied in the type of grounding (objective versus relative) they gave those issues, suggesting that the meta-ethical pluralism found by Goodwin and Darley (2008) is genuine.

2. Study 1

Forty-nine undergraduate students from Introduction to Psychological Science courses at the College of Charleston participated in this study for research credit. The data from two participants were eliminated due to incomplete surveys. Of the remaining 47, 12 were male; 94% Caucasian, 4% African-American, and 2% no response.

Everyone signed up to participate in the study by selecting from available time-slots through an on-line research system utilized by the Psychology Department. After arriving, participants read through and signed an informed consent document and then were given a survey to fill out. Upon completion, they were given a debriefing form explaining the nature of the survey and allowed to leave. The survey took 20–30 minutes to complete.

All participants completed a survey that contained the same 27 issues (e.g., the anonymous donation of one's income to charity, opening gunfire on a crowded city street, etc.; see table 1) used by Goodwin and Darley (2008).¹ Each issue was embedded into an issue statement (e.g., “anonymously donating a significant proportion of one's income to charity is good”) and the order that these statements were introduced to participants was counterbalanced to control for possible order effects.

Immediately following each issue statement, participants were asked how strongly they agreed with the issue statement (“0” = strongly agree to “8” = strongly disagree). This was later converted into a measure of attitude strength, which required a transformation of the reported agreement ratings through the standard technique (Krosnick, Boninger, Chaung, Berent, & Carnot, 1993; Wright et al., 2008) of folding the attitude score at its midpoint, giving a measure of extremity regardless of valence (e.g., “4” was assigned to the most extreme attitude ratings located at either end of the scale, “3” was assigned to next most extreme, and so on).

Participants were then asked to consider the issue that the issue statement was about and to report what *type* of issue they believed it to be, choosing the category they thought was the *best fit* from the following: “personal choice/preference,” “social conventions/norms,” “moral issue,” or “scientific fact.”² Participants were not given further instructions about the categories, as we assumed that participants would have at least an implicit understanding of each category and we did not want to unduly influence their classifications.

In line with Goodwin and Darley (2008), relativism/objectivism was then measured in two ways. First, participants were asked whether they thought the issue statement was “true,” “false,” or “just an opinion or attitude.” Second, they were told: “a person could disagree with you on this issue. If that happened, what do

Table 1 Domain Classification and Objectivity Percentages, Study 1.

Issue	%Sci						
	%Moral	%Social	%Pers	Fact	%Rel	%Mixed	%Obj
Robbing bank to pay for holiday	61%	31%	8%	0%	6%	9%	85%
Opening gunfire in a crowd	61%	33%	4%	2%	10%	9%	81%
Cheating on lifeguard exam	79%	16%	4%	1%	13%	10%	77%
Racial discrimination	62%	25%	11%	2%	23%	15%	62%
Giving false testimony for friend	75%	15%	8%	2%	27%	27%	46%
Assisted suicide	61%	7%	32%	0%	60%	25%	15%
1st trimester abortion	51%	7%	41%	1%	57%	28%	15%
Stem cell research	48%	9%	30%	13%	63%	26%	11%
Wearing pajamas to meeting	0%	60%	40%	0%	51%	30%	19%
Call teacher by first name	3%	56%	39%	2%	50%	35%	15%
Driving on wrong side around blind corner	4%	55%	12%	29%	9%	9%	82%
Running red light at busy intersection	22%	50%	20%	8%	11%	10%	79%
Talking loudly during lecture	16%	43%	41%	0%	22%	19%	59%
Schindler's List is the best movie	0%	0%	100%	0%	83%	15%	2%
da Vinci is best artist	0%	0%	100%	0%	89%	11%	0%
CNN is best news channel	0%	0%	100%	0%	81%	19%	0%
Beautiful Mind is best movie	0%	0%	100%	0%	85%	13%	2%
Shakespeare is the best author	0%	2%	98%	0%	83%	13%	4%
Miles Davis is the best musician	0%	0%	98%	2%	79%	17%	4%
Rock is the best music	0%	2%	96%	2%	85%	11%	4%
Donation of money to charity	11%	0%	89%	0%	54%	35%	11%
Bill Clinton is the best president	0%	11%	83%	6%	77%	13%	10%
Mars is the closest planet	0%	0%	0%	100%	2%	2%	96%
Location of Boston	0%	0%	2%	98%	0%	0%	100%
Earth is the center of universe	0%	2%	0%	98%	2%	9%	89%
Aerobics is good for health	0%	0%	8%	92%	4%	15%	81%
Homo Sapiens evolved	14%	0%	15%	71%	13%	22%	65%

you think would be the best explanation for this disagreement?" choosing from: "the other person would be mistaken," "it's possible that I would be mistaken, and the other person correct," or "it's possible that neither I *nor* the other person would be mistaken—we could both be correct." Objectivism was calculated in the following manner: choices of "true" or "false" were coded as an objective response (scored as a "1") and "just an opinion or attitude" as a relative response (scored as a "0") for question (1); "either person being mistaken" was coded as an objective response (scored as a "1") and "neither person being mistaken" as a relative response (scored as a "0") for question (2). Adding these two together gave a possible range of 0–2 in level of objectivity for each of the issues ("0" = fully relative, "1" = mixed, "2" = fully objective).³

2.1. Results

2.1.1. Preliminaries

Of the 27 issues given to participants, only five were unanimously classified into one domain category (four as "personal choice/preference" and one as "scientific fact").

Nonetheless, all but four issues were *dominantly* (38% or more of participants⁴) classified into only one domain and four were dominantly classified into two domains. This gave us nine dominantly classified (83–100%) personal choice/preferences (hereafter “personal”), two dominantly classified (50–55%) social norms/conventions (hereafter “social”), seven dominantly classified (48–79%) moral issues, and five dominantly classified (71–100%) scientific facts (see table 1). In addition, *1st-Trimester abortion* was split between moral and personal (51% and 41%, respectively), and three items were split between social and personal: *Wearing pajamas to a meeting* (60% and 40%), *Calling teachers by their first names* (56% and 39%), and *Talking loudly during a lecture* (43% and 41%).

These dominant classifications tracked fairly well with the a priori classification given by Goodwin and Darley (2008). The only clear exception to this was *Anonymous donations to charity*, classified by the researchers as a moral issue but dominantly classified (89%) by participants as personal. In addition, several other issues showed split classification, demonstrating that participants were divided over the appropriate classification. Indeed, only five issues received unanimous classification, which means that even for those issues whose dominant classification matched Goodwin and Darley’s, participants displayed clear disagreement (table 1).

The results also showed a similar division in the type of grounding (objective/relative) found by Goodwin and Darley (2008): some self-identified moral issues received strong objectivist groundings while others received strong relativist groundings, with one issue (*Conscious racial discrimination*) receiving higher than chance grounding for both (table 1).⁵ But, this does not yet give us meta-ethical pluralism—for that, we must find a similar sort of split in groundings at the individual level.

2.1.2. Main analyses

The number of issues participants classified as moral was around one-fourth of the 27 surveyed issues (mean = 5.5, median = 6, and mode = 7). There was only one participant who failed to classify any issues as moral. Of the other 46 participants, nine provided a consistently objective grounding for the issues they classified as moral, three consistently provided a relative grounding, one was consistently mixed (answering yes to only one of the grounding questions for each issue), and the remaining 33—the clear majority—fluctuated between relativist, mixed, and objectivist groundings.

Looking at participants’ objectivity ratings across domains required calculating mean objectivity ratings for each category domain (personal/social/moral/scientific), which involved averaging across each participant’s objectivity grounding responses for all the items they had self-identified into each particular domain. A within-subjects ANOVA comparing participants’ mean objectivity ratings for their self-classified personal, social, moral, and scientific issues revealed a significant main effect for domain, $F(3,129) = 100.7$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.70$. Post hoc paired-sample t-tests revealed that participants gave significantly lower objectivity ratings for those issues self-classified as personal ($M = 0.32$, $SE = 0.05$) than those classified as moral

($M = 1.26$, $SE = 0.09$), social ($M = 1.32$, $SE = 0.09$), or scientific ($M = 1.85$, $SE = 0.04$), $t(44) = 10.1$ – 20.1 , $ps < 0.001$. In addition, their objectivity ratings were significantly higher for those issues self-classified as scientific than for those classified as social or moral, $t(44) = 6.2$, $ps < 0.001$. However, participants' objectivity ratings were *not* significantly different between their self-classified social and moral issues, $t(43) = 0.54$, *ns*. That is, while differences were found between all other types of issues, participants did not distinguish between the social and moral domain in terms of grounding, even when allowed to self-identify the issues.

We examined those issues dominantly classified as moral to see if those participants who had identified them as moral gave higher objectivity ratings than those who had identified them as personal or social. Independent sample t-tests revealed no significant differences in objectivity ratings. Thus, it would appear that for at least *some* of the issues, participants were treating domain classification and objectivity rating as orthogonal issues: e.g., *1st-Trimester abortion* was given a relativist grounding by both participants who had classified it as moral and by those who had classified it as personal; *Conscious racial discrimination* was given an objectivist grounding by both participants who had classified it as social and by those who had classified it as moral.

Finally, while a wealth of research has found that people treat differently those attitudes and beliefs they hold strongly from those they hold more weakly (for reviews, see Petty & Krosnick, 1995; Krosnick & Petty, 1995), attitude strength did not reveal itself here to be predictive of either domain classification or objectivity. A within-subjects ANOVA showed that attitude strength did not significantly differ between domains, $F(3, 129) = 0.38$, *ns*, and objectivity and attitude strength were not significantly correlated in any of the four domains, $rs = 0.024$ – 0.29 , *ns*.

2.2. Discussion

The results of study 1 revealed that even when people were allowed to self-identify moral issues, they still varied in the type of grounding (objective versus relative) they gave for those issues. Indeed, our results looked strikingly like those found by Goodwin and Darley (2008). Not only were the strong majority of participants (34 out of 47) mixed in the meta-ethical groundings they gave for their self-identified moral issues, but those issues dominantly classified as moral were themselves split—some were given dominantly objective groundings and others dominantly relative groundings. Allowing people to self-identify moral issues did not, as we originally hypothesized, undermine Goodwin and Darley's discovery of meta-ethical pluralism—rather, it provided additional support, eliminating the possibility that Goodwin and Darley's mixed findings were merely an artifact of their methodology.

Of course, one important limitation to study 1 is that people's domain classifications and relative/objective groundings were provided without any explanation. As such, we have no way of assessing the reasons behind their particular domain and objectivity choices—including the possibility of simply failing to properly understand the question(s). Such purely quantitative data make it hard to

assess how well people's answers reflect their actual meta-ethical commitments. Therefore, study 2 was designed to explore the matter more deeply by asking participants to not only self-classify issues and provide groundings, but to also give verbal explanations for their responses.

3. Study 2

Eighty-Nine undergraduate students enrolled in Introduction to Psychological Science courses at the College of Charleston participated in this study for research credit. The students came from several different course sections. The data from three participants were eliminated due to incomplete surveys. Of the remaining 86, 22 were male; 88% Caucasian, 5% African-American, 1% Asian-American, 2% Hispanic, and 2% other.

Everyone signed up to participate in the study by selecting from available time-slots through the on-line research system utilized by the Psychology Department. Upon arriving, all participants read through and signed an informed consent document. After consent was obtained, they were given the survey to fill out. Once they had completed the survey, they were given a debriefing form explaining the nature of the survey and allowed to leave. The survey took about 30 minutes to complete.

Fourteen of the 27 original issues (and issue statements) from study 1 were chosen for study 2 (most of the dominant personal and scientific fact issues were removed to allow for a more concentrated focus on participants' discussion of social versus moral issues) and the order in which they were presented was once again counterbalanced. Other than this change, the surveys were structured in the same way as study 1, except that after each of the three questions following the issue statement, participants were given space to verbally explain their answers. Specifically, they were asked to explain three things: *why* they had classified the issue as being a particular type of issue; *why* they believed the issue statement to be true, false, or just an opinion/attitude; and *why* they believed that the explanation of disagreement they had chosen was the best explanation. They were encouraged to provide as complete and detailed written explanations as possible.

3.1. Results

The results looked very similar to those from study 1, with some slight movement in dominant classification: *Opening gunfire into a crowd* shifted from dominantly moral to dominantly social (43%), *Talking loudly during a lecture* shifted from split between personal and social to dominantly social (58%), and *1st-Trimester abortion* shifted from split between personal and moral to dominantly moral (60%; see table 2). Surprisingly, both *Running a red light* and *Driving on the wrong side* were not classified dominantly into any category, receiving a higher percentage of scientific fact classifications (23% and 31%, respectively) than they did in study 1, but still being most strongly classified as social (38% and 40%, respectively).

Table 2 Domain Classification and Objectivity Percentages, Study 2.

Issue	%Moral	%Social	%Pers	%Sci			%Obj
				Fact	%Rel	%Mixed	
Cheating on lifeguard exam	63%	11%	15%	11%	15%	16%	69%
Robbing bank to pay for holiday	60%	30%	9%	1%	16%	24%	60%
Racial discrimination	67%	16%	15%	2%	20%	27%	53%
Giving false testimony for friend	64%	14%	18%	4%	28%	25%	47%
Stem cell research	58%	4%	20%	18%	65%	21%	14%
Assisted suicide	56%	4%	39%	1%	71%	21%	8%
1st trimester abortion	60%	1%	38%	1%	72%	23%	5%
Call teacher by first name	4%	59%	37%		71%	16%	13%
Talking loudly during lecture	5%	58%	35%	2%	3%	55%	42%
Wearing pajamas to meeting	1%	57%	42%		65%	22%	13%
Opening gunfire in a crowd	38%	43%	11%	8%	16%	23%	61%
Driving on wrong side around blind corner	14%	40%	16%	30%	11%	13%	76%
Running red light at busy intersection	21%	38%	18%	23%	17%	20%	63%
Donation of money to charity	24%	3%	73%	0%	71%	22%	7%

There were only two issues that shifted in their level of objectivity (otherwise, all of the issues remained the same, even those whose classification had shifted): *Talking loudly during a lecture* shifted from being dominantly objective to dominantly mixed, receiving a mixed grounding from 55% of participants, though it still received a fully objective grounding from 43% of participants; and *Running a red light* received dominantly relative and objective groundings (17% and 63%, respectively), whereas before it had only received a dominant objective grounding (79%). Of those issues dominantly classified as moral, the same three were still given dominantly relative groundings and the same five dominantly objective groundings as in study 1 (table 2).

A within-participants ANOVA revealed the same general relationship between participants' domain classification, attitude strength, and objectivity as in study 1. Therefore, we moved directly into an analysis of the qualitative data.

3.2. Word Analysis

3.2.1. Domain classification

In study 1, no issues were unanimously classified into the moral domain, and some of the domain classifications given were surprising—why would *anonymously donating money to charity* be dominantly considered a personal rather than a moral issue, as originally supposed by researchers? What led some people to classify *1st-Trimester abortions* as a moral issue and others as a personal choice? Why did so many people classify *Opening gunfire in a crowd* as a social issue? And why did almost a third of participants classify *Driving on the wrong side* as a matter of scientific fact? In order to explore these questions, we read through and carefully analyzed participants' verbal explanations.

First, we developed a coding scheme that identified 24 features/characteristics as we all agreed were indicative of the different domains: e.g., mention of *personal choice*, *preference*, and *autonomy* were considered indicative of the personal domain; *norms*, *laws*, and *social consensus* were indicative of the social domain, and *obligations*, *harm*, *justice*, and *sanctity of life* were indicative of the moral domain. We then had two coders independently read participants' verbal domain classification explanations (while remaining blind to their actual classifications), coding for the presence of these various features/characteristics in the participants' explanations. Multiple features were found for most of the participants' statements. Reliability for the presence or absence of each feature between the two coders was good to strong, Cohen's Kappas falling between 0.63 and 0.89, $ps < 0.001$. All disagreements between the coders were resolved by the first author. See table 3 for the distribution of the various features across the domains.

Within all the issues that participants had classified as personal, a particular theme emerged. Most frequently, people made explicit reference to *personal choice/control*, to the fact that the issue under consideration was the sort of issue that a person should be able to decide for themselves. For example, they wrote: "it's up to the person to decide" and "it is your choice to do it or not." They also mentioned that the issue was merely a *matter of opinion/personal preference* (e.g., "whatever someone prefers," "it is personal opinion," "that's just what I feel"), that acceptability was determined by the *individual's own beliefs/values* (e.g., "it is based on what the person believes," "everyone has their own values"), and, more specifically, that the goodness/badness of the issue was *relative to the individual*. Thus, participants consistently highlighted the sorts of features considered by many theorists to be the principle components of the personal domain (Nucci, 1981; Turiel, 1983, 1998), and they highlighted these features more frequently for those issues they had classified as personal than for the issues they had classified as either social or moral, $F(2,38) = 9.1-57.4$, $ps < 0001$.

Interestingly, participants also occasionally gave a contextual explanation for a personal domain classification, viewing the acceptability to vary *depending on the circumstances* (e.g., "there are times when it could be acceptable," "depends on the person's situation")—something they did most frequently for the issues they classified as personal, $F(2, 38) = 19.2$, $p < 0.001$. Participants also infrequently made reference to *social norms* and *etiquette*, stating that individuals had to choose whether or not they were going to be rude or were going to do what was socially expected (while acknowledging that such norms existed).

For those issues classified as social conventions/norms, participants most frequently made reference to *norms*, *laws*, and *customs*: e.g., "it is a convention in certain parts of the world," "this is a social norm," "it's against the law," "it is not socially acceptable," "because there are rules that everyone must follow." Less frequently, they mentioned the presence of *social agreement/consensus* (e.g., "people all agree that you don't do it," "everybody knows better," "people accept this as wrong"), the importance of following *etiquette* (e.g., "it's rude," "it's impolite and disrespectful," "it looks unprofessional"), and maintaining *social status/authority*

Table 3 Features Highlighted in Reasons Given for Domain Classification (% = number of times the feature was chosen/number of responses), Study 2.

Domain	Choice/ personal control	Opinion/ preference	Good/bad relative to person	Can't be mandated	Not wrong	Good/bad Right/wrong			Personal pride/ salvation	Personal moral code	Sanctity of life, dignity
						Sensitive to context/ circumstance	Based on beliefs/ values	Religion			
Personal	50%	19%	2%	1%	3%	9%	17%	3%	3%	3%	
Social	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%	3%	1%	1%	1%	1%	
Moral	3%	0%	0%	0%	1%	2%	5%	2%	10%	10%	
Domain	Customs/ norms/ laws	Social agreement/ consensus	Social benefit	Punishment/ reward	Rights	Religion	Oblig- ation	Good/bad Right/wrong action (to do)	Good/bad person (virtue)	Harm	Sanctity of life, dignity
Personal	4%	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%	4%	3%	4%	1%
Social	71%	5%	7%	2%	0%	1%	1%	3%	1%	5%	0%
Moral	5%	2%	2%	1%	1%	6%	7%	45%	8%	32%	5%

(e.g., “you should dress according to your position,” “you should respect their authority”). These are all considered to be paradigmatic examples of the social domain (Smetana, 1981; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998), and participants referenced them more frequently for those issues they had classified as social than for the issues they had classified as either personal or moral, $F_s(2,38) = 4.1$ to 67.5 , $ps = 0.026$ to <0.001 .

Participants also occasionally talked about the importance of following those norms in order to *benefit society* and avoid *harming/ endangering lives*. In particular, the latter explanation was given for issues like *Opening gunfire*, *Running a red light*, and *Driving on the wrong side*, and arguably crosses over into the moral domain.

For those issues participants classified as moral, the most common response given was that the action in question was just simply *right/wrong to do*, without further explanation: e.g., “killing a person on purpose is not acceptable,” “it isn’t our place to take life,” “lying to protect a murderer is wrong.”⁶ When further explanation was given, participants referred frequently to the *harm* an action might cause and also, less frequently to the *sanctity of human life* (e.g., “human life is sacred,” “all life has value”). They also sometimes referred to the importance of the *virtuous/misanthropic qualities of the person* (e.g., “a person with morals wouldn’t cheat,” “no good person kills,” “only a dishonest person would do that”). Occasionally, they referred to actions as involving *obligations* (things we must/should do or not do—e.g., “you should never cheat to get a job,” “people should always help those less fortunate”). Finally, there was an occasional explicit reference to matters of *justice/fairness* and *equality, universality, and empathy/compassion*. All of these features are considered to be paradigmatic features of the moral domain (Damon, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969, 1986; Lapsley, 1996; Piaget, 1932; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998). And, once again, participants referenced them for those issues they had classified as moral more frequently than for the issues they had classified as personal or social, $F_s(2,38) = 4.5$ to 23.7 , $ps = 0.017$ to <0.001 .

Participants also occasionally referred to *laws*, though often alongside morality (e.g., “it’s illegal *and* it’s wrong”). In addition, on occasion they referred to *religion* (e.g., “it is God’s law,” “it’s against my religion,” “it’s in the Bible,” “it would be a sin to God”). These could arguably be viewed as social reasons rather than moral reasons.

Finally, participants referred a fair amount to people’s individual *moral codes*: i.e., an individual’s own moral values/beliefs. This explanation typically went along with a more relative view of morality, involving statements like, “it’s just a moral that I possess,” “it deals with each person’s moral code,” “people all have different moral beliefs.” Importantly, participants made this sort of reference much more frequently when categorizing an issue as moral rather than as personal (10% versus 3%, respectively). This suggests that participants were treating the personal domain (the domain involving issues that individuals have autonomy over) as separate from what we might call a “personalized” moral domain, which they viewed as involving issues whose goodness/badness is determined by a moral code that is relatively grounded in the individual’s own beliefs/values.⁷ The final category was the domain of scientific

fact. Even though most of the issues from study 1 that naturally fell into this category had been removed for study 2, participants still occasionally used it to classify some of the issues (see table 2). When they did so, they commonly referred to *factual information* to explain their classification: e.g., “based in scientific research,” “it’s been proven that if you get shot you are likely to die,” and “it’s a fact.” But more often, they referred to other features, such as *harm* and *norms/laws* (e.g., “it is dangerous and could hurt someone,” “it could be harmful/deadly to others,” “this is a law in the US”). These latter sorts of reasons seem much more consistent with the moral and social domains, respectively.

In summary, despite being given no explicit instructions about domain classification, participants’ verbal explanations revealed a clear grasp of each the domains, one largely in line with the representations each domain has been given in psychological and philosophical literature. When participants classified an issue as personal, they reported it to be an issue that should be under the individual’s control, a matter of choice, preference or personal opinion; when they classified an issue as social/conventional, they reported it to be a matter of norms/laws, etiquette, and social consensus; when they classified an issue as moral, they reported it to be an issue involving harm and the sanctity of human life, obligation, virtue, justice, and equality—and to be the sort of issue that is “just right/wrong.” These findings suggest that people’s meta-ethical pluralism is *not* simply an artifact of confusion (or semantic differences) with respect to domains.

Nonetheless, a few of the domain classification choices (across studies 1 and 2) were surprising and would benefit from a closer examination. For example, what about those issues—*Anonymously donating money to charity*, *1st-Trimester abortion*, *Assisted suicide*, and *Opening gunfire in a crowd*—that received dominant to strong personal or social classifications, despite involving clear moral considerations? What explanations for this did participants give?

For *Anonymously donating money to charity*, participants most commonly cited the importance of personal choice/control and opinion/preference. Though certainly understood by the participants to be a nice thing to do, they nonetheless argued that it was up to people to decide for themselves whether or not to donate money. For both *1st-Trimester abortion* and *Assisted suicide*, their explanations shifted slightly, still commonly citing personal choice/control—e.g., “it involves a woman’s own life/body and so she should be able to choose/be in control of what happened”—but then also focusing on the importance of a person’s own beliefs/values, hardly mentioning opinion/preference at all. These explanations were noticeably different from the explanations given by those people who classified *1st-Trimester abortion* and *Assisted suicide* as moral—a large percentage of them cited the obvious wrongness of the action and either referenced potential harm to self and others, in the case of *1st-Trimester abortion*, or the sanctity of life, in the case of *Assisted suicide*.

Looking at the differences in explanations for the social versus moral classification in *Opening gunfire in a crowd*, there was significantly more focus on the social norms/laws being violated by those participants who classified it as social (social: 62% versus moral: 10%) and more focus on the obvious wrongness of the action by those who

classified it as moral (social: 8% versus moral: 43%), with about equal reference to the harm involved for both classifications (social: 24% versus moral: 33%). Importantly, this means that participants were not insensitive to the harm being caused, even when giving the issue a social classification. Rather, they focused more heavily on the social norms/laws that both prohibited such an action and, at times, made it acceptable (e.g., when you are a police officer chasing a criminal or attempting to protect innocent people).

The scientific fact domain was the only surprising classification that further examination of participants explanations did not clear up. While participants may have been correct in identifying the factual basis of certain actions causing harm and/or being illegal, the identification of harm and/or social norms/laws as the *source* of the wrongness suggests that they would be nonetheless more accurately be classified as social or moral issues. Given this, the two coders re-coded all of participants' scientific fact classifications into whatever domain best fit their explanation (Cohens' Kappa = 0.90, $p < 0.001$, disagreements resolved by first author). While a few issues remained coded as scientific fact by the coders, most were redistributed into the moral, social, and (less frequently) the personal domains (figure 1).

3.2.2. Objectivity ratings

On the surface, participants look like meta-ethical pluralists, at times giving their moral beliefs relative groundings and at others, objective groundings. In order to explore in more depth whether this was a reflection of a genuine competence or some sort of confusion, two independent coders were asked to code participants' verbal explanations for their objectivity ratings. Much like for domain classification, the coders were asked to code the types of features/characteristics referred to by participants as being explanatory of their ratings. The coders were provided with a list of features/characteristics indicative of objectivism versus relativism (once again identified by the researchers) which the raters then coded for in each explanation. Reliability between the two coders was moderate to good, Cohen's Kappas between 0.52 to 0.67, $ps < 0.001$. All disagreements between coders were resolved by the first author.

This secondary coding revealed that for both of the "grounding" questions, when people chose the relativist response (opinion/both be right), their explanations often highlighted features such as the issue being *relative to the person/society*, *non-factual* in nature, and a *matter of personal choice/preference* (e.g., "it's whatever people feel is right," it's "a matter of opinion, not fact," "it would be up to the person"). These are all straightforward relativist responses that do not recognize a grounding of the rightness/wrongness of an action outside the beliefs, desires, and values of the individual and/or society.

However, participants who had given a relativist response just as frequently provided explanations that were not as clearly relativist. For example, participants frequently highlighted the *existence of disagreement* about the issue (relativism is thought by many to preclude genuine disagreement, since truth becomes relativized to the speaker or the speaker's culture; Rachels & Rachels, 2009) and/or the fact that

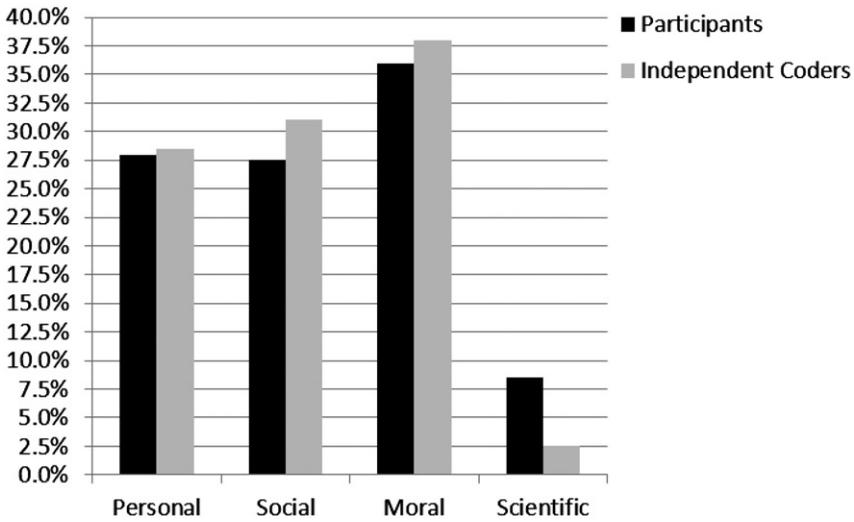


Figure 1 Domain Classification Percentage by Participants and Coders, Study 2.

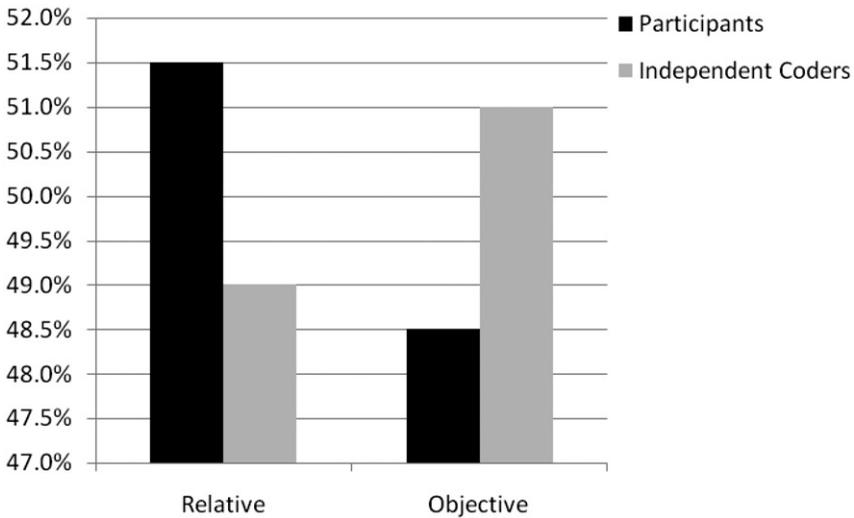


Figure 2 Difference in Relative Versus Objective Coding Percentage by Participants and Coders, Study 2.

pro/con arguments for the issue could be given (e.g., “people don’t agree,” “it is an issue that could be argued,” “someone might have a better argument for their side”). More importantly, participants also frequently pointed out the importance of a *situational influence*—for example, that fact that circumstances could influence whether a given action was right or wrong (e.g., “it depends on the seriousness of the

situation,” “I don’t know the situation,” “reasons that make it okay can come up”). This sort of response is arguably *not* relativist in nature, but is rather an acknowledgement that contextual features can alter the moral qualities of an action—for instance, the act of killing someone (which is typically morally wrong) may not be wrong when done in self-defense or in order to protect other innocent lives.

Thus, when choosing the relativist response participants often seemed to be giving an objectivist explanation—something like, “there *is* a right answer, but I might not know what it is, either because I don’t have the best argument or because I don’t know all the details of the situation.” Such reasoning is importantly different from believing there to be multiple right answers, or that what is true for them may not be true for someone else (which participants also quite frequently reported).

When participants chose an objectivist response (true/false) to the question, on the other hand, they rarely referred to the existence of *disagreement* or *situational influence*, citing instead the *obvious wrongness* of the issue (e.g., “it’s just wrong,” “it’s always bad”), and also frequently the *objective foundations* of the issues themselves (e.g., “you’re not hurting anyone else,” “it should never be done out of respect for others,” “it’s a moral issue,” “human life is sacred,” “you’d be endangering lives, which is wrong”).

They also occasionally referred to *social consensus/agreement* (e.g., “everyone knows that it is wrong,” “people agree that you shouldn’t do it”). Such explanations are not clearly objectivist—indeed, to the extent that they locate the grounding of the issue in general agreement/consensus, they are arguably more relativist in nature.

In summary, participants’ relative versus objective groundings displayed a fair degree of competence with the distinction, insofar as they more frequently gave explanations consistent with their responses than not. Nonetheless, there was quite a bit more confusion reflected in their explanations here than there had been in their explanations for domain classification: e.g., the influence of situational factors on an action’s rightness/wrongness was mistakenly employed as an explanation for relativism. Given this, we decided to conduct a recoding of participants’ relative/objective groundings for each issue, using their verbal explanations (rather than their quantitative responses) as the basis for the coding. We felt such a recoding could provide a more accurate insight into the true nature of their meta-ethical commitments—perhaps their apparent pluralism was largely an artifact of this confusion.

In order to conduct this recoding, the two independent coders were given standard descriptions of the two (relativist vs. objectivist) philosophical positions (e.g., Rachels & Rachels, 2009) and then asked to code participants’ qualitative explanations for both questions into whichever of these two positions was the best fit. Once again, the coders remained ignorant of the participants’ actual (quantitative) answer. The reliability between the two independent coders was very strong (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.80). Any disagreements were resolved by the first author.

Overall, the coders rated the participants' verbal explanations as indicative of objectivity more often than was reflected in the participants' quantitative responses, $F(1, 83) = 12.1$, $p = 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.13$ (figure 1). There was disagreement between 9.3% of the independent coders' and participants' meta-ethical ratings, 65% of which involved reclassifying the a participant's relative grounding to an objective one (meaning that in 65% of the disagreements between the coders and participants, the independent coders interpreted the participants' verbal explanation for their relative grounding as actually indicative of objectivity).

Yet, even with this change those moral issues coded by participants as dominantly relatively grounded (i.e., *1st-Trimester abortion*, *Assisted suicide*, and *Stem cell research*) remained so after the recoding. The only issue that displayed a slight shift was *1st-Trimester abortion*, which was coded as only slightly more objective (9% coders vs. 5% participants) by the independent coders. Overall, there was not a significant difference between the independent coders' and the participants' objectivity ratings for these issues, $F(1,35) = 2.4$, *ns*.

Surprisingly, most of the difference in objectivity ratings between the coders and the participants occurred for those moral issues already coded by participants as objectively grounded. That is, they were recoded as *even more* dominantly objective by the coders (e.g., *Robbing a bank*: coded as objectively grounded 65% of the time by coders versus 60% by participants; *Discrimination*: 60% of the time versus 53%; *False testimony for a friend*: 52% of the time versus 47%). Overall, the independent coders rated these issues as objectively grounded more frequently than the participants, $F(1, 82) = 8.2$, $p = 0.005$, $\eta^2 = 0.09$.

The independent coders also gave objective ratings more frequently than participants for their dominantly classified social issues, $F(1, 83) = 6.1$, $p = 0.016$, $\eta^2 = 0.07$. Specifically, the coders reported increased objectivity for *Driving on the wrong side* (83% of the time by coders versus 76% by participants).

In conclusion, even with the revised coding provided by the independent coders, participants' self-identified moral issues remained split into those given a strongly relativist grounding and those given a strongly objectivist grounding. And though the independent coders' generally rated participants as being more strongly objectivist in their meta-ethical commitments (on the basis of the participants' own verbal explanations) than the participants did themselves, this increased objectivity did not meaningfully alter the meta-ethical pluralism found in participants' moral classifications—if anything, it intensified it.

3.3. Discussion

The results from study 2 confirmed those of study 1. Participants disagreed (at times, strongly) about issue classification, with no issue being unanimously classified as moral. While these results bring into question the methodological soundness of assuming domain classification a priori, they did not challenge—but rather supported—Goodwin and Darley's (2008) original findings of meta-ethical pluralism. Even when given the opportunity to self-identify moral issues, participants still

gave pluralistic groundings—along with reasonable, conceptually sound justifications for them. In short, participants' pluralistic meta-ethical commitments appear to be genuine.

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that the range of issues given to participants for their consideration was limited, with many potentially relevant moral issues (e.g., dishonesty, homicide, genocide, physical abuse) having not been included. Nonetheless, the issues that were included involved a wide range of moral/immoral behaviors and highlighted many classic and contemporary moral problems—problems of life/death, potential harm to oneself and/or others, theft, and injustice, just to name a few. And though people disagreed about which issues counted as moral issues, whenever they *did* classify an issue as moral, they tended to highlight precisely these sorts of features.

Interestingly, the presence of these features was not always perceived as qualifying the issue as a moral one. At times other features (such as the importance of personal autonomy, choice, and personal values) were allowed to trump the moral considerations, qualifying it as a personal issue instead. Alternatively, while participants were clearly sensitive to the fact that certain actions endangered people's lives, at times they nonetheless found the fact that they did so *because* they involved breaking (or even upholding) certain norms or laws more salient. In summary, it does not appear that differences in participants' classifications of the various issues resulted from dramatically different conceptions of them, but rather from a different *prioritization* of the many different features involved.

How should we make sense of participants' meta-ethical pluralism? Our coding of participants' verbal explanations suggests that this meta-ethical pluralism is unlikely to be an artifact of any atypical conceptions of morality or other forms of conceptual confusion. We found participants' verbal explanations of their domain classifications to be entirely consistent with the conceptions of the personal, social, and moral domains commonly found in the literature (Damon, 1977; Kohlberg, 1969, 1986; Nucci, 1981; Piaget, 1932; Skitka et al., 2005; Smetana, 1981, 1983; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1983, 1998; Wainryb et al., 1998, 2001, 2004; Wright et al., 2008). And the reasons participants gave for both their relative and objective groundings of the issues they had identified as moral were also largely consistent with the sorts of explanations any ethicist would give (Brink, 1989; Levy, 2002; Mackie, 1977; Rachels & Rachels, 2009; Shafer-Landau, 2003). They viewed the rightness/wrongness of *some* moral actions as being determined by the beliefs, norms, and values of the individual acting—or, less frequently, the community in which the individual acted—and the rightness/wrongness of *other* moral actions as being grounded in more objective bedrock, citing as the source the harm caused, matters of justice, the sanctity of life, self-evident truth, and so on (see endnote 7).

One suggestion, given by Goodwin and Darley (forthcoming), is that people may be simply conflating objectivity with perceived consensus, being more likely to give a relative grounding for those issues whose rightness/wrongness they perceive as being up for debate (and, in support of this, they found an across-items correlation between objectivity and perceived consensus of $r=0.84$). And, if we consider the

issues that the participants dominantly classified as moral, it does appear that the issues that received a strong relativist grounding—*1st-Trimester abortion*, *Assisted suicide*, and *Stem cell research*—are issues that (unlike *Conscious racial discrimination* or *Robbing a bank*) people are currently debating the moral status of, often quite publicly.

The problem with this interpretation is that participants' verbal explanations of their meta-ethical ratings did not actually reflect this sort of conflation. Their relativist explanations more often than not seemed *genuinely* relativist—and even when those responses that referenced disagreement (and other more objective characteristics, such as contextual sensitivity) were corrected for, the issues in question remain dominantly relatively grounded. Similarly, participants' explanations for their objectivist groundings only rarely referenced social consensus as an explanation for the grounding, and often alongside other features (e.g., “it's bad to do *and everybody knows it*”).⁸

In short, the findings of study 1 and study 2 taken together suggest that the meta-ethical pluralism we (and others) have found is genuine. This means that the assumption held by many philosophers about our “folk moral psychology” (i.e., that we are naturally objectivists) is neither right, nor wrong. People do not appear to conceive of morality as a unified (meta-ethically speaking) domain, but rather as a domain whose normative mandates come in different shapes and sizes. They view the wrongness of some moral actions as clear and unquestionable, unaltered (and unalterable) by the feelings/beliefs/values of the individual or culture. They view the wrongness of other actions (though still genuinely moral in nature) as more sensitive to, and molded by, the feelings/beliefs/values of the actor and/or the people whose lives would be (or have been) affected by the action. This possibility is one we've not seen seriously considered in the meta-ethical literature—and perhaps it is time that it was.

What implications does this pluralism have for our moral psychology? While the focus of the research cited here was to more clearly establish its existence (by both allowing participants to *self-identify* their moral issues and by having them *explain* their classification and grounding choices), we can nonetheless speculate about its significance. It is our hypothesis that people's meta-ethical commitments will be strongly related to their openness to divergent beliefs and practices and their willingness to endorse them as acceptable, along with their willingness to interact with the people who hold and/or engage in them.⁹ And by this, we are not simply repeating the long-standing relativist mantra that relativists are more tolerant of different people and cultures than objectivists—rather, we are proposing that people's meta-ethical commitments may serve the important psycho-social function of determining the level of permissible dialogue and exploration. In other words, viewing a moral issue as objectively grounded effectively removes it from the realm of legitimate personal and social negotiation (e.g., to the extent that slavery is viewed as objectively wrong, any individual and/or social attempt to legitimize the practice would be censored and punished, and would elicit strong negative moral emotions—indignation, disgust, shame, etc.). Viewing a moral issue as relatively grounded,

on the other hand, allows for the acknowledgement of its moral significance while at the same time creating space for personal and social exploration, discussion, and debate.

Consistent with this interpretation, whenever participants gave their self-identified moral issues relative groundings, they highlighted the fact that, while they personally viewed it as wrong, it was still a matter of personal opinions, beliefs, and values, a personal decision, not something beyond themselves to decide—regardless of what the issue was. On the other hand, when they gave those same issues objective groundings, their responses took on a quite different tone: “it is immoral and illegal,” “it’s just wrong,” “you shouldn’t do it,” “there’s no way to justify it,” “it is never acceptable,” “it is an obligation,” and so on.

Thus, the capacity to view moral issues pluralistically may serve as an important mechanism for personal and social change, allowing the boundaries of our moral concern to change. That is to say, perhaps the gradual introduction of an issue into the moral domain (and into our collective moral conscience) is facilitated by our ability to separate the issue’s moral significance from its normative grounding. As our participants’ responses clearly illustrate, coming to view a particular issue as *moral* involves the recognition of its morally significant features (such as the fact that it causes harm or is unfair), but coming to ground it objectively involves another step—namely, viewing those morally significant features as *trumping* other considerations. The fact that domain classification and grounding can come apart creates an opportunity for people to acknowledge an issue as moral (by acknowledging the presence of morally relevant features) without facing the immediate risk of social (and personal) censorship and punishment, allowing attitudes to change gradually. Once the moral status of an issue has become more universally recognized, a shift from relative to objective groundings may occur, at which point, higher levels of censorship and punishment are introduced.

Looking ahead, it may be that several issues currently sitting on the fringes of our collective moral conscience (e.g., vegetarianism, the use of non-renewable resources) are gradually making this transition from largely a matter of “personal choice” to a dominantly relatively grounded moral issue, and will then eventually to an objectively grounded moral issue—seen by future generations as being as embedded in the same moral bedrock that slavery and the sexual abuse of women and children now are, but once were not.

Of course, insofar as we conceive of this explanation as a *developmental* explanation (both within individuals and societies), the underlying normative ideal it assumes is objectivism, the relativist component of meta-ethical pluralism being viewed as temporary—a perhaps necessary transitional phase. Such a view would fit nicely with existing theories of epistemic development (e.g., Chandler, 1975, 1987; Chandler, Boyes, & Ball, 1990; Perry, 1970), in which adolescence marks the beginning of a transition away from rigid childhood absolutism, through a phase of “skeptical relativism,” before (ideally) settling into a “rationalist” stance—the recognition that, while there is more often than not a “fact of the matter” to be had, it is likely to be complex and often difficult to locate.

At the same time, however, we should hesitate to assume that an issue ultimately being identified as objectively grounded was in fact always so (we just failed to see it), or that all issues that are *genuinely* moral are objectively grounded. It may be that our normative relationship to some issues changes, as we (and our world) change. And perhaps some issues exist as part of the moral structure of our daily existence simply because we have individually or collectively willed them to be, though they could have just as easily not been and could (though, perhaps not as easily) be replaced with something else. But these are mere speculations, any defense of which would go beyond the intended scope of this paper—and so, are best left for another time.

Appendix

Study 1

1. Anonymously donating a significant proportion of one's income to charity is good.
2. Opening gunfire on a crowded city street is unacceptable.
3. Robbing a bank in order to pay for an expensive holiday is unacceptable.
4. Calling teachers by their first name, without being given permission to do so, in a school that calls them "Mr." or "Mrs." is unacceptable.
5. Shakespeare was a better writer than is Dan Brown (author of "The Da Vinci Code").
6. Miles Davis was a better musician than is Britney Spears.
7. Boston (Massachusetts) is further north than Los Angeles (California).
8. Consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race is unacceptable.
9. Cheating on a knowledge section of a lifeguard exam, to obtain a job for which one is not qualified is unacceptable.
10. Wearing pajamas and bath robe to a seminar meeting is unacceptable.
11. Bill Clinton is a better public speaker than George W. Bush.
12. Schindler's List is a better film than Police Academy.
13. Homo sapiens evolved from more primitive primate Species.
14. Before the 3rd month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason (of the mother's) is acceptable.
15. Assisting in the death of a terminally ill friend who is in terrible pain, and who wants to die, is acceptable.
16. Driving round a blind corner on the left hand side of the road (in the USA) is unacceptable.
17. Classical music is superior to rock music.
18. Da Vinci was a better painter than Monet.
19. The earth is not at the center of the known universe.
20. Scientific research on embryonic human stem cells that are the product of in vitro fertilization is acceptable.
21. Providing false testimony in court about the whereabouts of a friend who is being charged with murder (i.e., to protect that friend by offering an alibi) is acceptable.
22. Driving through a red light at a busy intersection because you are late for work is unacceptable.
23. Talking loudly and constantly to the person next to you during a lecture is acceptable.
24. CNN provides better news coverage than does FoxNews.
25. A Beautiful Mind is a better film than The Matrix.

26. Frequent aerobic exercising (i.e., running, swimming, cycling) usually helps people to lose weight.
27. Mars is the smallest planet in the solar system.

Study 2

1. Anonymously donating a significant proportion of one's income to charity is good.
2. Opening gunfire on a crowded city street is unacceptable.
3. Robbing a bank in order to pay for an expensive holiday is unacceptable.
4. Calling teachers by their first name, without being given permission to do so, in a school that calls them "Mr." or "Mrs." is unacceptable.
5. Consciously discriminating against someone on the basis of race is unacceptable.
6. Cheating on a knowledge section of a lifeguard exam, to obtain a job for which one is not qualified is unacceptable.
7. Wearing pajamas and bath robe to a seminar meeting is unacceptable.
8. Before the 3rd month of pregnancy, abortion for any reason (of the mother's) is acceptable.
9. Assisting in the death of a terminally ill friend who is in terrible pain, and who wants to die, is acceptable.
10. Driving round a blind corner on the left hand side of the road (in the USA) is unacceptable.
11. Scientific research on embryonic human stem cells that are the product of in vitro fertilization is acceptable.
12. Providing false testimony in court about the whereabouts of a friend who is being charged with murder (i.e., to protect that friend by offering an alibi) is acceptable.
13. Driving through a red light at a busy intersection because you are late for work is unacceptable.
14. Talking loudly and constantly to the person next to you during a lecture is acceptable.

Notes

- [1] Though the issues employed were the same as those found in Goodwin and Darley (2008), the wording of some of the issue statements was slightly changed. In particular, all of the ethical statements utilized by Goodwin and Darley contained the word "morally"—e.g., "anonymously donating a significant proportion of one's income to charity is a morally good action." Since our objective was to have participants determine for themselves into what domain the issue contained in this issue statement belonged, we removed the word "morally" from the issue-statement in order to not prime (or otherwise confuse) them. We also changed "permissible" to "acceptable" because we did not want participants to think that we were asking about the issue's legal status (having run into this confusion before in previous research; Wright et al., 2008).
- [2] Two points: first, we recognize that some of these issues could be construed as fitting into multiple categories. Therefore, we asked participants to choose which category was the *best fit*, capturing the features that they thought were most salient and/or important. Second, our domain categories differed from Goodwin and Darley's (2008) in one important respect—our use of "personal choice/preference," though inclusive of their category of "artistic/aesthetic taste," was arguably broader in application. This broader category was chosen in the place of theirs for two reasons: first, giving participants the option to classify certain issues (e.g., the aesthetic value of classical music) as a *personal preference* seemed entirely consistent with "artistic/aesthetic taste"; and second, adding *personal choice* to this provided

an important and often employed “non-moral” domain category (Nucci & Turiel, 2000) for people to utilize in their issue classification.

- [3] After answering questions for all 27 issue-statements presented, participants were asked the same questions that were asked in Goodwin and Darley (2008): (1) to provide what they felt to be the “grounding” or “justification” for their *own* particular set of moral beliefs (the choices being: “they are ordained by a supreme being,” “they are part of the natural order of things,” “every good person on earth—regardless of their culture—would hold the same beliefs,” “a society could not survive without its citizens holding these beliefs,” “they were taught to me by my parents/my culture,” and/or “their truth is simply obvious”), and (2) to indicate whether it is possible for there to be morally right and wrong acts without the existence of God (the choices being: “yes,” “no,” “not sure”). Participants’ answers to these questions were not significantly related to either their domain classification or their objectivity ratings, so this was not discussed in the results.
- [4] In both studies, we calculated the percentage of classification (four response options making 25% the baseline) required to be significantly above chance. For study 1, with 47 participants, this percentage was 38%, and for Study 2, with 86 participants, this percentage was 42%.
- [5] Given that there were two questions used to calculate participants’ grounding, and that two of the three answers counted as “objective,” while only one counted as “relative,” the above chance calculations for participants’ groundings were more complicated. For study 1, 58% was required to be significantly above chance for an objective and a mixed classification, while only 20% was required for a relative grounding (by chance you could get an objective or mixed grounding 44% of the time each, and a relative grounding only 12% of the time). For study 2, the percentages were 54% and 17%.
- [6] According to some moral theorists (e.g., Haidt, 2001), the simple statement that something is “right/wrong” without further justification for moral issues should not be surprising—people tend to take the rightness/wrongness of a moral issue as obvious and not in need for explanation. In short, people often treat moral issues as “truisms” (Maio & Olson, 1998).
- [7] Both this and previous research (Wright et al., 2008; Wright, forthcoming) suggests that while distinct categories, the personal and the moral domains nonetheless overlap. This overlap reveals itself in two ways. First, people talk of some personal issues being issues that people have the *right* to decide for themselves. That is, people talk as if some—though not all—personal choices (or, at least, the ability to make those choices) are *morally protected* (it would be wrong from someone to take the choice away from you). The second area of overlap is illustrated by the notion of an individualized “moral code” seen here—namely, there are some issues that people recognize as moral (or involving the moral domain), while at the same time wanting to acknowledge a degree of flexibility with regards to the specific “moral code” (values, belief sets) people choose to adopt/follow and which not. In essence, people seem to recognize that there is more than one set of legitimate moral codes, more than one way to live a morally appropriate life. Not surprisingly, people reference personal moral codes much more frequently for the issues they have relativized (abortion, euthanasia, stem cell research) than for those they consider to be objectively grounded. Once we get into issues of extreme harm/injustice, their comfort with plurality begins to disappear—here we hit moral “bedrock.” Certain things (e.g., the torture of children for entertainment) are just *not done*; other things (e.g., parents loving and taking care of their children) are just *required*.
- [8] What is more, in another study (Wright, McWhite, & Grandjean, unpublished manuscript) we found that perceived consensus was a complete mediator of the relationship between objectivity and people’s willingness to interact with and/or help dissimilar others. That is, it was participants’ objectivity judgments that explained their consensus judgments, which then in turn explained their willingness to interact with and/or help dissimilar others (and not the other way around). Thus, while providing an objective grounding to self-identified moral issues did not directly explain participants’ increased attitudinal and behavioral

intolerance, their judgments of objectivity influenced how much perceived consensus they felt they could expect from others, which determined how acceptable expressions of disagreement would be—and, correspondingly, how much intolerance for that disagreement they could reasonably express.

- [9] We've recently generated empirical support for this supposition (Wright, McWhite, & Grandjean, unpublished manuscript), demonstrating that people's meta-ethical commitments strongly predict their tolerance for beliefs and practices with which they disagree, as well as their willingness to interact with and/or help dissimilar others.

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