It is remarkable how many students remain drawn to ethical relativism even after becoming aware of its rather damning shortcomings. They acknowledge that, yes, they know of no cogent positive argument in its favor; that it seemingly undermines the basis for moral reasoning and discussion, and for ethical aspiration and improvement; and that as relativists they may be entangled in self-contradiction. But then they look once again at ethical objectivism, which they see as the only available alternative that still allows for talking about ethical judgments as true or false, and they’re reminded that they deem it to be even more unacceptable: “Given the diversity of divergent opinions about ethical matters, how can I count on my ethical views happening to be the true ones, when they have been so shaped by the happenstance of my background, upbringing, educational exposure, intellectual inclinations, and even genetic makeup?” So they reason, displaying admirable self-awareness and humility. “Did I just happen to obtain the one true view of religion, right and wrong, and what’s valuable in life — while those who disagree with me on questions of morality and value (and not merely factual matters) were instilled with false ideas? Couldn’t they all say the exact same thing about me, and with no less justification? And wouldn’t I now be espousing their ethical convictions if I had been born to their parents, raised in their families and (sub)cultures, taught by their teachers, and exposed to the same arguments as they?”

So, at the end of the day, many students still allow themselves to think and talk like relativists. What else, after all, can they do? To drop relativism for objectivism strikes them as jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. It’s better to stifle one’s judgment than to become indefensibly arrogant, isn’t it?
Now, others will undoubtedly object to such a characterization of objectivism. They believe that, however complicated the right answer to an ethical question sometimes is, there is a right answer — and a, single right answer, not a different one for each different perspective that is taken on the matter. In some cases, moreover, the right answer is obvious — it’s wrong to torture babies for fun; it’s good to help others in need; it’s right to live as Christ decreed, perhaps — and only someone who has been damaged, brainwashed, improperly trained, or seduced by evil can fail to see these truths. Surely it cannot be arrogant to hold fast to clear, important truths?

There is certainly something to be said for this view (and for relativism, for that matter). Moreover, it seems possible to embrace objectivism, and a particular set of uncompromising ethical truths, without taking the further step of imposing these views upon those who disagree. The fact is, though, that many of our students steadfastly regard objectivism as a far-fetched, egotistical or ethnocentric — maybe even dangerous — doctrine. Could they benefit from a deeper, more subtle appreciation of the objectivist and relativist options? Unquestionably. But are they likely ever to obtain such a thorough, detailed philosophical comprehension of the nuances of metaethical theory? Not the vast majority of them — and yet their orientations on these issues will pervasively influence their approaches to education, their political attitudes and activities, their relationships with their neighbors, even the ways that they end up raising the next generation of citizens. So it is crucial that we engage these students. And, to be able to engage them at all, we must engage them on their home turf — understanding what brings them to their relativistic attitudes, and accepting that they will not be dislodged easily from their simplified, stereotyping conceptions of objectivism and relativism, certainly not by intricate abstract arguments.

Many of these students are drawn to relativism in ethics (and often beyond) due to the anxiety that they feel when they contemplate deviating — even in mere thought, let alone in overt expression — from those ‘reference’ groups or persons to whom they look for their norms. The regard, or mere acceptance, of those persons who they perceive to be hip, astute, or simply normal is too precious for them to risk. Not feeling “safe enough” to engage in moral analysis, not (yet) possessing the basic moral courage required to think for themselves, they adopt a “fatalistic” relativism that rationalizes their disengagement. For other students, of course, it may be mere laziness, a distaste for the hard work of thinking clearly, that draws them in.
These forces aside, however, many students are led into relativism by a reasonable, if exaggerated and perhaps ultimately misguided, worry about being contemptibly judgmental or arrogant. How, then, can we help them move beyond the disagreeable objectivist-relativist dilemma into which they feel forced? We can, and do, make efforts to open their minds to objectivist alternatives — introducing them to some versions that are nuanced and/or empirically supported; showing them that humility and tolerance can be compatible with objectivism, and explaining why objectivism does not license the leap to assuming that one’s own current positions are the ones uniquely endowed with truth. But these efforts seem to leave many minds unchanged. To these students, objectivism cannot be rescued or rehabilitated; it is simply a non-starter, and there is nowhere else to turn but relativism, for all its problems.

But we still have one arrow left in our quiver, and it is a philosophically significant and pedagogically fruitful one: we can show these students that there is somewhere else to turn. Beside relativism and objectivism, there is a third option in this area — ethical pluralism. Might it avoid those features of its competitors that are so often found unpalatable?

The core claim of pluralism is that there can be multiple correct answers to ethical questions of right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse — not merely one correct answer, as objectivists maintain, nor as many correct answers as there are differing cultural (or individual) opinions, as ‘cultural’ (or ‘individual’) relativists maintain. To the objectivist, if people disagree about an ethical matter, only one of them can be right — everyone else is wrong. (Though it may be that none of them has discerned the truth of the matter.) There is a single universal standard of ethical truth, a single all-encompassing ethical reality, against which to measure everyone’s behaviors, beliefs, and feelings. To the cultural relativist, by contrast, every culture’s answer is right ‘for it’ — no culture can be mistaken. And it may even be that every single person’s view, no matter how absurd or wrongheaded it seems to others, is right ‘for him’ and thus beyond criticism, as the more radical, ‘individual’ version of relativism maintains. Either way, there is no single ethical reality, hence no universal standards.

The pluralist position lies in between the poles of objectivism and relativism, and claims to possess the most appealing features of each. Yes, there is an objective truth of the matter concerning ethics, and thus it is possible for people’s judgments to be wrong; at the same time, yes, ethical truth is not always single, providing for only one correct answer to
every question, and thus there is no good reason to conclude that all whose judgments disagree with ours are wrong. According to the pluralist, then, each ethical question may have multiple equally correct (reasonable, acceptable) answers, but not an unlimited number of such answers. Only certain answers are above reproach; the rest are mistaken. Error, ignorance, misjudgment, wishful thinking, self-deception, and confusion are possible in ethical thinking. So we need not, and ought not, grant an uncritical free pass to the viewpoints of other persons or cultures — or to our own. Critical reflection, inquiry, and debate are important, and not pointless, activities.

Now, this might sound pretty mysterious. How can there be a truth that “is not always single,” that allows for multiple right answers to a question? Are we supposed to take this kind of lunacy seriously?

To see the plausibility of pluralism in ethics, we ought first to look outside of ethics, to the domains where the contending theories are most at home, where they strike us as most compelling. Let’s consider the subject matters where it is fairly uncontroversial that objectivism and relativism are appropriate, and that pluralism would therefore be out of place.

Begin with matters of empirical, in particular scientific, fact: there is general consensus on how to go about answering questions about things like distance, mass, heat, voltage, or pressure, or at least on how to test the answers. Moreover, each method of testing is required to be objective — to come out with the same answer regardless of who performs it, or what subjective attitudes and preferences the testers bring to it, provided that they have received the appropriate training and are competent.3 This objectivity is not confined to the physical sciences, either. Journalists, historians, biologists, economists — even ordinary citizens trying to learn about the scheduled kickoff time for a football game — regard themselves as pursuing objectively existing and verifiable facts, even if they later launch from these foundations into less objective domains of interpretation and judgment.

Surely, objectivism is the appropriate approach to take here. There are no multiple right answers to questions about such matters, let alone a different correct answer for each (sub)culture or each person!

But let’s give relativism its due, too. Consider matters of taste or preference, regarding such things as food, romantic allure, or how best to spend one’s leisure time. Here we certainly seem not to find the objectivism-favoring features just discussed — the agreement across persons, the methods for verification, the irrelevance of who is doing the judging. The procedures for answering questions about these matters seem to be
unavoidably, and irreducibly, subjective: they properly draw upon personally variable, sometimes idiosyncratic, attitudes and other features of our psyches. While it’s possible to make a case that the person who prefers vanilla ice cream to strawberry is objectively wrong, that thunderstorms are inherently unpleasant, or that beaches are more beautiful than mountain ranges, it seems impossible to make a convincing case in such instances. And notice that individual tastes and preferences often are shaped by the surrounding (sub)cultures: to Koreans generally, pickled foods are delicious, but not so for participants in many other culinary traditions.

It would appear, then, that in realms such as these, there seems no problem with saying “to each, his own” for every (sub)culture, or even for every person. Relativism is not out of place here.

But what if someone were to ask for the name of the greatest military leader in American history — or the best route for driving to that football game mentioned above, or the right strategy for succeeding in business, or the best hitter in baseball, or the finest film of all time, or the right way to play a certain Beethoven sonata, or the best teacher at one’s school? Now, there might well be several legitimate, reasonable competing answers to any of these questions. But surely there are, as a matter of objective reality, plenty of wrong answers to each, too, answers that have no strong reasons in their favor compared to some other possibilities. Anyone with a few seconds reflection can come up with some.

In matters like these, we obtain answers by turning to the underlying factors or criteria that are relevant. For military leadership, we inquire about such things as engagements won, importance of those victories, quality of the adversaries defeated, handicaps fought under, innovative methods used, and personal character and charisma. For excellent teaching, we ask about making class interesting, being a role model, displaying a good sense of humor, having a well-designed syllabus, treating students fairly and respectfully, inspiring wonder and curiosity, instilling high standards, generating intellectual enthusiasm for the subject-matter, and so on. Yet there can be reasonable disagreement about how to apply each underlying criterion, and even about whether a given criterion is relevant, or how much weight it should be given. Was Star Wars more innovative a film, for instance, than Toy Story? And should innovation even be considered a factor in film greatness? If so, how important a factor?

Thus, various defensible conceptions or ‘theories’ of military leadership, teaching excellence, film greatness, etc., are possible, and they lead to irresolvable debates in bars, at conferences, on talk shows, and on
awards panels. Some people are clearly more expert than the rest of us at rendering judgments in these areas, but even these knowledgeable, sage persons disagree. Consequently, pure objectivism looks unsuited to questions like these. Still, there are many, many answers that simply cannot be reasonably defended, and so we also find an important brake on the kind of ‘anything goes,’ all-accepting attitude of relativism. Pluralism seems to offer the best alternative.

So, finally: what about ethics? Here, too, we usually find ourselves drawn toward conceptions that are based upon multiple factors. For example, what makes an action ethically right or wrong? Well, isn’t it important to know whether the action brings pleasure or suffering? And what alternative options are available to the actor? Sure. But what about other implications — say, for human flourishing or well-being or autonomy, pleasure aside? And then there is the actor’s state of mind. And whether any rights, or obligations, are violated. And whether the action displays an excellent, admirable character. And maybe other considerations. Plus, how are these factors supposed to be combined and balanced into a single judgment? Some philosophers have become famous by urging that a single factor or set of factors always predominate — for Bentham and Mill, consequences of pleasure and pain; for Kant, state of mind; for Aristotle and Aquinas, in different ways, character and human flourishing — but few ordinary persons think that convincing answers can always be obtained by such a purity, or narrow exclusivity, of vision.

We thus face a choice when we answer an ethical question. We must decide, in effect, which factors to weigh, and how heavily to weigh each, without there being only one proper way to decide these matters. The result is that there are multiple defensible methods for reaching a final judgment, and, often, multiple divergent answers each of which can be defended with sound reasoning. The answers do need to be defended — in ethics, as opposed to those issues for which relativism is proper, no one earns a free pass just by showing up and stating a personal or cultural opinion. There are implausible, untenable answers that deserve not automatic deference, but disagreement or at least silent critique: answers that rely upon irrelevant issues (e.g., the rightness of an action typically does not depend upon the actor’s race, or political views), answers that ignore relevant ones, and answers that are based upon mistakes of fact or upon inconsistent or fallacious reasoning. Ethically sophisticated, wise persons are familiar with all the relevant factors, and can insightfully and logically analyze and discuss their applications in particular cases. They are also
astute enough to know that, in ethics, the expectation of a single correct answer is typically a misguided one.4

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NOTES


2 Deni Elliott, Teaching Ethics in the First Person, ch. 4 (unpublished manuscript).

3 Philosophers, sociologists, and historians of science have raised some doubts about this picture, but it is adequate for our purposes.

4 I am greatly indebted to Susan Wolf’s “Two Levels of Pluralism,” Ethics 102: 785-98 (1992),