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How to Be A Relativist
Kenneth A. Taylor
Stanford University

I. Preliminaries

Rampant moral relativism is widely decried as the leading source of the degeneracy of modern life.¹ Though I proudly count myself a relativist, I rather doubt that relativism has anything like the cultural influence that its most ardent critics fearfully attribute to it. Much of what gets criticized under the rubric of relativism is often really no such thing. Relativists need not be hedonists, egoists, nihilists or even moral skeptics. Moreover, when it comes to the upper reaches of our intellectual culture, relativism is more often dismissed than defended.² I don't deny that in certain literary corners of academe, relativism retains a fashionable post-modern cache.³ But in more sober philosophical circles, the catalog of ills from which relativism is widely thought to suffer is impressive.⁴ When taken as a characterization of the nature of moral discourse and moral argument, relativism is often thought to be descriptively inadequate. Contra the relativist, we do not treat moral disputes as rationally irresolvable. We do not tolerate all alternative moral “codes” as equally valid. Relativism may be true of merely cultural norms or practices. But morality has a felt universality that makes it quite different in character from a system of merely cultural norms or practices. In the face of morally abhorrent practices, we don't simply shrug our shoulders and say that while the relevant practices may be wrong for us, they are alright for them. Relativism is sometimes even said to be self-undermining. It makes the very thing it purports to explain – the possibility of rationally intractable disagreements – impossible in the first place. Partly because of its supposedly self-undermining character, relativism is sometimes accused of being a strictly incredible doctrine. Those who profess to be relativists must, if this is true, either be insincere, confused, or self-deceived. Though someone might well sincerely hold the mistaken second-order belief that she believes that she believes that relativism is true, no one, in his or her deepest heart of hearts, sincerely, non self-deceptively and informedly believes that relativism is true.

In this essay, I swim against the predominant anti-relativistic philosophical tide. My minimal aim is to show that relativism is neither descriptively inadequate nor self-defeating. My maximal aim is to outline the beginnings of an argument that relativism is a truth resting on deep facts about the human normative predicament. And I shall suggest that far from being a source of cultural degeneracy, the fact of relativism has the potential to ground a culture that is deeply life-affirming. My argument against the twin charges of descriptive inadequacy and self-defeat turns on a distinction between *tolerant* and *intolerant* relativism. I concede that many of the standard arguments against relativism do have force against tolerant relativism. But against intolerant relativism, those arguments are entirely unavailing. The crucial difference between the tolerant and

intolerant relativist is that although the intolerant relativist agrees with the tolerant relativist that norms are relative, she insists that agents are sometimes entitled to hold others to norms by which they are not bound. I shall argue that just because the intolerant relativist allows that we are sometimes entitled to hold others to norms by which we are bound but they are not, she is able to escape both the charge of descriptive inadequacy and the charge of self-defeat. In particular, I shall show that the intolerant relativist has a coherent and satisfying account of the nature of moral disagreement and moral argument. Establishing the ultimate truth of relativism, however, would take more than showing that one form of relativism escapes certain standard arguments against relativism. Though I do not pretend to conclusively discharge the burden of showing that relativism is true in the space of this essay, I do sketch the beginnings of an account of what I call the bindingness of norms that has intolerant relativism as more or less straight-forward downstream consequence. If there are independent grounds for accepting that account of bindingness, then there are independent grounds for accepting intolerant moral relativism.

II A Metaphilosophical Prelude

The account of the bindingness of norms on offer in this essay is psychologistic and naturalistic. In order to focus, if not entirely forestall, certain objections to my account that may arise just because of its psychologistic and naturalistic character, let me be clear from the outset what I do and do not claim to show. The question my account of normativity is intended to answer is, in large measure, a how possibly question. I want to know what in natural order norms of rational self-management might be such that an agent might be bound by such norms in virtue of merely natural and psychological facts. What makes this question at all gripping and challenging is the evident fact that there exists a certain conceptual distance between our ordinary, intuitive conception of the normative and our ordinary, intuitive conception of the merely natural.⁵ Because of this conceptual distance, we don't know in advance how to coordinate the explicitly naturalistic concepts by which we cognize the denizens of the natural order and the explicitly normative concepts by which we cognize the denizens of the normative order. We have no antecedently available means of re-identifying that which we proto-typically re-identify via the deployment of normative concepts as merely further aspects of the natural order. If we are to achieve rational coordination between the natural and the normative, we need more concepts than are currently dreamt of in either our commonsense intuitive conceptions of the natural or our commonsense intuitive conceptions of the normative. And those new concepts must bridge the conceptual distance between the natural and the normative as we current conceive of them.

My aim in this essay is to offer up just such a set of intermediate or bridging concepts. Consequently, the central claims on offer here should not be understood as conceptual-analytic claims about our intuitive understanding of normativity and its relationship to the natural order. I am prepared, if need be, to adopt a quite revisionary attitude toward our ordinary understanding of our ordinary normative practices. Though there is a budget of folk concepts and notions that we typically use to understand our own normative thought and talk, I am prepared to find that those concepts give us a poor cognitive hold on a certain real phenomenon in the world. I do not take it as a condition

on the adequacy of the theory of norm-bindingness on offer here that it should preserve in tact our ordinary conceptions, intuitions, and notions. My account fairly bristles with theoretical notions and distinctions neither directly nor explicitly countenanced by our ordinary common sense understanding of normativity. This is not to say that I remain entirely indifferent to the deliverances of common sense. I do take it to be a condition on the adequacy of my account that where it has consequences that appear to conflict with certain ordinary intuitions and notions, that I should, ultimately, be able to either explain or explain away those intuitions, but in my own privileged theoretical vocabulary. This I will do, for example, with the widely shared intuition that morality has a felt universality that renders it incompatible relativism. Morality does have a kind of universal purport, it will turn out, but of a kind that is entirely consistent with intolerant relativism.

This essay is an exercise in speculative metaphysics cum psychology. I aim to say what, if anything, in the natural order, the bindingness of norms might possibly come to. If I can show that there are plausibly nearby possible worlds of which my naturalistic and psychologistic account of the bindingness of norms is plausibly true, then I will have shown that the normative really *could* have a place in the natural order. Admittedly, I will not thereby have shown that normativity *actually does* have a place in the natural order. But it is, I hope, not unreasonable to expect that the stock of concepts and distinctions I develop in brief compass in this essay and more fully elsewhere will ultimately prove to have application not just to nearby possible worlds, but to our very own as well.⁶ Establishing that, however, is a task for another day. For the nonce, I will be satisfied if you gain fuller imaginative acquaintance with a possibility – the possibility that norms and their binding force are a real part of the natural order. If we are able to gain fuller imaginative acquaintance with that possibility, we should be left with less lingering temptation to see normativity as *sui generis* and irreducible. And given that my defense of relativism flows directly from my account of the metaphysics of normativity, our exercise in imagining should also lower any antecedent resistance to and fear of relativism.

III. What are Norms that they may bind us?

Some philosophers believe that the biological world is replete with normativity. They see normativity in the “proper functioning” of the parts of animals and plants and in the way the coordinated functioning of those parts enable living things to thrive and reproduce.⁷ I am not, in the first instance, concerned with such putative norms of proper functioning. Indeed, I take no stand on whether norms of proper function are normative in any robust sense -- though I rather doubt that they are. My concern is rather with what I call norms of rational self-management. Norms of rational self-management are a very special kind of thing, addressed to very special kinds of creatures. They are addressed, in the first instance, to cognizing agents who enjoy the capacity for a kind of self-mastery over their own cognition and conation. Norms of rational self-management direct cognizing agents to govern their cognition and conation in one way rather than another. When agents are bound by such directives they are often thereby “committed” to manage their cognition and conation in accordance with those directives. And others may thereby be entitled to hold them to such commitments. My aim in this section is to sketch a

naturalistic, psychologistic account of how possibly norms of rational self-management manage to bind us and to explain how possibly commitments and entitlements are generated by the norms by which we are sometimes bound.

But what exactly is a norm? To a first approximation, we may think of a norm as an ought-to, where an ought-to is a directive articulating what (putatively) ought to be, be done, or be believed. Such directives can be more or less general. They can articulate what a given agent ought to do or believe at a given time or in a given set of circumstances. Or they can articulate general constraints on action or belief. Think of the totality of norms as subsisting in a sort of abstract norm space, roughly on a par with the space of propositions. Think of this abstract space as a plenum, containing every possible ought-to, from the most specific to the most general. It might well be worth the effort to investigate the, as it were, fine structure of this plenum, but that is not a task I shall undertake here. Our problem is not to determine which norms *subsist* in the plenum of all possible norms, but to say which norms *bind* self-managing cognizing-agents and to say in virtue of what they do so. Separating questions about which norms are subsistent from questions about which norms are binding is crucial. Norms may subsist even when they bind no one.

Because norms have a quasi-proposition like character, it may be initially tempting to suppose that norms are the sort of thing that can be true or false. But I want to resist this way of thinking. The plenum of norms is not a plenum of propositions. It is, rather, a plenum of directives.⁸ Norms are not themselves directly in the business of being true or false. But they are in a related business – the business of binding or failing to bind cognizing agents. To say this is not to deny that there subsist normative propositions about what ought to be, be done, or be believed. And these can indeed be either true or false. My claim is rather a claim about the relative priority of norms and normative proposition. Normative propositions are made true, if they are true, by facts about norm bindingness. If Smith is bound by a norm of rational self-management that directs the prompt completion of her relativism paper, that makes it true, at least in one sense, that Smith *ought* to finish her paper soon. It behooves us, then, to say just what it takes for an agent to be bound by a norm. It is to that task that I now turn.

On my view, a cognizing agent is bound by a norm *N* just in case she does or would endorse *N* upon what I call culminated competent reflection. Now phrases like “culminated competent reflection,” and “endorsement” are intended here as purely psychofunctional role concepts, systematically interdefinable in terms of one another. None of these notions is intrinsically or irreducibly normative.

Consider first the competence condition. A form of reflection counts as competent, for a given dialectical cohort, if exercises of that form of reflection historically played a decisive causal role in spreading and sustaining normative community among the members of that dialectical cohort. *Current* exercises of the historically decisive form or forms of reflection count as episodes of competent reflection. A cognizer reflects competently, in other words, if she is disposed to reflect in ways that have historically sustained normative community among a dialectical cohort of which she is a member.

If, and only if, you exercise considerable caution in so doing, you may think of competent reflection as a kind of “ideal” reflection. Some philosophers think of ideal reflection as reflection that tracks the “objectively good” whatever exactly that is. Others

believe that under “ideal” reflection, rational agents are guaranteed to converge on endorsements of the same standards or norms. As used here, the phrase “competent” reflection is intended to carry no such connotations at all. The question my competence condition is intended to answer is not the question which form of reflection objectively “deserves” to play a causal role in the sustaining and spreading of normative community. The question is, rather, what kind of reflection has in fact played the decisive causal role in spreading and sustaining such communities among various collections of cognizing agents. The competence conditions specifies, in effect, how it *has been* or *is still* done *hereabouts*.

The “hereabouts” bears stressing. Competence is relative to dialectical cohorts. A dialectical cohort is a collection of cognizing agents among whom a distinctive form of reflection plays a role in sustaining normative community. The competence condition may pick out different dispositions for different dialectical cohorts. Forms of reflection that spread and sustain normative community among pre-scientific, pre-literate, or pre-philosophical dialectical cohorts may differ radically from the forms of reflection that are extant among more scientific, literate and philosophical cohorts. Even within a dialectical cohort, intellectual progress may give rise to progressively more refined forms of reflection. When intellectual progress does happen, the competence condition for a dialectical cohort will specify the form of reflection that currently plays the decisive role in spreading and sustaining normative community. Dialectical cohorts may also fragment and divide. Out of this fragmentation, a new array of dialectical cohorts may constitute themselves. At the very extreme, a given cognizing agent may even come to form a dialectical cohort of one. A cognizer may count simultaneously as a member of multiple dialectical cohorts subject to different competence condition. But such an agent is likely to suffer from a kind of internal fragmentation.

We may think of the diverse dialectical cohorts as so many local configurations of reason.⁹ There is a rich and complex story to tell about the formation, deformation, and reformation of dialectical cohorts over the long sweep of human history. The history of such formation, deformation and reformation represents reason’s actual historical walk through the space of all possible local configurations of reason. Elsewhere, I argue at length that there can be no a priori anticipation of reason’s trajectory through the space of possible local configurations.¹⁰ Reason’s walk through history is determined by no simple principle. It is a walk fraught with contingency, with dead ends and wrong turns, but also with decisive and clarifying ruptures. What bears stressing here, however, is that the local configurations of reason are one and all configuration *of reason*. But local configurations of reason are not all created equal. Some local configurations of reason have been the engines of what we here and now, by our own normative lights, judge to be intellectual progress; others have been engines of what we here and now, by our normative lights, judge to be darkness and error. The configuration of reason locally is often contested and always contestable. A configuration of reason which one dialectical cohort regards as an engine of intellectual progress, another cohort may regard as an instrument of intellectual decline. There is no privileged stance, no transcendental ground, fixed once and for all, from outside of history and culture, from which we may determine by whose lights the “truth” is to be measured in such disputes. This is not to deny that we typically do measure by our own current lights and that we take ourselves to

be entitled to measure by our own lights. But as dear as our own lights may be to us, they enjoy no *antecedent* privilege except that of being our own.¹¹

Consider next what I call a conception of the good. A conception of the good is a set of convictions and commitments about what is to be, be done, or be believed. The set of convictions and commitments that constitute a conception of the good may be of varying strength and intensity. They may be more or less articulate, more or less determinate. A conception of the good may be either initial or considered. A conception of the good is initial when although it is, in some sense there, inside the agent, it does not yet enjoy the agent's full rational backing. A conception of the good is considered when an agent has decisively owned, through culminated competent reflection, that conception of the good as her own. She has thereby decisively undertaken to govern her life in accordance with norms that license that conception of the good.

Now initial conceptions of the good are shaped and conditioned in a variety of ways. Mechanisms of socialization, for example, play an important and powerful role. Before even the first dawning of reflective self-awareness, human beings are typically thrown into various collectivities in which our still developing normative lights are assaulted from without by the relentlessly droning other. Others attempt to mold and shape us, from the ground floor of our selves, into beings fit for a life within the local collectivities into which we find ourselves thrown. At the eventual dawning of reflective self-awareness, we may find ourselves already furnished with a conception of the good, one that may be deeply psychological entrenched and thus, in one sense, firmly held. But as long as that already given conception of the good lacks our own full rational backing, however firmly psychologically entrenched it may be, it remains still a merely initial conception, rather than a considered conception. A conception becomes considered only when one makes it fully one's own through culminated and competent reflective endorsement. When one does make a conception of the good fully one's own, one thereby undertakes, with all one's rational powers, to govern one's life as one's own.¹²

If initial conceptions of the good are the (initial) inputs to reflection, endorsements are the outputs of reflection. Endorsement too must be understood in merely psychofunctional terms.¹³ To a first approximation, a state x is an endorsement if it is a state of a kind K such that (a) culminated courses of reflection typically culminate in states of kind K and (b) states of kind K typically cause pro-attitudes toward actions, attitudes and states of affairs appropriate to states of kind K . If I endorse Barack Obama for President that will typically cause me to have a pro-attitude toward any or all of the following: (a) the state of affairs of Obama's being or becoming president; (b) my own or another's desire to see Obama become President; and (c) actions taken by me or others that are intended to bring about or sustain an Obama presidency.

All manner of states and properties present themselves to us as *candidates* for reflective endorsement, including our emotions, desires, and beliefs. I take this to be fact about the very architecture of self-governing rational intellects and wills. For a self-managing rational being, having a belief, desire, emotion or urge merely occur within the psyche is not yet for that state to be "owned" by the cognizing-agent as her very own. But it would be a mistake to conclude that a state that merely occurs within the psyche of a self-managing rational agent is, therefore, merely an alien interloper until it has been reflectively owned. Through the mere occurrence of a state within the psychic economy

of a self-managing cognizing agent a question is put - even if not yet explicitly and self-consciously so - viz., the question whether what she merely finds her believing, feeling, or desiring is *worthy* of believing, feeling, or desiring. Through culminated competent reflection, self-managing cognizing agents decisively answer such questions for themselves. If one answers such questions in the affirmative, one has *ratified* the relevant beliefs, desires, or emotions. When one ratifies one's inner states, one thereby undertakes to stand behind those states in what I call the contest of reasons. One undertakes, thereby, to be responsive to rational pressures of various sorts, including possibly self-generated rational pressures for coherence and consistency, rational pressures directed toward the self from other rational beings, and worldly rational pressures from below.

There is no a priori guarantee that a cognizer will in fact desire or believe that which she would deem, upon culminated competent reflection, worthy of belief or worthy of desire. Nor is there an a priori guarantee that a cognizer would endorse, upon culminated competent reflection, that which she in fact desires or believes. A psychologically well-ordered cognizer may strive to bring it about that she believes only what she deems worthy of belief and desires only what she deems worthy of desiring, but she is not guaranteed of success in that endeavor. In one sense, our beliefs, desires and commitments may not be entirely up to us. Even a psychologically well-ordered cognizer may be causally determined to believe or desire that which, upon culminated competent reflection, she would deem unworthy of believing or desiring. Imagine a cognizer who believes that *p* as the result of hypnotic suggestion and lacks any further grounds for believing that *p*. Imagine that if she were to competently reflect upon hypnosis as a method of belief-fixation, she would not endorse it. Even if our cognizer were to reflectively conclude that her belief is not worthy of belief, she might still be unable to rid herself of that belief. This points to the possible real world limits to our capacity for self-management.

Endorsements are not all created equal. Some actual endorsements are not the outcome of a culminated course of competent reflection -- either because though there was a culminated course of reflection, it was incompetent or because the endorsement was not the product of reflection at all. Only endorsements that are outcomes of culminated courses of competent reflection suffice to bind an agent to a norm. We might call those endorsements that are the outcome of culminated competent reflection deep endorsements. Deep endorsements matter because they amount to the undertaking of decisive rational commitments to norms of rational self-management. One who deeply endorses a norm thereby undertakes responsibility for rational self-management in accordance with that norm. She is thereby responsible both to herself and to any with whom she stands in rational community in the mutual endorsement of the relevant norm. She has thereby endowed herself with a certain normative status that commits her, both to herself and to those with who she stands in rational community, to manage her claims, intentions, beliefs, desires, and actions in accordance with the relevant norm. She may even thereby entitle others to *hold* her to the relevant norm. Now when an agent is in fact causally regulated only by attitudes and states that enjoy her own deep endorsement, and when the fact of deep endorsement is decisively causally responsible for bringing about such causal regulation, we may say that the agent is a fully self-managing agent.

Consider next the notion of culmination. Talk of *culminated* reflection may at first blush appear to have a quasi-normative feel. One is tempted to say that reflection culminates when it reaches an “appropriate” stopping point. One then wants to know what *standards* of appropriateness amount to. But talk of culmination is here intended in an entirely non-normative manner and involves no reference to any antecedent standard of appropriateness. The culmination of reflection is a matter of reflection coming to a stopping point, at least temporarily. We may reflect and reflect, but until reflection culminates, we have not bound ourselves to any determinate norm. Reflection culminates when it produces endorsements that are “stable” in light of all currently relevant rational pressures on reflection. Reflection culminates, that is, when further reflection would yield the same endorsement at least given the same rational pressures.¹⁴

But the stability in which reflection culminates is typically a merely local, merely temporary stability. The inputs to reflection change in a myriad of ways and for a plethora of reasons. They change in response to social and personal upheaval, in response to new voices, demanding recognition and respect, in response to new discoveries about either our individual lives or about our collective places in the order of things. Reflection is practically inexhaustible. We are subject to constant moral testing, to constant opportunities for discovery, for growth, for failure, for success. What stability and fixity reflection achieves, in light of the constant churning of the moral whirlwind, is likely to be but the fixity and stability of the dialectical moment. Still when reflection does culminate in a stable and fixed endorsement, if even only for a dialectical moment, we have *decisively* committed to govern our lives by the endorsed norm. For at least this moment, we have given that norm our full rational backing.

There is no a priori guarantee that reflection will in fact culminate in stable endorsements. There may be incoherence or indeterminacy in the initial inputs to reflection. Instability, incoherence, and/or indeterminacy in the set of initial commitments and convictions may lead to instability, incoherence, and/or indeterminacy in the set of reflective endorsements. Where reflection does not culminate in a set of coherent, stable and determinate endorsements, the agent is not stably bound by relevant norms. An agent in such a normative predicament is still an agent, but she is not yet a fully self-owning, self-governing one. She has reached no equilibrium point in rational self-management. There are no determinate and stable facts of the matter about which of the would-be reasons, as it were, are really and truly *her* reasons.

Now a course of reflection may sometimes bring stability, coherence and determinacy, even when the initial inputs to reflection originally enjoyed no such coherence, stability or determinacy. I call reflection that creates stability, coherence, or determinacy de novo *Sartrean reflection* and reflection that merely elucidates coherent, stable and determinate commitments and convictions that were already there, but not yet fully “owned” or acknowledged, *elucidative reflection*. Both elucidative and Sartrean reflection play significant roles in our self-constitution and self-governance. Through elucidative reflection, we invest our full normative authority in commitments that are, in sense, already there, but not yet fully acknowledge and owned as our own. Through elucidative reflection, we decisively commit to owning up to our initial commitments as considered commitments. In so doing, we decisively undertake the rational self-management of our lives in accordance with those now elucidated commitments. Through Sartrean reflection, by contrast, we constitute ourselves, as it were, de novo.

Through Sartrean reflection, one may decisively break with previous commitments after, for example, continually finding oneself incapable of living up to the old commitment. In an act of Sartrean self-reconstitution, one forswears the old commitment and gives oneself a new commitment in accordance with which one henceforth decisively undertakes to manage one's life. Alternatively, Sartrean reflection may lead one to decisively choose one side of a previously intractable conflict of commitments.

Accounts of norm-bindingness that emphasize the role of reflective endorsement are sometimes accused of being overly intellectualized. It is not just those highly reflective few who are in the habit of explicitly reflecting that are, and are regarded as, subject to norms. Indeed, we often take ourselves to be entitled to hold even the most unreflective agents to norms of various sorts. But how could this be, the worry goes, if reflective endorsement were a *sine qua non* of norm bindingness?

The answer is that "being subject to a norm" should be understood in at least two different ways. On the one hand, an agent is "subject to a norm" if she is, in the sense we have so far been considering, bound by that norm through the mechanism of culminated competent reflection. But an agent may also be "subject to a norm" if another is entitled to hold her to the relevant norm, even if she is not herself bound by that norm in my privileged sense. It is often tacitly assumed, but without much real argument, that one is subject to a norm in the "entitlement to be held to it" sense if and only if one is subject to that norm in the "being bound by it" sense. But this, I shall argue below, is a mistake, a mistake that lies at the core of many arguments against relativism.

Before delving further into that issue, however, let me more directly answer the potential concern about the overly intellectual character of my account. We must distinguish between being merely tacitly bound by a norm and being explicitly bound by a norm. An agent is merely tacitly bound by a norm when, although she has not in fact engaged in an episode of culminated competent reflection, nonetheless, the current actual facts of her psychology suffice to make true counterfactuals about what she would endorse upon culminated competent (elucidative) reflection. When an agent is merely tacitly bound by a norm, she has not thereby explicitly committed herself to that norm. She has not yet explicitly undertaken to manage her life in accordance with that norm. Consequently, she is not subject to the relevant norm in the "bound to it" sense. But she may, nonetheless, be subject to it in the "entitlement to be held to it" sense. When agent A recognizes that agent B would endorse a certain norm upon culminated competent elucidative reflection, even if B has never, in fact, explicitly reflected on the relevant norm, A may self-generate an entitlement to hold B to the relevant norm. Though A's self-generated entitlement is not yet ratified by B, nonetheless, A's self-generated entitlement to hold B to N is responsive to normatively relevant facts about B herself. As such, A's self-generated entitlement purports to be more than a mere imposition from without.

Tacit binding plays a significant social-dialectical role in (implicitly) licensing rational criticism and sanctions. One agent's holding another to norm by which she is merely tacitly bound may occasion reflection that does culminate in the subject of the holding either decisively taking up or decisively rejecting the relevant norm.

IV Two Species of Entitlement

I have been arguing that I alone have the power to decisively commit myself to a norm. Others may attempt to coerce or otherwise socially condition me into living in accordance with some norm. Coercion or conditioning may even cause me to “obey” a norm. But neither coercion nor conditioning suffice to endow a norm with my rational authority. Only through my own reflective endorsement can a norm be endowed with such authority. Despite the fact that another cannot bind me to a norm, however, she may, I have already said, be *entitled to hold* me to a norm, even to a norm by which I am not bound. We must distinguish, that is, between the authority that *entitles* and the authority that *binds*.

Now entitlements to hold an agent to a norm can arise in two different ways. They can be *self-generated* or *granted by the subject*. x has a *self-generated entitlement* to hold y to N when x entitles herself to hold y to N . x has a *subject-granted entitlement* to hold y to N when y entitles x to hold y to N . When one self-generates an entitlement to hold another to N , one, in effect, endorses N as a norm for the other. Now my endorsing N as a norm for you cannot bind you to N . Nor need it give you any original, non-derivative reason to live up to N . Nonetheless my endorsing N as a norm for you may indeed give *me* a reason to hold, or try to hold you to N .

To be sure, when I endorse N as a norm governing you merely on my own normative authority, my self-generated entitlement to hold you to N need not be recognized or acknowledged by you as a legitimate authority with respect you. Indeed, you may self-generate an entitlement to resist my attempts to hold you to N . You thereby refuse my normative authority standing as an authority for you. But in self-generating an entitlement to hold you to N , I need not acknowledge the authority by which you self-generate an entitlement to resist as a legitimate authority with respect to me. When I fail to acknowledge the normative authority in you as an authority for me and you fail to acknowledge the normative authority in me as an authority for you, we stand in the situation of rational enmity. In the situation of rational enmity there exists a discord of reasons. What count as reasons for me are not ratified by you as reasons for you. What count as reasons for you are not ratified by me as reasons for me.

One may initially be tempted to conclude that self-generated entitlements to hold another to a norm by which she is not bound, which she may even abhor, are rooted in mere normative hubris. But that conclusion would be hasty. To see why, it will help to distinguish two distinct categories of norms, *traveling norms* and *merely local norms*. Roughly, N is endorsed as a traveling norm by x if and only if for any agent or (normative) community of agents y , x 's application of N to y is licensed by N to be unconstrained by y 's reflective attitude(s), pro or con, toward N . On the other hand, N is endorsed as a merely local norm by x if and only if for any agent or normative community of agents y , x 's application of N to y is not licensed by N to be constrained by y 's reflective attitude(s), pro or con, toward N . Contrast norms of etiquette with ethical norms. Norms of etiquette are paradigmatically local. Among one normative community, burping after a meal may be a polite expression of satisfaction. In a different normative community, burping after a meal may be regarded as rude and obnoxious. If the members of the burping community endorse burping as a merely local norm, then they will not self-generate entitlements to hold the non-burping community to their own standards of politeness, at least when the non-burpers remain within their own community. To be sure, members of the burping community may themselves travel to

non-burping locales and vice versa. When they do travel, they may be held and may even permit themselves to be held to local norms different from their own. When a norm is merely local, there is no guarantee that when *you* travel, it travels with you.

Norms of etiquette stand in apparently sharp contrast to ethical norms. Ethical norms are often thought to enjoy a certain felt universality. This felt universality may result from the fact that ethical norms are traveling norms. Distinctively ethical norms are perhaps norms that we endorse as norms for the entire rational order. To endorse a norm as a norm for the entire rational order is to entitle or license oneself to hold every rational agent answerable to the norm, independently of their own reflective attitudes toward that norm. Indeed, even if one recognizes that another would upon culminated competent reflection abhor the relevant norm, still if the norm is endorsed as a traveling norm and thereby purports to govern the entire rational order, one thereby self-generates an entitlement to hold others to the relevant norm, to evaluate and perhaps even sanction them in light of the norm. Consider, for example, an abolitionist community that endorses the ending of slavery as a traveling norm. Even if a slave-holding community endorses a norm that permits slave-holding as either a traveling or merely local norm, the abolitionist community may self-generated an entitlement to subject the slave-holders to their abolitionist norms. They will license themselves to condemn, to seek to persuade and perhaps even to coerce the slave-holding community into freeing their slaves. And they need not regard the slave-holding community's abhorrence of their abolitionist norms as legitimately blocking their self-generated entitlement to do so. At the same time, the slave-holding community may well refuse to recognize the normative authority by which the abolitionists entitle themselves to condemn, persuade or coerce as a legitimate or governing authority for them. That is, that may refuse to *ratify* the abolitionist's self-generated entitlements with subject-granted entitlements. Indeed, the slave-holders may self-generate entitlements to resist and reject all condemnation, argument and coercion from the abolitionist community.

When two normative communities endorse two incompatible norms, with at least one of the norms being endorsed as a traveling norm, there arises the possibility of intractable moral conflict between them. Moral conflict arises, that is, when we take what is merely our own normative authority as a normative authority for another, often through the endorsement of a norm as a traveling norm. Such norms will very often meet with normative resistance as we try to make them travel.

I do not mean to say that moral conflict is inevitable or that all moral disputes are rationally irresolvable. Moral conflict is often a mere way station on the path toward more encompassing normative community. Because human beings generally hunger for normative community with others, when we do self-generate entitlements to hold others to our traveling norms, we often offer those norms up to the other as candidates for their reflective endorsement as well. We ask others to ratify our self-generated entitlement by granting us entitlement in return. When agents do ratify one another's self-generated entitlements with subject-granted entitlements they thereby achieve *mutual ratification* of a system of traveling norms. They thereby make the system of traveling norms mutually and reciprocally binding on one another. They no longer enjoy merely self-generated entitlements. They have granted one another *mutual and reciprocal entitlements* to hold one another to the norms by which they are now mutually and reciprocally bound. They have acknowledged each other as full and equal partners in normative community. To

acknowledge one another in this way is for each to say to the other that the normative authority of one is also a normative authority for the other.

None of this is automatic. It grows haltingly and dialectically from an initial tension generated by agents' competing self-generated entitlements. These self-generated entitlements reflect first and foremost our self-recognition and self-valuing. Each fully reflective intact rational being recognizes herself to be an original, non-derivative source of reasons for herself. But almost without hesitation, we sometimes take what are merely reasons of our own as reasons for other rational beings. Our tendency to extend our own reasons beyond our own domain is brought short by the recognition that other reflective rational agents value and esteem themselves in just the ways that we value and esteem our own dear self. To recognize another as a fellow reflective rational being is to recognize that other as an original and non-derivative source of reasons for herself. In this mere recognition, we have already elevated the other rational being above the whole of non-rational nature. Non-rational beings, who lack the power of reflection, are nothing at all either to themselves or for themselves. They are at best derivative sources of reasons for any rational being. Non-rational beings can indeed be sources of reasons for us, but only in virtue of the rationally optional interests that we happen to take in them. We may esteem non-rational beings as instruments, as objects of wonder and awe, even as objects of a peculiar kind of sympathy or love. But they are not the kinds of beings for which even the possibility of normative community arises.

The mere recognition of another as a fellow rational being, a being capable of the deepest self-valuing and highest self-estimation, is not yet the achievement of normative community. In the bare recognition of another as a fellow rational being, one has not thereby reflectively owned the other as a non-derivative rational source for oneself. Nor has one thereby limited the presumed reach of one's own normative authority. Recognition does, however, set the question, "What, if anything, shall we do, be or believe together as fellow rational beings?" This happens when we confront each other with concrete demands for respect and recognition of the normative authority that lies within. I claim here and now a right to what I take to be mine. I demand recognition and respect of my claim from you. Correlatively, you claim rights to what you take to be yours. Our claims may conflict. We are confronted with a question. How, if at all, shall we be reconciled? How, if at all, shall we live together? The struggle to arrive at mutually acceptable answers to such questions, a struggle in which we sometimes succeed and sometimes fail, is what I mean by the dialectic of ratification.

Through the dialectic of ratification, I try to get you to ratify me and my norms. I try thereby to make it the case that me and my norms govern your life. Simultaneously, you try to get me to ratify you and your norms. You try thereby to make it the case that you and your norms govern my life. When we are each governed by the other, we constitute a normative community. We have made ourselves into original normative authorities and non-derivative sources of reasons for each other.

Normative communities are among humanity's highest achievements. Through the constitution of normative communities, we extend the reach of our own rational powers. For example, through the mediation of mutually ratified norms of inquiry and communication which direct the truth to be sought and told, my having reasons for believing a certain proposition may give you a non-derivative reason for believing that proposition as well. Through the mediation of mutually ratified norms of conduct calling

for mutual aid and co-operation, my having a reason for pursuing some good may give you a non-derivative reason either to refrain from interfering with my attempts to pursue that good or perhaps even a reason for aiding me in my attempts to achieve that good. Mutually ratified norms are thus the rails along which reasons may be transmitted from cognizing agent to cognizing agent. Within a normative community, the rational powers of one become rational resources for all. Normative community thus makes possible the emergence of complex cooperative rational activity, including shared forms of inquiry, deliberation and argument.

Let me stress that contrary to the dreams of, say, Kant, an all-encompassing community of reasons, is not an a priori, rationally mandatory imperative categorically binding on all rational beings as such. There are myriad ways in which we might fail to achieve thoroughgoing community, despite the full rationality of all who are a party to the failure. The norms by which I would see the world governed, that I most urgently offer up for mutual acceptance to the entire rational order, may simply be rejected. That would make them an insufficient basis for normative community. But it need not make them any less dear to me, nor in any way weaken my commitment to them. Not out of mere hubris or self-love, but out of deep concern for the entire rational order, one may self-generate an entitlement to shape the unyielding world by one's own normative lights. One may prefer to shape the world by the force of argument, if argument will suffice. But by what imperative must we abandon our deepest convictions about the governance of the world, if argument should fail? Yet, were one to succeed through mere coercion in imposing norms upon a reluctant world, one would not have achieved true normative community, but the mere domination of one over another. With fellow rational beings who succeed through coercion in holding me to norms of their own endorsing, despite my abhorrence of those norms, there can only be rational enmity and a discord of reasons. Even if I appear to endorse their domination over me through incompetent or non-culminating reflection, that amounts to a mere semblance of normative community, not its reality.

V Conclusion: Relativism Revisited

The account of normativity on offer in this essay is deeply relativistic. Nonetheless, it is subject to none of the more or less standard arguments against relativism. Because the intolerant relativist distinguishes the authority that entitles from the authority that binds, for example, she has the resources to coherently deny that all moralities must be regarded as "equally valid." The intolerant relativist need not allow that those who owe allegiance to one moral system can never be entitled to condemn or criticize those who are bound by the norms of a different moral system. Liberal, secular moderns may condemn, on their own normative authority, what they regard as benighted and archaic fundamentalisms. What the intolerant relativist does deny is that such condemnation enjoys the ultimate backing of some external and transcendent normative authority. There is, she insists, no such normative authority either on heaven or on earth. There is only the normative authority that lies within each of us.

My intolerant relativist suspects, in fact, that the belief in such an external normative authority is itself an exercise in bad faith. Often, when we would hold others

to norms grounded in nothing but our own normative authority, they will self-generate entitlements to resist. Equally often we may refuse to ratify the resisting other's self-generated entitlement to resist. The question naturally arises: By what authority, with what right do we refuse to ratify the resisting other's self-generated entitlement? Faced with this question, the transcendental absolutist and the tolerant relativist turn into strange bedfellows. For both will agree that if we refuse ratification with an authority that is merely our own, and not yet an authority for the other, then nothing but hubris could ground that refusal. In fear of such hubris, the tolerant relativist retreats. In denial of such hubris, the absolutist lays claim to an authority that is not merely her own. She claims to speak on behalf of a transcendental authority to which all rational beings are subject – the voice of god, the unwavering voice of human reason, the mandate of history or of universal human sentiment.

The intolerant relativist insists that both the fear of the tolerant relativist and the denial of the absolutist misunderstand the true reach and nature of our normative authority. Contrary to the tolerant relativist, we may stand our normative ground and not retreat in the face of resistance from the rational other. Though we cannot bind the entire world to norms merely of our own endorsing, we can indeed entitle ourselves to hold the world to the norms by which we would most urgently see the world governed. Contrary to the transcendental absolutist, standing our normative ground requires not transcendental mandate whatever. We have only our own locally generated mandate for the governance of the world. And that, the intolerant relativist insists, is all the mandate it is worth our while to concern ourselves about.

To be sure, the intolerant relativist does not deny that human beings hunger for normative community. She sees that hunger as one among the great driving engines of human history. She also sees it as an important constraint on our self-generated entitlements. Unless we do adjust our proffered up traveling norms in the face of resistance from the rational other, we can never in fact achieve normative community with them. Since the dawn of humanity, no doubt, human beings collectively have been engaged in fraught struggles to constitute ourselves in moral community one with another. The struggle goes on. The intolerant relativist insists only that there can be no a priori anticipations of the outcome of the struggle. The struggle may possibly culminate in thoroughgoing moral fragmentation and rational enmity. But it may also culminate in thoroughgoing moral community and rational solidarity.

Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Ratzinger and Pera (2006).

² For some by now classical philosophical defenses of relativism see Wong (1984), Harman (2000) and (1996). A fair number of other philosophers defend views with strong relativistic tendencies, even if they don't flat-out embrace relativism. Two prime examples are Blackburn (1993), (1998) and Gibbard (1991), (2003). Blackburn labors quite explicitly and mightily to keep various forms of relativism at bay, but he does not anticipate my distinction between tolerant and intolerant relativism.

³ Many literary theorists appear to draw relativist inspiration from some of the works of Richard Rorty. See, for example, his "Justice as a larger Loyalty" and "Kant vs. Dewey: the current situation of moral philosophy," both in Rorty (2007) and also his essays on solidarity in Rorty (1991).

⁴ For a recent sustained attack on relativism, especially epistemic relativism See Boghossian (2006).

⁵ I take Moore's (1903) justly famous open question argument to be a pretty decisive demonstration that there is conceptual distance between our ordinary concepts of the normative and our ordinary concepts of the natural. But I take the open question argument to be of no further philosophical importance. In particular, it shows nothing at all about the metaphysics of normativity and in no way constrains the future co-evolution of our concepts of the normative and the natural.

⁶ See Taylor (2003), especially essays 13 and 14. These concepts receive their fullest development in my book Taylor (in progress).

⁷ The exemplar is, of course, Millikan (1984).

⁸ As such, norms are akin to what Castañeda (1975) calls *practitions*. Ultimately, however, in the longer work from which this essay is drawn, I reject talk of norms, understood as abstract existents, in favor of what I call *normative statuses*. A normative status is defined by a set of (normative or non-normative) entry conditions and a set of downstream consequences, with the pairing of entry conditions being determined largely by the social coordinating role of the relevant normative status. Dispensing with norms in favor of normative statuses enables us to more clearly bridge the gap between fact and norm. My account of normative statuses is deeply indebted to Brandom's (1994) inferentialist approach to norms and normativity – though I do not consider myself any sort of inferentialist.

⁹ Dialectically cohorts will typically have an epistemic fine structure. By this I mean, a set of background theories, principles, and cognitive dispositions that jointly function as warrant spreading machinery within the relevant local community of reasoners. But by

warrant I do not mean “objective” warrant, whatever that might be, but warrant by the lights of the members of the relevant dialectical cohort. We might call this sort of warrant internal warrant. To explain the epistemic fine structure of a dialectical cohort is to explain the mediating structures that spread internal warrant within and across agents. Now we sometimes seek, as it were, external validation of our merely internal warrants. For example, we may seek to (objectively) verify a theory by appeal to evidence from the world below. Or we may seek external ratification of norms proffered up to rational others with whom we do not yet stand in full normative solidarity.

¹⁰ Taylor (in progress)

¹¹ When I say that our normative lights enjoy no antecedent privilege except that of being our own, I do not mean thereby to deny our entitlement to judge others by our own normative lights. This will become clearer in due course. But it is worth stressing that when the normative lights of others differ from our own, we may often be blind to the standing of other as “rational.” In this connection, it may help to distinguish among: (a) those with whom enjoy normative solidarity; (b) those we recognize as reasoning, but unreasonable; (c) those we take to be not merely unreasonable, but “irrational” and (d) those we take to be altogether unreasoning. In our ordinary praise and condemnation of others, we most readily laud as rational those with whom we enjoy the greatest normative solidarity. At the other extreme is the entire unreasoning order – including rocks, trees, and many animals. In between these two extremes, fall both those with whom, though we take them to be part of the “rational” order, we do not enjoy full normative solidarity. This is true both of those in group (b) – the reasoning but unreasonable – and those in group (c) -- the irrational, with the difference being one of degree, rather than kind. In ordinary parlance, we may lack fully articulated and explicit concepts that adequately capture the full import of such distinctions. But I take this budget of distinctions to be of great normative significance for it helps to determine what we should do when we are faced with resistance from the other.

¹² Culminated competent reflective endorsement is thus my candidate for solving what Bratman (2004) calls the problem of agential authority. What inner states, Bratman asks, are such that “when they guide, *you* govern?” To the extent that I understand the question, I answer that the agent governs when she is guided by states that are the outcome of culminated competent reflective endorsement.

¹³ Though my account of reflective endorsement bears a certain superficial family resemblance to Korsgaard’s (1996) views about reflective endorsement, my views are offered in defense of descriptive and explanatory project – the project of naturalizing normativity -- with which Korsgaard would have no truck. Correlatively, Korsgaard’s views about the significance of reflective endorsement are offered in service of a normative project – the project of answering what she calls the normative question – which I find ill-conceived.

¹⁴ Stability under reflection plays a role in my account analogous to the role played by stable plans and intentions in Bratman (2000). Bratman thinks stable plans and intentions play a decisive role in answering the question of what he calls “agentive” authority. Relatedly, Blackburn (1998) evidently thinks that knowledge is roughly a matter of beliefs that are stable under the pressure of further evidence and inquiry. There is something right about this thought. Indeed, I defend a similar claim in Taylor (in progress). Unlike Blackburn, I see no tension whatsoever between a thoroughgoing realism and making stability under inquiry be the hallmark of that which we are pleased to honor with the title “knowledge.”

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