The moral universalism-relativism debate

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Introduction

Theories of moral relativism have long been met with skepticism. The dominant view in philosophy is that morality is universal, meaning that moral statements follow from general moral principles that apply to everyone and apply everywhere. Put simply, what is wrong for me here and now is also wrong for you, and is likewise wrong were it to occur somewhere else. Moral relativism, in contrast, means that there are moral principles that do not apply to everyone or everywhere.

There are two lines of argument in favor of moral universalism. First, according to analytic philosophers, morality is *by definition* universal. As a consequence, if a rule is not universal then it is not a moral rule. Second, according to moral psychologists, morality is universal because this is how lay people think of the concept of morality. If a rule is not universal, lay people are not likely to think of it as a moral rule.

Although these two lines of arguments may appear to be independent from each other, upon closer inspection, it is evident that they are closely intertwined. First, analytic philosophers build their theories on the assumption that lay people do think of morality as universal (see Section I.1). This assumption is empirically testable and thus depends on findings from moral psychology. Indeed, psychological findings seem to undergird this argument of analytic philosophers (see Section III.3). However, moral psychologists have long *defined* moral principles as rules that apply or should apply universally, generally, or objectively. They, in turn, referred to major philosophical traditions in order to support these definitions. To the extent that these philosophical traditions again relied on assumptions about individuals' moral psychology, the main arguments in favor of moral universalism amounted to circular reasoning. One way to break this

circularity is to again investigate individuals' moral psychology, but without a priori defining moral principles as rules that apply universally.

In this paper, we give an overview of recent arguments and new empirical findings related to this moral universalism-relativism debate. In the first section, below, we discuss moral universalism and analytic philosophers' arguments in favor of it. In the second section we discuss moral relativism and philosophers' arguments against it. In the first and second sections we explain why empirical research is necessary in order to advance the debate. In the third section, we explain how 20th century moral psychologists have employed a restrictive notion of morality, biasing their results in favor of moral universalism. In the fourth section we discuss recent survey studies and present new findings that raise serious doubts about arguments in favor of moral universalism. Finally, we argue that in order to advance the debate, we now need to supplement philosophical reasoning and survey research with a broader range of empirical research methods.

I. Moral universalism

Proponents of moral universalism often argue that universality is part of the very meaning of morality. They start with the question "What is morality?" A very thin answer to this question would define morality as a set of evaluative statements, statements that are not about how the world is, but about the way it ought to be. Of course, this is not enough: not all evaluative statements are moral statements. There is a difference, for instance, between things being morally wrong, as opposed to merely bad or unfortunate. If we tell someone to be more careful when crossing the street, we are evaluating his behavior in order to avoid unfortunate accidents, but we are not uttering a moral imperative. Something more is needed, and universality has been a popular candidate for a thicker description of morality, especially among 20th century analytic philosophers[1]. In this section, we look at the arguments put forward by these analytic philosophers.

I.1 Analytic philosophy

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[1] B. Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972, p.4.

Twentieth century analytic philosophers habitually appealed to their readers' understanding and use of the word morality. According to Hare, for instance, moral evaluations apply *by definition* universally, in other words, universality is part of the *true meaning* of morality[2]. The true meaning of a word can be known to competent users of a language. As a consequence, when trying to find the meaning of a word, we can refer to usage and understanding of the term by competent users of that language[3]. Indeed, Hare defends his view by referring to his readers' use and understanding of moral terms. He asks us, for instance, to imagine a conversation between a Kantian (K) and an Existentialist (E)[4]:

> E.: "You oughtn't to do that."
> K.: "So you think that one oughtn't to do that kind of thing?"
> E.:"I think nothing of the kind; I say only that you oughtn't to do that."
> K.: "Don't you even imply that a person like me in circumstances of this kind oughtn't to do that kind of thing when the other people involved are the sort of people that they are?"
> E.: "No; I say only that you oughtn't to do that."
> K.: "Are you making a moral judgment?"
> E.: "Yes."
> K.: "In that case I fail to understand your use of the word 'moral'."

Now Hare asserts that "most of us would be as baffled as the 'Kantian'; and indeed we should be hard put to it to think of *any* use of the word 'ought', moral or non-moral, in which the 'Existentialist's' remarks would be comprehensible,"[5]. Thus, according to Hare, we, his readers, think of morality as universal, because this is how we use the word in a way that we find comprehensible. This is his argument in defense of moral universalism.

Likewise, Taylor, defending the universality of moral rules, also seems to refer to how his readers understand the notion of a moral rule when he speaks about "*our* understanding of what it means to take the moral point of view [...]"[6]. Other examples are Streiffer[7] and Lyons[8], who oppose

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[2] R.M.Hare, "Universalisability", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 55, 1954, p.306.
[3] G. Wallace, A.D.M. Walker, *The Definition of Morality*, London & Southampton, The Camelot Press, 1970, p.5.
[4] R.M.Hare, "Universalisability", in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 55, 1954, pp.304-305.
[5] *ibid.*, p.306.
[6] P.W. Taylor, "On taking the moral point of view", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 3/1,

certain theories of moral relativism due to their counter-intuitive implications. When discussing conflicting moral statements (e.g., 'X is good' versus 'X is not good', uttered by two different individuals), they refer to "the conviction shared by laymen and philosophers that only one of these [assertions] could possibly be right,"[9].

Thus, lay people's speech acts – which we refer to as folk morality - are taken to constitute an argument for or against the meaning of the term morality. We have two objections to this line of reasoning. First, analytic philosophers have never asked their readers or anyone else how they use these words. Instead, they take their own intuitions about how the folk use and understand a specific word as a proxy for folk morality. As a consequence, it is an open question whether folk morality is indeed what analytic philosophers think it is.

Second, philosophers themselves do not agree about this folk morality. Other philosophers defend moral relativism by referring to common intuitions, lay people's speech acts, or common understandings of certain moral terms[10]. MacIntyre[11], for example, refers to notable cases such as instances of personal moral dilemmas: he invites us to think of Sartre's example of a pupil who had to decide between joining the fight against the Nazis and caring for his sick mother[12]. In this case, the pupil's feelings would in the end determine what to do, and feelings differ from person to person. Thus, whatever the pupil would decide to do would not necessarily rest upon a universal rule, but it would still be a moral decision, at least to his readers; or so the argument goes.

In sum, philosophers appeal to the folk's understanding and use of the word 'morality' in order to defend their view in favor of moral universalism and against moral relativism. However, there is no consensus

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1978, pp.35, emphasis added.

[7] R. Streiffer, *Moral relativism and reasons for action*, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Doctor of Philosophy, 1999, p.104.

[8] D. Lyons, "Ethical relativism and the problem of incoherence", in *Moral relativism - A reader,* New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976/2001.

[9] *ibid.*, p.16.

[10] e.g. B. Brogaard, "Moral Contextualism and Moral Relativism", in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 58/232, 2008, pp.385-409; J. Beebe, "Moral Relativism in Context", in *Noûs,* 44/4, 2010, pp.691-724; J. Prinz, *The emotional construction of morals*, Oxford, University Press, 2007; G. Harman, "Moral relativism defended", in *The Philosophical Review*, 84/1, 1975, pp.3-22.

[11] A. MacIntyre, "What Morality is Not", in *The Definition of Morality*, London & Southampton, The Camelot Press, 1957/1970.

[12] J.P. Sartre,"L'Existentialisme est un Humanisme", 1946. http://www.danielmartin.eu/Textes/Existentialisme.htm

among philosophers about what folk morality consists of. It is therefore useful to empirically investigate how the folk understand and use the word morality. However, before sorting this out, we need to have a clear understanding of the meaning of moral relativism and of arguments against it.

II. Moral relativism

II. 1. What is moral relativism?

While moral universalism means that moral statements can be inferred from general moral statements that apply to everyone at all times and places, moral relativism means that moral statements cannot be inferred from or reduced to generally applicable statements. Instead, moral statements are relative, for instance to individuals, their opinions, times and places, conventions, or still something else.

Moral relativism can be construed as consisting of three necessary components. In general, moral relativism is a three-pronged view such that: X is relative to Y, where X is an aspect of the moral phenomenon and where there is irrevocable variation in Y[13]. We explain each component below with an example.

First, one can take moral relativism to mean that some aspect of moral statements (e.g., their truth, their referent) or morally relevant acts (e.g., their moral rightness) is relative to a moral framework[14]. Consider the following example, inspired by Lyons[15]: Assume that pro-choice activists endorse a moral framework that prioritizes the value of personal choice over the value of the unborn life. According to some kinds of moral relativism, a pro-choice activist – say, Jane – can correctly judge that abortion is permissible because it is in accordance with her moral framework. Nonetheless, if a pro-life activist – say, Claudia – abhors abortion, Claudia's statement regarding the impermissibility of abortion is also true because it is in accordance with Claudia's moral framework that prioritizes the value of the unborn life over personal choice.

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[13] K. Quintelier, D.T. Fessler, "Varying versions of moral relativism: the philosophy and psychology of normative relativism", in *Biology & Philosophy*, 27/1, 2012, pp.95-113
[14] G. Harman, J. J. Thompson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*, Blackwell, 1986.
[15] D. Lyons, "Ethical relativism and the problem of incoherence", in *Moral relativism - A reader,* New York/Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1976/2001.

Second, moral relativism holds that there is variation in these moral frameworks. In our example, some people are pro-choice and others are pro-life. Some of their moral judgments will therefore differ because their respective moral frameworks differ.

Finally, this variation in moral frameworks cannot be entirely eliminated. Assume that the truth of moral statements is relative to the moral framework one endorses, and that different individuals adhere to different moral frameworks. If it is the case that a pro-choice framework is, for example, epistemically better than a pro-life framework, then the statement 'abortion is wrong' becomes false no matter who utters it. If moral relativism would allow that all variation in moral frameworks could be eliminated, moral relativism would be compatible with (most forms of) moral universalism. This meaning of moral relativism would be too broad to be useful. Thus, moral relativism is better taken to hold that many moral frameworks are epistemically or normatively equivalent.

II. 2. How is moral relativism opposed to moral universalism?

It follows from the second component of the above scheme that moral relativism and moral universalism differ from each other. Moral relativism entails that there is irrevocable variation in moral frameworks. As a consequence, according to moral relativism, acts are morally right for some people in some contexts and morally wrong for other people or in other contexts; moral statements are true for some people and false for other people or in other contexts; moral concepts ought to be used in different ways by different people or in different contexts. In contrast, moral universalism holds that acts are right or wrong, or statements are true or false, for everyone and in all contexts, or that moral concepts ought to be used in the same way by everyone and in all contexts.

II. 3. Kinds of moral relativism

Before we discuss arguments against moral relativism, it is important to spell out that there are different kinds of moral relativism[16]. Arguments against moral relativism might be applicable to a specific kind of moral relativism only. This is especially the case for two distinctions, namely,

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[16] K. Quintelier, D.T. Fessler, "Varying versions of moral relativism: the philosophy and psychology of normative relativism", in *Biology & Philosophy*, 27/1, 2012, pp.95-113.

agent versus appraiser moral relativism[17], and moderate versus extreme moral relativism.

First, consider agent and appraiser moral relativism. The example in Section II.1. relativizes the truth of the moral statement to the appraiser, this is, the person uttering a moral statement. It is therefore a form of appraiser (meta-ethical) moral relativism. However, importantly, acts are usually performed by agents and they often have an impact on second parties other than the appraisers. What would happen if we introduce agents and their moral frameworks?

An example can illustrate this complication. Both Susan, a pro-choice activist, and Helen, a pro-life activist, are having an abortion. They are agents performing an act. Claudia (the pro-life activist) and Jane (pro-choice activist) again contemplate these actions and prepare their respective judgments. In the previous example, the truth of a moral statement was contingent upon its accordance with the appraisers' (Claudia and Jane's) moral frameworks. Now, if we introduce agents and their moral frameworks, whose moral framework constitutes the appropriate frame of reference? Should we assign truth values based on the moral frameworks of the agents performing the act, this being Susan and Helen, or based on the moral frameworks of the appraisers judging the act, this being Claudia and Jane? Or could any moral framework be an appropriate frame of reference?

According to an agent moral relativist, the agent's moral framework is the appropriate frame of reference. In this example, it would be true that it is permissible for Susan to have an abortion (because Susan is a pro-choice activist) while it would be false that it is permissible for Helen to have an abortion (because Helen is a pro-life activist). For the agent moral relativist, it does not matter who is appraising the act. Both Claudia and Jane would be correct if they admonished Helen's abortion and permitted Susan's. In Section II.3 we explain how previous arguments against moral relativism apply to either appraiser relativism or to agent relativism.

Second, the distinction between moderate and extreme moral relativism is also important. Extreme moral relativism holds that no moral judgment is universally true or false, that no moral act is universally right or wrong, and so on. This is also the kind of relativism that holds that anything is right or wrong, that any moral statement is true, and that Hitler was right. Moderate moral relativism holds that some moral judgments are universally

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[17] J. Beebe, "Moral Relativism in Context", in *Noûs*, 44/4, 2010, pp.691-724.

true or false while others are relatively true or false[18]. Thus, it can be compatible with moral relativism that 'murder is wrong' is a universally true moral statement. This can, for instance, be the case when there is no epistemologically or normatively acceptable moral framework that legitimates murder.

Most relativist scholars defend moderate moral relativism. At the same time, criticism against moral relativism is generally aimed at extreme moral relativism. Nonetheless, certain philosophers have also opposed moderate moral relativism. An exemplary argument is described below.

II. 3. What arguments are there against moderate moral relativism?

Ruse[19] argues that we evolved to think of morality as objectively true in the service of motivating us to act upon our values. As a consequence, people are innately objectivist about morality – when they judge something right or wrong they have strong inclinations to think of this judgment as having a basis that is independent of their beliefs; correspondingly, they are also inclined to believe that the judgment should hold universally. Another consequence is that, should one manage to think of a judgment as relative, then one necessarily would no longer think of it as a moral judgment. Thus, according to Ruse, people cannot think of morality as relative. Now, we have seen in Section I.1 that certain analytic philosophers refer to how people do think of morality, and take this as an argument for or against a specific moral theory. If we follow the arguments put forward by analytic philosophers, the alleged fact that people cannot – and therefore do not - think of any moral act, rule or statement as relative constitutes an argument against moderate moral relativism.[20]

Another argument against (moderate and extreme) moral relativism is that it has counterintuitive implications[21]. According to appraiser moral relativism, two conflicting moral statement can both be true at the same time. Philosophers have argued that this is hard to reconcile with how

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[18] Adapted from: P.K. Moser, T. L. Carson, *Moral relativism - a reader*, New York/Oxford, University Press, 2001, p.3.

[19] M. Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously. A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy*, Oxford/New York, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

[20] According to Ruse, this is not an argument in favor of moral universalism. Instead, Ruse is a proponent of error theory in ethics: we all think of morality as objectively true; however, this is merely an illusion foisted upon us by our evolved nature. As a consequence, all moral statements are false.

[21] B. Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1972.

people use moral concepts[22]. For instance, according to appraiser moral relativism, one appraiser cannot reasonably say that a conflicting statement, made by another appraiser, is wrong. However, most people allegedly do admonish others when they utter moral statements that appear to conflict with their own. Thus, the moral speech acts of most people do not appear to be in line with moral relativism. In order to know if this argument is correct, we need to investigate if lay people have appraiser moral relativist intuitions.

In contrast, according to agent moral relativism, each moral statement about a specific act performed by a specific agent is either true or false, irrespective of who is appraising the act. As a consequence, conflicting moral statements are not both true at the same time, and it is not unreasonable for discussants to admonish those who utter conflicting moral statements. Thus, findings that speak against appraiser moral relativism do not refute agent moral relativism. However, Hare's argument against moral relativism is an argument against moral agent relativism (see Section I.1). In order to know if his argument against moral relativism is correct, we need to investigate if lay people have agent moral relativist intuitions.

In sum, those who reject moral relativism because of its divergence from everyday moral language should clarify what kind of moral relativism they have in mind: appraiser moral relativism might well be at odds with folk morality in ways that agent moral relativism is not, and agent moral relativism might run against the folks' use of moral concepts in ways that appraiser moral relativism does not. Of course, whether the folk do use moral language in line with agent or in line with appraiser relativism needs to be tested.

In order to assess the above arguments in favor of moral universalism and against moral relativism, we will first provide an overview of pioneering studies that might shed light on folk morality. In section IV, we turn to more recent findings.

III. Previous research in moral psychology

III. 1. Bias against moral relativism

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[22] R. Streiffer, *Moral relativism and reasons for action*, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy Cambridge, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1999.

The folk's morality has been extensively investigated by 20th century moral psychologists. At first glance, their findings appear to provide overwhelming support for the claim that human beings are moral universalists.

In the field of moral development, Lawrence Kohlberg[23] insisted that all moral principles are universal. He famously backed up such claims with empirical data indicating that moral development is characterized by six stages of increasing universality. When reaching the sixth and final stage, lay people think of moral rules as being correct by virtue of their universal applicability.

In the same research tradition, Elliot Turiel[24] proposed that individuals come to perceive moral rules as different from conventional rules: while the latter are perceived to apply only in specific social situations, depending on the prevailing convention, moral rules are intended to be universally justified. Thus Turiel argued that "moral prescriptions […] are *universally applicable* in that they apply to everyone in similar circumstances. They are *impersonal* in that they are not based on individual preferences or personal inclinations"[25]. This view is again supported by an impressive amount of empirical data[26].

Despite the large volume of material in the Kohlberg and Turiel traditions, these findings need to be examined carefully: they are based on research that defined morality a priori as consisting of universalist principles, by referring to universalist moral theories. Kohlberg, for instance, built on Kant's universalist moral theory. This can limit the scope of empirical investigations and guide the interpretation of data. Specifically, if a given research participant thinks of a certain rule as relative, the interpretation would be that the research participant has not reached the final stage of moral development yet, or that the rule is not a moral rule. This would simply be a consequence of the definition of morality; it would not matter whether the research participant thought of the rule as a moral rule or

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[23] L. Kohlberg, "A reply to Owen Flanagan and some comments on the Puka-Goodpaster exchange", in *Ethics*, 92/3, 1982, pp.513-528.

[24] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention.* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[25] *ibid.*, p.36.

[26] L.P. Nucci, E. Turiel, "Social interactions and development of social concepts in preschool-children", in *Child Development*, 49/2, 1978, pp.400-407; C.L. Wainryb, M. Shaw, Langley, K. Cottam, R. Lewis, "Children's thinking about diversity of belief in the early school years: Judgments of relativism, tolerance, and disagreeing persons", in *Child Development*, 74, 2004, pp.687-703; J.G. Smetana, "Preschool children's conceptions of moral and social rules", in *Child Development*, 52/4, 1981, 1333-1336.

not. It is possible that, had another definition of morality been used, the same data could have been interpreted as evidence that morality is relative. Thus, the a priori universalist definition of morality guided the scope of research and the interpretation of research findings; as a consequence, folk moral universalism was supported.

Of course, every empirical researcher needs to demarcate morality in order to know what to investigate. However, this demarcation can be minimal at the outset of research, allowing more freedom in the experimental design and the subsequent interpretation of the results.

This bias towards moral universalism is also very prominent in the literature defending the existence of a moral/conventional distinction. Because this research tradition is still very influential, it is important to examine its arguments in more detail.

III. 2. The moral/conventional distinction

Theorists defending the moral/conventional distinction[27] hold that most individuals develop the capacity to distinguish two kinds of social interactions. One cluster of interactions is perceived as belonging to the moral domain and triggers associated mental computations. The other cluster is perceived as belonging to the conventional domain and triggers different, convention-specific mental computations.

According to the research tradition that defends the existence of a moral/conventional distinction, moral transgressions are defined as transgressions that involve a victim who is harmed, whose rights have been violated, or who has been subjected to an injustice. When asked why a moral transgression is wrong, people accordingly refer to these justifications. A conventional transgression, on the other hand, is wrong because there are implicit or explicit social strictures ruling against it, such as laws, sanctions, or prevailing opinions or practices. Because these are the defining criteria distinguishing moral from conventional transgressions, and in order to avoid confusion arising from associations with the word 'moral', it is better to speak of 'transgressions that involve inflicting harm, injustice, or violating rights' versus 'transgressions against convention'. In what

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[27] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; J.G. Smetana, "Social-Cognitive Domain Theory: Consistencies and Variations in Children's Moral and Social Judgments", in *Handbook of Moral Development*, Mahwah, New Jersey / London, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981, pp.119 – 153; R.A. Shweder, "In Defense of Moral Realism: Reply to Gabennesch", in *Child Development*, 61/6, 1990, pp. 2060-2067.

follows, we abbreviate this to 'HJR transgressions' and 'conventional transgressions'.

What, then, are those domain-specific mental computations? In the context of the relativism-universalism debate, the generalizability criterion is most relevant. HJR transgressions are allegedly perceived by lay people as generalizably wrong. This means that they are wrong in every social system, independent of convention, while conventional transgressions might not be wrong in a different social system[28].

At first sight, an impressive corpus of empirical investigations employing this conceptual framework supports the conclusion that people think of HJR transgressions as generalizably wrong, independent of convention[29]. This makes the moral/conventional distinction also a claim in defense of universalism and against relativism[30], even though this was not the primary aim of moral/conventional defenders. Specifically, the moral/conventional distinction holds that the wrongness of HJR transgressions is not relative to convention, and HJR transgressions are moral transgressions. However, we argue that the methods used in these studies inherently preclude the accrual of evidence of the existence of folk moral relativism.

Like Kohlberg, Turiel[31] premises his approach on a narrow conception of 'morality', drawing on a selection of philosophical theories that support universal accounts of morality[32]. Morality is *defined* – prior to empirical research – as "analytically independent of systems of social organization that coordinate interactions,"[33]. This definition is manifest in Turiel's conception of HJR transgressions: Moral right and wrong are

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[28] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983; see discussion in D. Kelly, S. Stich, K. Haley, S. Eng, D.M.T. Fessler, "Harm, affect, and the moral/conventional distinction", *Mind & Language*, 22/2, 2007, pp.117-131.

[29] e.g. C. Wainryb, L. Shaw, M. Langley, K. Cottam, R. Lewis, "Children's thinking about diversity of belief in the early school years: Judgments of relativism, tolerance, and disagreeing persons", in *Child Development*, 74, 2004, pp.687-703; E. Turiel, M. Killen, C. Helwig, "Morality. Its structure, functions and vagaries", in *The emergence of morality in young children*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987.

[30] See also: G.P. Goodwin, J. M. Darley, "The Perceived Objectivity of Ethical Beliefs: Psychological Findings and Implications for Public Policy", in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 1/2, 2010, pp.161-188.

[31] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

[32] J. Searle, *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*, Cambridge, England, Cambridge University, 1969.

[33] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, p.39.

determined by, and justified by, *universal* values of justice, rights, and 'do no harm.' As a consequence, what is morally wrong is morally wrong everywhere, and its wrongness is justified by these universal values. In this conception, by definition, relativistic rules cannot be moral rules.

These definitional premises profoundly shape the empirical findings of research on the moral/conventional distinction. In these studies[34], participants are confronted with transgressions that have been selected by and categorized by researchers or independent jurors based on the prior definitions of 'moral' and 'conventional.' It is quite likely that there exists a substantial class of transgressions that many people would intuitively classify as 'moral' but that are not 'moral' according to the researchers' definitions, and are therefore not regularly included when researchers intend to show the widespread existence of the moral/conventional distinction. Moreover, most studies do not ask participants whether they think of the transgression as moral or conventional – the distinction is made by the researchers themselves.

That such an a priori conception of the domain of morality creates a bias is neatly illustrated by the studies of Wright, Cullum, and Schwab[35] and Wright, Grandjean and McWhite[36]. They presented participants with a broad range of issues and asked them to classify them as moral or conventional. It turned out that there was no consensus among participants for almost all issues: many of them were considered moral by one participant and conventional by another participant; some of these issues – such as firing a gun into a crowd - would have been classified as moral according to Turiel's criteria[37], while other issues – such as calling a teacher by his or her first name - would have been classified as conventional. Issues that are classified as 'conventional' by moral/conventional researchers are generally seen as variably right or wrong. However, it is possible that such a 'conventional' issue is considered to be a 'moral' issue by some participants, while it is

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[34] L.P. Nucci, E. Turiel, "Social interactions and development of social concepts in preschool-children", in *Child Development*, 49/2, 1978, pp.400-407; E. Turiel, M. Killen, C. Helwig, "Morality. Its structure, functions and vagaries", in *The emergence of morality in young children*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987; L.P. Nucci, M. S. Nucci, "Children's responses and social conventional transgressions in free-play settings", in *Child Development*, 35/5, 1982, pp.1337-1342.

[35] J.C. Wright, J., Cullum, and N. Schwab, "The Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Moral Conviction: Implications for Attitudinal and Behavioral Measures of Interpersonal Tolerance", in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34/11, 2008, pp.1461-1476.

[36] J.C. Wright, P.T. Grandjean, C.B. McWhite, "The meta-ethical grounding of our moral beliefs: Evidence for meta-ethical pluralism", in *Philosophical Psychology*, forthcoming.

[37] E. Turiel, *The development of social knowledge. Morality and social convention*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

also seen as variably right or wrong by these participants. Thus, individuals might think of moral issues as variably right or wrong – a possibility masked by the methods employed.

Critics sometimes point out that Turiel acknowledged the existence of so-called non-prototypical cases that do not qualify to be HJR transgressions but nonetheless trigger universalist types of reasoning. For instance, in a study by Turiel, Hildebrandt and Wainryb[38], participants judged that consensual adult incest (a taboo-breaking yet harmless act) should be illegal, that it is universally morally wrong and would remain so even if an authority would say that the act is permissible. But the recognition that there are cases of non-HJR transgressions that evoke moral (i.e. universalist) reasoning does not satisfy as an argument against moderate moral relativism. For moderate moral relativism to be an accurate description of our moral psychology, it is sufficient that *some moral* issues trigger relativist reasoning.

Moreover, clear cultural differences have been found in the response patterns in regard to HJR or conventional transgressions[39]. Moreover, participants have typically been asked to rate a small number of transgressions. This leaves open the possibility that participants' answers were specific to the transgressions considered and not to morality per se[40]. Finally, studies that include a wider range of scenarios and do not have inclusion or characterization criteria based on Turiel's classification do not find this clear-cut conceptual distinction[41] – thus calling into question the reasonableness of a priori classifications.

In addition to the above considerations, there are also problems with the questions that investigators have used to probe the issue of generalizability. In order to test if an act is really wrong independent of

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[38] E. Turiel, C. Hildebrandt, C. Wainryb, "Judging social issues: difficulties, inconsistencies, and consistencies", in *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 56/2, 1991, pp.1-103.

[39] J.G. Miller, D. M. Bersoff, *et al.*, "Perceptions of social responsibilities in India and the United States: Moral imperatives or personal decisions?", in *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58/1, 1990, pp.33-47; J. Haidt, *The Righteous Mind. Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, New York: Vintage Books, 2012.

[40] J.C. Wright, J. Cullum, N. Schwab, "The Cognitive and Affective Dimensions of Moral Conviction: Implications for Attitudinal and Behavioral Measures of Interpersonal Tolerance", in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34:11, 2008, pp.1461-1476.

[41] e.g. B. Huebner, J. J. Lee, *et al.,* "The Moral-Conventional Distinction in Mature Moral Competence", in *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 10, 2010, pp.1-26; S. Nichols, "After objectivity: an empirical study of moral judgment", in *Philosophical Psychology*, 17/1, 2004, pp.3-26; D. Kelly, S. Stich, K. Haley, S. Eng, D.M.T. Fessler, "Harm, affect, and the moral/conventional distinction", in *Mind & Language*, 22/2, 2007, pp.117-131.

whether or not it is in accord with prevailing convention, researchers should ask whether a HJR transgression is morally wrong at one place and time where it is *against* convention, and whether the same HJR transgression is also morally wrong somewhere else where it is *entirely in line with* prevailing convention. Only by varying the conventionality of the act can one investigate the extent to which the act is deemed wrong independent of convention. However, in posing the generalizability question, researchers used to vary one single aspect of convention, leaving it to the imagination of the participant what other aspects of convention would vary or stay the same. For example, Smetana[42] asks if it would it be OK if there were no rule about a certain act such as hitting a child for fun. But participants can argue that, even if there is no rule against it, it will still be against convention in the sense that everyone disapproves of the practice. Huebner, Lee and Hauser[43] ask if the act would still be wrong if X lived somewhere where everyone else did this. But in this case, there might be a conventional rule against it, even if everyone does it. In general, even if a transgression is concordant with one aspect of convention (e.g., when there is no rule against it), it can still be discordant with convention by virtue of any of its other aspects (social norms, consensus, behavioral uniformity, etc.).

Because of the above limitation, existing moral/conventional studies do not effectively test whether HJR transgressions are wrong independent of convention. To be effective, the generalizability probe must explicitly vary every aspect, or at least as many aspects as possible, of the prevailing 'convention'. Only such a design can test whether lay people relativize the wrongness of HJR transgressions to prevailing conventions. Following this logic, Quintelier, Fessler and De Smet[44] therefore examined the effects of varying multiple aspects of convention on participants' judgments of the wrongness of HJR transgressions. Indeed, they found that participants assessed a hypothetical moral (i.e. HJR) transgression as less wrong when several aspects of convention explicitly permitted the behavior, compared to when the conventionality of the act was made less explicit.

In sum, results from the large body of research on the moral/conventional distinction does not convincingly preclude the existence of folk moral relativism. But are there studies that provide evidence in favor

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[42] J.G. Smetana, "Preschool children's conceptions of moral and social rules", in *Child Development*, 52/4, 1981, pp.1333-1336.
[43] B. Huebner, J. J. Lee, *et al.,* "The Moral-Conventional Distinction in Mature Moral Competence", in *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 10, 2010, pp.1-26.
[44] K. Quintelier, D. De Smet, D.M.T. Fessler, "Agent moral relativism reappraised: an exploratory study", submitted manuscript.

of folk moral relativism?

III.3 Arguments in favor of folk moral relativism

Sarkissian et al.[45] were able to manipulate participants' agreement with a moral statement either in the direction of objectivism or in the direction of relativism. They presented participants with a short scenario about a man killing his son because he found him very unattractive. Participants were then told about two appraisers: One appraiser was a classmate, and another appraiser could be another classmate, someone from a different culture, or an extraterrestrial. In the scenario, the first appraiser, the one who was always a classmate, thought the behavior was wrong while the other appraiser thought it was right. Participants then had to indicate how much they agreed with the statement that 'at least one of the appraisers must be wrong'. As they had predicted, Sarkissian and colleagues found that participants were more likely to disagree with this statement when the other appraiser was from another culture, and they were most likely to disagree when the other appraiser was from a different planet. The authors concluded that, while people do have objectivist intuitions, various psychological processes are at work, leading to objectivist intuitions in some cases and relativist intuitions in other cases. These findings clearly nuance the long-held conviction that the folk are universalists in regard to all moral concepts.

The above results are in accord with those from an investigation of moral objectivism by Goodwin and Darley[46]. Although these authors did not test folk moral relativism, their findings are informative. Goodwin and Darley presented participants with a range of statements (some factual, some taste, some conventional and some HJR statements) and asked them for each statement whether there could be a correct answer to the question of whether this statement was true. Participants were further asked to indicate how they interpreted the information that another person disagreed with them; here, the response options were: (1) the other was surely mistaken, (2) it is possible that neither you nor the other person is mistaken, (3) it could be that you are mistaken, and the other person is correct, (4) other. Even though Goodwin and Darley were interested in moral objectivism, we can interpret certain answer patterns as in accordance with

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[45] H. Sarkissian, J. Park, D. Tien, J.C. Wright, J. Knobe, "Folk Moral Relativism", in *Mind and Language*, 26/4, 2011,pp. 482-505.
[46] G.P. Goodwin, J. M. Darley, "The psychology of meta-ethics: Exploring objectivism", in *Cognition*, 106/3, 2008, pp.1339-1366.

(meta-ethical) moral relativism: if the participant indicates that the statement can have a truth value (i.e., the participants chooses either response option 'true' or response option 'false'), and the participant indicates that neither (s)he nor a disagreeing person is mistaken about the statement, then the participants' answers are in accordance with moral relativism: two logically incompatible moral statements can both be true, depending on the appraiser. In a first experiment 11% (11 out of 100) of participants and in a second experiment 8% (12 out of 152) of participants conformed to this pattern. Hence, in each experiment, a small but consistent minority of participants used moral terms in accordance with moral relativism. Again, these findings nuance the prevalence of folk moral universalism. These studies contradict assumptions that lay people cannot think of morality as relative. However, they do not provide evidence against arguments that moral relativism is at odds with more specific aspects of folk morality. Notably, most of the discussed studies mainly probe whether variation in the appraisers causes participants to adjust their evaluations of these statements, neglecting the possibility that the background of agents will influence participants' evaluations. This means that we might also find relativist moral speech acts if we explicitly vary the backgrounds of the agents. We therefore conducted a range of studies that inform us about the existence of folk moral agent relativism. Moreover, moral relativists in above studies might simply have been confused. It would be useful to know if moral relativism is a stable intuition that guides moral speech acts concerning a range of moral concepts. In order to see if moral relativism is stable, we asked participants to evaluate moral permissibility as well as moral truth. The results of these studies are reported in the next section.

IV. Folk moral agent relativism

We developed scenarios in which we explicitly vary the moral frameworks of agents. Probing whether agent moral relativism is a stable intuition, we asked participants both to judge the permissibility of the act as well as to assess the truth of another appraiser's moral judgment of this particular act. If agent relativism is a stable intuition, participants who make a relativist moral judgment should also make a relativist judgment as to the truth assessment of a moral judgment made by another appraiser.

IV. 1. Experiment 1

IV.1.1. Hypothesis and research question

We predict that changing the moral framework of agents will have an effect on lay people's moral speech acts. We ask participants about *their own moral judgments* about moral scenarios featuring agents who hold various moral frameworks. We also ask participants to assess *the truth of moral judgments* about these specific scenarios. We explore whether individuals who are moral agent relativists in regard to moral judgments are more likely to be moral agent relativists about truth than is typical of the overall sample.

IV.1.2. Participants

From December 2010 to January 2011 we recruited participants using Amazon.com's Mechanical Turk web-based employment system (hereafter MTurk). This is a crowdsourcing website that allows people to perform short tasks, including surveys, for small amounts of money. Anyone over 18 may use the site. This study was certified exempt from UCLA's Institutional Review Board.

IV.1.3. Methods

In order to test participants' own moral judgments, participants were presented with two scenarios describing the same act, one in which the act was *concordant* with the agents' moral framework and one in which the act was *discordant* with the agents' moral framework. Nationality of protagonists was made explicit in order to reduce potential confounds. To ensure that participants would not condemn the act for being illegal, the scenarios specified that the relevant acts were legal.

After each scenario, we asked participants about their moral judgment of the act. Pilot testing revealed that some participants made a distinction between two kinds of wrongness: descriptive wrongness and moral wrongness. For instance, some explained that it was OK legally, or that it was not against the rules described in the scenario, but that it was nonetheless 'morally' or 'ethically' wrong according to themselves. We were not interested in participants' descriptive statements (e.g., the act is OK according to the law or according to the protagonist). Instead, we were interested in participants' own evaluations of the act (e.g., the act is morally wrong). In order to accommodate participants who thought that an act was

morally right but also wanted to indicate that they thought the act was descriptively impermissible, we provided three forced-choice answer options: 1 = 'morally permissible,' 2 = 'morally permissible but wrong for reasons that have nothing to do with morality (e.g., it might be unlawful),' and 3 = 'morally wrong.'

In order to test participants' truth assessments of moral statements, we presented them with two additional scenarios, describing the same kind of act but including moral judgments by other appraisers. Participants were then asked to assess the truth of these appraisers' moral statements.

The order of presentation of the two manipulations (judgment versus truth) was randomized between subjects. Within each manipulation (concordant versus discordant), the order of scenarios was also randomized between subjects. This yielded eight different orders to which participants were randomly assigned. The moral judgment scenarios, but not the truth scenarios, were also used as part of a previous study (Quintelier, Fessler, & De Smet, forthcoming).

Below, underlined sections highlight the relevant variation for the purposes of this exposition; scenarios were not underlined when presented to participants.

Scenario 1: Agent-discordant moral judgment scenario

Mr. Johnson is an officer on a cargo ship in 2010, carrying goods along the Atlantic coastline. All the crew members are American but the ship is mostly in international waters. When a ship is in international waters, it has to follow the law of the state whose flag it sails under and each ship can sail under only one flag. This ship does not sail under the U.S. flag. The law of this ship's flag state allows both whipping and food deprivation as a punishment.

<u>On this ship, food deprivation is always used to discipline sailors who disobey orders or who are drunk on duty; as a consequence everyone on this ship has come to think that food deprivation is an appropriate punishment. Whipping however is never used to discipline sailors and no one on this ship thinks whipping is an appropriate punishment.</u>

One night, while the ship is in international waters, Mr. Johnson finds a sailor drunk at a time when the sailor should have been on watch. After the sailor sobers up, Mr. Johnson punishes the sailor by giving him 5 lashes with a whip. This does not go against the law of the flag state.

Is it morally permissible for Mr. Johnson to whip the sailor? *(moral judgment question)*

1. Yes, it is morally permissible

2. Yes, it is morally permissible but it is wrong for reasons that have nothing to do with morality (e.g., it might be unlawful)

3. No, it is morally wrong (whether it is right or wrong in other ways or not)

Scenario 2: Agent-concordant moral judgment scenario

Mr. Williams is an officer on another cargo ship in 2010, carrying goods along the Atlantic coastline. All the crew members are American but the ship is mostly in international waters. When a ship is in international waters, it has to follow the law of the state whose flag it sails under and each ship can sail under only one flag. This ship does not sail under the U.S. flag. The law of this ship's flag state allows both whipping and food deprivation as a punishment.

On this ship, whipping is always used to discipline sailors who disobey orders or who are drunk on duty; as a consequence everyone on this ship has come to think that whipping is an appropriate punishment. Food deprivation however is never used to discipline sailors and no one on this ship thinks food deprivation is an appropriate punishment.

One night, while the ship is in international waters, Mr. Williams finds a sailor drunk at a time when the sailor should have been on watch. After the sailor sobers up, Mr. Williams punishes the sailor by giving him 5 lashes with a whip. This does not go against the law of the flag state.

Participants again answered the moral judgment question.

They were then led to another screen with scenarios featuring appraisers and their moral statements, or to a debriefing page if they had seen the two appraisers scenarios first.

As noted above, we wanted to explore whether individuals who are agent relativists about moral judgments are also more likely to be moral agent relativists about truth. We therefore introduced appraisers in the scenarios, who stated that what Mr. Williams or Mr. Johnson did was morally permissible.

However, we wanted to be certain that participants who appeared to be agent relativists about moral judgments were not also more likely to be *appraiser* relativists about truth. This would mean that lay moral relativists do not consistently, across a range of terms, relativize to agents. For this reason, we also specified the moral frameworks of the appraisers. Furthermore, we varied the moral frameworks of the appraisers in the

opposite direction: appraisers either evaluated an act that was in accordance with their own moral framework but in discordance with the agents' moral framework, or the other way around. This allowed us to distinguish individuals who were moral agent relativists about truth from individuals who were moral appraiser relativists about truth.

Below, relevant differences in the scenarios are underlined; scenarios were not underlined when presented to participants.

Scenario 3: Agent-discordant, appraiser-concordant truth scenario

Marc and Eric are sailors on Mr. Williams' ship. They both know that on Mr. Johnson's ship whipping is never practiced and that no one on Mr. Johnson's ship thinks that whipping is an appropriate punishment. They also know that food deprivation is always practiced on Mr. Johnson's ship and that everyone on Mr. Johnson's ship has come to think that food deprivation is an appropriate punishment.

Of course, on their own ship, it is just the other way around: everybody on Marc's and Eric's ship thinks that whipping is an appropriate punishment.

Hence, even though Marc and Eric are sailors on Mr. Williams' ship, they are both fully informed about the different practices and sensibilities on Mr. Johnson's ship. They have heard that Mr. Johnson whipped a sailor on his ship.

Marc says to Eric: What Mr. Johnson did was morally permissible.

Is what Marc says true or false? *(truth question)*
1   True
2   False
3   Neither

Scenario 4: Agent-concordant, appraiser-discordant truth scenario

Peter and Steve are sailors on Mr. Johnson's ship. They both know that on Mr. Williams' ship food deprivation is never practiced and that no one on Mr. Williams' ship thinks that food deprivation is an appropriate punishment. They also know that whipping is always practiced on Mr. Williams' ship and that everyone on Mr. Williams' ship has come to think that whipping is an appropriate punishment.

Of course, on their own ship, it is just the other way around: no one on Peter's and Steve's ship thinks that whipping is an appropriate punishment.

Hence, even though Peter and Steve are sailors on Mr. Johnson's ship, they are both fully informed about the different practices and

sensibilities on Mr. Williams' ship. <u>They have heard that Mr. Williams whipped a sailor on his ship.</u>

<u>Peter says to Steve: What Mr. Williams did was morally permissible.</u>

Participants again answered the truth question.

IV.1.4. Analysis

We analysed data from 991 participants (46% women). Mean age was 30.36 years (SD = 10.055), ranging from 18 to 81 years old. Participants were mostly from the U.S. (47.3%) and India (39.9%). The remaining participants (12.8%) were from various countries, such as: Canada (13 individuals), United Kingdom (9), Romania (7), Pakistan (6), Serbia (6), Germany (5), The Philippines (5), Australia (4), Macedonia (4), Portugal (4), Spain (3), other European countries (1-2 individuals per represented country), and other Asian countries (1-2 individuals per represented country).

In order to evaluate whether the agents' moral framework had an effect on whether participants consider an act to be *morally* permissible, we pooled answer options 1 and 2 of the moral judgment question, constructing a dichotomous variable indicating whether the act was judged morally permissible or not (Judgment-Agent-Discordant for whipping when not in accordance with the agents' moral framework, Judgment-Agent-Concordant for whipping when concordant with the agents' moral framework). In order to evaluate whether the agents' moral framework has an effect on whether participants consider a moral statement to be true or false, we constructed a dichotomous variable indicating whether the statement was assessed to be true or false, thus excluding participants who answered 'neither' (Truth-Agent-Discordant for 'whipping is permissible' when not in accordance with the agents' moral framework but in accordance with the appraiser's moral framework; Truth-Agent-Concordant for 'whipping is permissible' when concordant with the agents' moral framework but discordant with the appraiser's moral framework). The distribution of participants' answers is presented in Table 1.

Variables	Permissible? / True?		Total
	Yes	*No*	
Judgment-Agent-Discordant	454 (45.8)	530 (53.5)	984
Judgment-Agent-Concordant	607 (61.3)	382 (38.5)	989
Truth-Agent-Discordant	401 (40.5)	310 (31.3)	711
Truth-Agent-Concordant	533 (53.8)	296 (29.9)	829

Table 1. Experiment 1: Distribution of Participants' Answers for the Relevant Variables

We categorized participants based on their answers to the permissibility questions, creating an additional variable Judgment-Category. If participants answered that whipping was permissible in both scenarios, their answers are categorized as 'permissivist.' If they answered that it is wrong in both scenarios, their answer falls under the category 'universalist.' Their answers were classified as 'relativist' when they deemed whipping to be wrong when against agents' moral frameworks but permissible when in accord with agents' moral framework. The remainder were classified as 'unexpected,' as we do not have a ready explanation for these answer patterns beyond the possibility of participant confusion. The distribution of participants' answers is presented in Table 2.

We also categorized participants based on their answers to the truth questions (i.e. their evaluations of the appraisers moral judgments), thus creating an additional variable Truth-Category. If participants answered that it was true that whipping was permissible in both scenarios, their answers are categorized as 'permissivist.' If they answered in both scenarios that it is false that whipping is permissible, their answer falls under the category 'universalist.' Their answers were classified as 'agent relativist' when they deemed 'whipping is permissible' to be true when in accordance with agents' moral frameworks but false when not in accordance with agents' moral framework. Their answers were classified as 'appraiser relativist' when they deemed 'whipping is permissible' to be true when in accordance with the appraiser's moral framework but false when not in accordance with the appraiser's moral framework. The remainder, answering 'neither' to one or both of the truth questions, were classified as 'other,' as we were not

			Judgment-Category				
			Unexp.	**Agent**	**Perm.**	**Univ.**	**TOTAL**
		Count	4	13	34	21	**72**
	Appr.	**% within Judgment-Category**	23,5	9,0	9,1	6,6	**8,4**
		Adj. resid.	2,3	,2	,6	-1,5	
		Count	1	55	40	23	**119**
	Agent	**% within Judgment-Category**	5,9	37,9	10,7	7,2	**14,0**
		Adj. resid.	-1,0	9,1	-2,4	-4,4	
		Count	8	28	239	31	306
Truth-Category	**Perm.**	**% within Judgment-Category**	47,1	19,3	64,1	9,7	35,9
		Adj. resid.	1,0	-4,6	15,1	-12,3	
		Count	2	15	10	148	175
	Univ.	**% within Judgment-Category**	11,8	10,3	2,7	46,5	20,5
		Adj. resid.	-,9	-3,3	-11,4	14,5	
		Count	2	34	50	95	181
	Other	**% within Judgment-Category**	11,8	23,4	13,4	29,9	21,2
		Adj. resid.	-1,0	,7	-4,9	4,8	
TOTAL		**Count**	17	**145**	373	318	853
		% of Total	2,0	**17,0**	43,7	37,3	100,0

Note. The total distribution of agent and appraiser relativists for each variable is highlighted in bold in the marginal rows and column.

Table 2. Experiment 1: Contingency Table for the Frequency Distribution and Adjusted Residuals (Judgment-Category X Truth-Category)

interested in participants who did not assign truth values to the moral statements. The distribution of participants' answers is presented in Table 2.

IV.1.5. Results

There were no order effects across the eight conditions for any of the relevant variables (Judgment-Agent-Concordant: $\chi^2(7,948) = 8.329$, $p = .304$; Judgment-Agent-Discordant: $\chi^2(7,943) = 8.079$, $p = .326$; Truth-Agent-Concordant: $\chi^2(7,794) = 8.582$, $p = .284$; Truth-Agent-Discordant: $\chi^2(7,685) = 13.414$, $p = .063$; Judgment-Category: $\chi^2(21,943) = 23.338$, $p = .326$; Truth-Category: $\chi^2(42,829) = 44.681$, $p = .360$). We therefore pooled data across all orders.

To determine whether participants are more likely to consider whipping permissible when it is in accordance with the agent's moral framework, we conducted a within-subject test. Participants were indeed more likely to hold that the 'agent concordant' whipping was morally permissible than that the 'agent discordant' whipping was morally permissible (602 vs. 454 of 984 participants, McNemar test, $\chi^2(1,984) = 114.08$ $p < .0001$).

To determine whether participants were more likely to hold that the statement 'whipping is permissible' was true when whipping was in accordance with the agent's moral framework than when whipping was not in accordance with the agent's moral framework, we again conducted a within-subject test. This was indeed the case (429 vs. 382 of 677 participants, McNemar test, $\chi^2(1,677)=11.565$; $p < .01$).

We found that 17% of participants relativized their moral judgments to the agent's moral framework; 14% of participants relativized their truth assessments to the agent's moral framework, while 8.4% relativized their truth assessments to the appraiser's moral framework (see Table 3).

Finally, we asked whether participants who were (agent)relativists about moral judgments were more likely to also be relativists about truth, and more specifically, whether participants who were (agent) relativists about moral judgments were more likely to also be agent relativists about truth. A chi-square test revealed that Judgment-Category and Truth-Category were significantly related to each other ($\chi^2(12,853) = 428.395$, $p < .001$). The adjusted residuals (Haberman 1973) suggest that, at the $p < .05$ level, agent relativists about moral judgments are significantly more likely than average (14%) to be moral agent relativists about truth (37.9%),

significantly less likely than average (35.9%) to be moral permissivists about truth (19.3%), and significantly less likely than average (20.5%) to be moral universalists about truth (10.3%). There is no significant relationship with appraiser relativism about truth. Table 2 is the contingency table for the relation between Judgment-Category and Truth-Category, including the adjusted residuals.[47]

IV.1.6. Discussion

We investigated whether some lay people's moral evaluations are in accordance with agent relativism. We found that 17% of participants were agent relativists about moral judgments. We found a comparable frequency of agent relativists about truth (14%), and a lower frequency of appraiser relativists about truth (8.4%). Moreover, individuals who are agent relativists about moral judgments are more likely than average to be moral agent relativists about truth; there is no relationship between moral agent relativism about judgments and moral appraiser relativism about truth. Thus, an underlying stable (agent) relativist intuition might be at work.

It may be argued that our permissibility questions were ambiguous. We intended to ask participants about their own evaluation of the act. However, asking if it was morally permissible for Mr. Johnson/ Mr. Williams to whip the sailor could induce a descriptive reading: participants answering that it was morally permissibly might have intended to convey the observation that whipping was morally permissible *according to Mr. Johnson/ Mr. Williams*, rather than, as we intended, conveying the judgment that whipping was morally permissible *according to the participant him/herself*. We therefore developed a follow-up study employing superior permissibility probes.

In Experiment 1, we manipulated agents' and appraisers' moral frameworks by stating that, according to the protagonists, the whipping/food deprivation was *appropriate*. While this perceived appropriateness can be

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[47] One reviewer asked whether our effects might have been driven by differences in the distribution of answer option 1 (morally permissible) and 2 (morally permissible but wrong for other reasons), as a function of agents' moral frameworks. We repeated all relevant analyses excluding participants who checked answer option 2. Our results were the same: There was an effect of agent's moral framework on permissibility (395 vs. 276 of 766 participants, McNemar test: $\chi^2(1, 766)=100.43$, $p <.001$) and agent relativists about truth were more likely to be agent relativists about moral judgments (42.1%) than average (12.9%).

interpreted as a moral sentiment, it may be useful to be more explicit about the moral values of the protagonists.

In Experiment 1, we examined assessments of only one kind of act, namely whipping as a punishment. But the extent of lay people's moral relativism may depend on the kind of act or the modality of the moral statement. We therefore developed two additional scenarios, one about murder by extraterrestrials, adapted from the study by Sarkissian et al. (2012), and one about moral duty.

Finally, the likelihood of being a moral relativist might depend on characteristics of participants' own moral frameworks. In Experiment 2, we therefore also asked participants about their own moral values pertaining to the context of the story they read, or their moral judgments about the act presented in the scenario in an everyday situation.

IV. 2. Experiment 2

IV.2.1. Hypothesis and research question

We again predict that manipulating the moral framework of agents will have an impact on lay people's moral speech acts. We ask participants to give *their moral judgments* about the permissibility of an act and to assess *the truth of moral statements* about the same act. Additionally, we ask participants about their own moral frameworks. In this experiment, we e explore if being an agent relativist about one's own moral judgments is related to being a moral agent relativist about truth, for three different kinds of acts, and how this relates to participant's own moral frameworks.

IV.2.2. Participants

From January 2012 to February 2012 we recruited participants using MTurk. In order to minimize the potential complicating factor of cultural differences, we recruited only participants residing in the U.S. We only allowed individuals to participate if they had not participated in Experiment 1. This study was certified exempt from UCLA's Institutional Review Board.

IV.2.3. Methods

We developed three stories. The first story was a modified version of the whipping scenario in Experiment 1. The second story was a modified version of the murder story from Sarkissian et al. (2012). The third story was about taking care of one's aging parents as a moral duty. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three stories. In order to avoid participant fatigue, we presented each participant with two scenarios (pertaining to the same story) instead of four, and we asked participants to indicate their truth assessments and moral judgments after each scenario. Because participants now were provided with much more information, we added a schematic drawing after each scenario to assist participants in keeping track of the actors and their actions. The order of the two scenarios, within each story, was also randomized between participants. This yielded six different orders to which participants were randomly assigned.

Below is a schematic representation of the scenarios and questions. Full scenarios, questions and all drawings can be found in the Appendix.

STORY 1: WHIPPING

On Mr. Johnson's ship, everyone believes food deprivation, but not whipping, is morally permissible. Mr. Johnson whips a sailor for being drunk on duty.

On Mr. Williams' ship, everyone believes that whipping, but not food deprivation, is morally permissible. Mr. Williams whips a sailor for being drunk on duty.

Mark and Eric are sailors on Mr. Williams' ship. Thus, they believe that whipping, but not food deprivation, is morally permissible.

Peter and Steve are sailors on Mr. Johnson's ship. Thus, they believe that food deprivation, but not whipping, is morally permissible.

Scenario 1: Agent discordant, appraiser concordant

Mark says to Eric: "What Mr. Johnson did was morally permissible."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened:
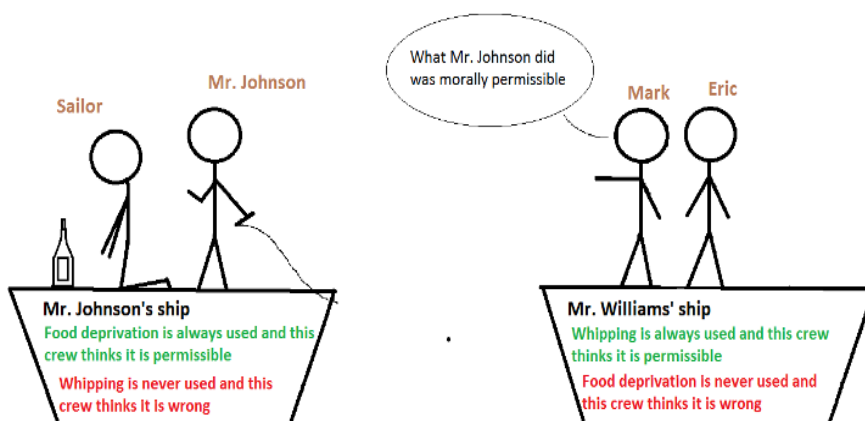
Figure 1. Experiment 2, Story 1: Agent-discordant, Appraiser concordant

According to you, is what Mark says true or false? *(Truth question)*
1.　　True
2.　　False

According to you, is Mr. Johnson's whipping of the sailor morally permissible? *(Moral judgment question, dichotomous)*
1.　　Yes
2.　　No

How morally wrong do you think Mr. Johnson's behavior is? (*Moral judgment question, ordinal*) [Not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong]

Scenario 2: Agent concordant, appraiser discordant
Peter says to Steve: "What Mr. Williams did was morally permissible."
Here is a schematic drawing of what happened:
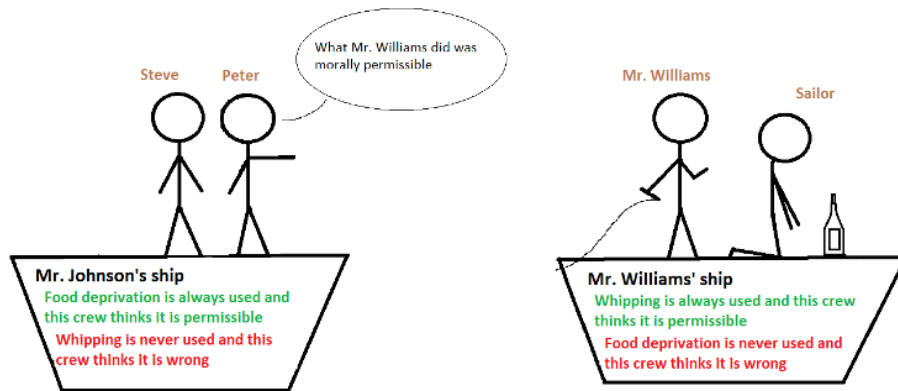
Figure 2. Experiment 2, Story 1: Agent-concordant, Appraiser-discordant

Participants were again asked the truth question and the two moral judgment questions.

Then, all participants were asked about their own moral frameworks:

Imagine that your colleague is drunk at work. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? [not at all – slightly – moderately – very]

It is morally permissible to punish your colleague by giving him five lashes with a whip.

It is morally permissible to punish your colleague by depriving him of food.

Finally, we added a control question intended to measure attentiveness:

Why was the sailor punished?
1.	He burned the flag
2.	He was drunk when he should have been on watch
3.	He had used violence

STORY 2: MURDER

Horace is a Rococar, an extraterrestrial. Rococars assign great moral value to life but they do not value beauty at all. Rococars believe that murder is morally wrong. Horace finds his youngest child so extremely ugly that he decides to kill him.

Barocar and Ornatar are two other Rococars. Thus, they value life but they do not value beauty.

Symetor is a Pentar, an extraterrerstrial on another planet than the Rococars. Pentars assign great moral value to beauty but they do not care about life at all. Pentars believe that murder is morally permissible. Symetor finds his youngest child so extremely ugly that he decides to kill him.

Equilateror and Quinten are two other Pentars. Thus, they value beauty but they do not value life.

Scenario 1: Agent discordant, appraiser concordant
Quinten says to Equilateror: "What Horace did was morally permissible."

Scenario 2: Agent concordant, appraiser discordant
Barocar says to Ornatar: "What Symetor did was morally permissible."

After each scenario, participants were asked about their truth assessment of the moral statement, whether they thought it was morally permissible that Horace/Symetor killed his newborn, how morally wrong they thought Horace's/Symetor's behavior was, and how much the participant valued beauty and life. For each question, the answer options were the same as in the first story. As a control question, we asked why Horace killed his child.

STORY 3: DUTY
In Kim's country, it is considered one's moral duty to house one's parents and take care of them in one's own home when they are old. However, Kim decides to put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them.

 Lin and Min also live in Kim's country.

In Yan's country, it is considered one's moral duty to put one's parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them when they are old. Yan decides to put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them.

Lan and San also live in Yan's country.

Scenario 1: Agent discordant, appraiser concordant
Lan says to San: "Kim did his duty."

Scenario 2: Agent concordant, appraiser discordant
Lin says to Min: "Yan did his duty."

After each scenario, we asked participants about their truth assessments of the moral statement, whether they thought Kim/Yan did his duty, how morally wrong they thought Kim's/Yan's behavior was, and to what extent the participant thought it was their own duty to, either, take care of their own parents in their own home or find a high-quality old-age home. For each question, the answer options were the same as in the first and second story. As a control question, we asked why Kim brought his parents to an old-age home.

IV.2.4. Analysis

We removed participants who did not answer the control question correctly. We analysed data from 653 participants (48.2% women). Mean age was 34.3 years ($SD = 12.35$), ranging from 19 to 83 years old.

As in Experiment 1, we categorized participants based on their answers to the moral judgment question (Judgment-Agent-Discordant and Judgment-Agent- Concordant) and based on their answers to the truth question (Truth-Agent-Discordant and Truth-Agent-Concordant) (Table 3), thus creating additional variables Judgment-Category and Truth-Category.

For Judgment-Category, if participants answered that whipping was permissible in both scenarios, their answers are categorized as 'permissivist.' If they answered that it was wrong in both scenarios, their answer falls under the category 'universalist.' Their answers were classified as 'relativist' when they deemed whipping to be wrong when against agents' moral frameworks but permissible when in accord with agents' moral framework. The remainder were classified as 'unexpected,' as we do not have a ready explanation for these answer patterns beyond the possibility of participant confusion. The distribution of participants' answers can be found in Tables 6, 7 and 8.

For Truth-Category, if participants answered that it was true that whipping was permissible in both scenarios, their answers are categorized as 'permissivist.' If they answered that it was false that whipping is permissible in both scenarios, their answer falls under the category 'universalist.' Their answers were classified as 'agent relativist' when they deemed 'whipping is permissible' to be true when in accordance with agents' moral frameworks but false when not in accordance with agents' moral framework. Their answers are classified as 'appraiser relativist' when they deemed 'whipping

is permissible' to be true when in accordance with the appraiser's moral framework but false when not in accordance with the appraiser's moral framework. The distribution of participants' answers can be found in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

We also calculated the variable Agent-Degree, based on the question 'How morally wrong do you think Mr. Johnson's / Mr. Williams' behavior was?' (or analogous questions for stories 2 and 3). The answer to this question was scored on a scale from 1 to 4. We subtracted the score on the question in the agent-concordant scenario from the score on the question in the agent-discordant scenario. The degree to which a participant thought that an act, concordant with an agent's framework, was more permissible than an act that is discordant with an agent's framework, is a measure of the degree of agent relativism for moral judgments. Indeed, Judgment-Category had an effect on Agent-Degree (whipping: $F(3,153)=18.781$, $p < .001$; murder: $F(2,235)=78.198$, $p <.001$; duty: $F(2,228) = 20.138$, $p < .001$). Post hoc tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that, in each story, agent relativists for moral judgments had significantly higher scores on Agent-Degree (whipping: $M = 0.97$, $SD = 1.33$; murder: $M = 1.66$, $SD = 1.20$; duty: $M = 1.12$, $SD = 0.93$) than both moral judgment permissivists (whipping: $M = -0.08$, $SD = 0.37$, $p < .001$; murder: $M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.74$, $p < .001$; duty: $M = 0.36$, $SD = 0.74$, $p < .001$) and moral judgment universalists (whipping: $M = 0.11$, $SD = 0.57$, $p < .001$; murder: $M = 0.09$, $SD = 0.62$, $p < .001$; duty: $M = 0.33$, $SD = 0.82$, $p < .001$). Agent-Degree is therefore a straightforward alternative measure of moral agent relativism about moral judgments.

IV.2.5. Results

Order had an effect on Truth-Agent-Discordant in the whipping story ($\chi^2(1,157)=3.975$, $p < .05$) and on Judgment-Agent-Discordant in the murder story ($\chi^2(1,252)=9.844$, $p < .01$). Order did not have an effect on Truth-Category or Agent-Degree. We therefore pooled the two orders for most variables and scenarios, except for Truth-Agent-Discordant in the whipping story and Judgment-Agent-Discordant in the murder story.

To determine whether participants are more likely to consider the act to be permissible, or to constitute one's duty, when it is in accordance with the agents' framework, we conducted a within-subject test. Participants were significantly more likely to hold that the agent-concordant whipping was morally permissible than that the agent-discordant whipping was morally permissible (McNemar test, 68 vs. 36 of 157 participants, $\chi^2(1, 157) =$

30.12, $p < .001$); they were also significantly more likely to hold that the agent-concordant child-killing was morally permissible than the agent-discordant child-killing in the murder story both in the first order of presentation (McNemar test, 38 vs. 4 of 135 participants, $\chi^2(1,135) = 30.42$, $p < .001$) and in the second order of presentation (McNemar test, 27 vs. 16 of 117 participants, $\chi^2(1,117) = 5.26$, $p < .05$). Likewise, participants were significantly more likely to hold that the act of bringing one's parents to an old-age home constitutes one's duty when it is agent-concordant than when it is agent-discordant (McNemar test, 205 vs. 58 of 243 participants, $\chi^2(1,243) = 139.41$, $p < .001$).

Story	Variables	Permissible? / True?		Total
		Yes (%)	*No (%)*	
1	Judgment-Agent-Discordant	36 (22.9)	121 (77.1)	157
	Judgment-Agent-Concordant	68 (43.3)	89 (56.7)	157
	Truth-Agent-Discordant	81 (51.6)	76 (48.4)	157
	Truth-Agent-Concordant	94 (59.9)	63 (40.1)	157
2	Judgment-Agent-Discordant	20 (7.9)	232 (92.1)	252
	Judgment-Agent-Concordant	65 (25.8)	187 (74.2)	252
	Truth-Agent-Discordant	117 (46.4)	135 (53.6)	252
	Truth-Agent-Concordant	105 (41.7)	146 (57.9)	251
3	Judgment-Agent-Discordant	58 (23.9)	185 (76.1)	243
	Judgment-Agent-Concordant	205 (84.4)	38 (15.6)	243
	Truth-Agent-Discordant	82 (33.7)	161 (66.3)	243
	Truth-Agent-Concordant	229 (94.2)	14 (5.8)	243

Table 3. Experiment 2: Distribution of Participants' Answers for the Relevant Variables for each story

To determine whether participants were more likely to hold that the moral statement was true when in accordance with the agents' moral framework than when it was not in accordance with the agents' moral

framework, we again conducted a within-subject test. Agents' frameworks had an effect on truth assessments in the duty scenario: participants were significantly more likely to answer that the moral judgment was true when the judgment was in accordance with the agent's moral framework than when it was not in accordance with the agent's moral framework (McNemar test, 229 vs. 82 of 243 participants, $\chi^2(1,243) = 130.96$, $p < .001$). There were no effects of the agent's framework on truth assessments in the whipping or in the murder story.

In the whipping, murder, and duty stories, respectively, 21%, 21.1% and 62.1% of participants relativized their moral judgments to the agents' moral frameworks. We found comparable frequencies of agent relativists for the truth of moral statements, namely 20.4%, 22.3%, and 64.2% for, respectively, whipping, murder, and duty. A smaller percentage of participants relativized their truth assessments to the appraisers' moral frameworks for whipping and duty, respectively 12.1% and 3.7%. However, 27% of participants were appraiser relativists about truth in the murder story. These percentages are presented in Tables 4, 5 and 6.

As in experiment 1, we tested whether there was a relationship between Judgment-Category and Truth-Category. There was a significant relationship in each story (whipping: $\chi^2(9,157)=42.672$, $p < .001$; murder: $\chi^2(9,55.153) = 55.153$, $p < .001$; duty: $\chi^2(9,243)=68.785$ $p < .001$). The adjusted residuals reveal that, in the whipping scenario, agent relativists about truth are more likely to be agent relativists about judgment (40.6%) than average (21%); the same holds in the duty scenario (79.5% vs. 62.1%). In the murder scenario, however, only appraiser relativists about truth are more likely to be agent relativists about judgment (29.4%) than average (21.1%). Tables 6, 7 and 8 are the contingency tables for the relation between Judgment-Category and Truth-Category, including the adjusted residuals.

To determine whether being an agent relativist about moral judgment was related to being an agent or an appraiser relativist about truth even after controlling for participants' own moral frameworks, we conducted a between-subjects ANOVA for the effect of Truth-Category on Agent-Degree controlling for participants' moral frameworks.[48] Truth-Category had an

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[48] Whereas testing the relationship between Judgment-Category and Truth-Category with a chi-square test does not allow us to control for participants' moral frameworks, testing the effect of Truth-Category on Judgment-Category with an ANOVA does allow us to control for participants' moral frameworks. In that case, a post-hoc analysis can inform us if the effect is driven by a pattern wherein moral agent relativists about truth score differently

effect on Agent-Degree, and these effects remained when controlling for participants' own moral frameworks (whipping: $F(3,153) = 3.419$, $p < .05$, $\eta = .067$; murder $F(3,217) = 5.434$, $p < .01$, $\eta = .073$; duty: $F(3,228) = 9.235$, $p < .001$, $\eta = .19$). Post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction revealed that, in the whipping story, moral agent relativists about truth had marginally significantly higher Agent-Degree scores ($M = 0.65$, $SD = 1.11$) than universalists ($M = 0.136$, $SD = 0.55$, $p = .056$), and significantly higher Agent-Degree scores than permissivists ($M = 0.14$, $SD = 0.83$, $p < .05$). In the murder story, moral agent relativists about truth had significantly higher Agent-Degree scores ($M = 0.66$, $SD = 1.29$) than universalists ($M = 0.0141$, $SD = 0.43$, $p < .01$); however, moral appraiser relativists about truth also had significantly higher Agent-Degree scores ($M = 0.488$, $SD = 1.077$) than universalists ($p < .01$). In the duty story, moral agent relativists about truth had higher Agent-Degree scores ($M = 1.169$, $SD = 0.93$) than both moral universalists ($M = 0.232$, $SD = 0.645$, $p < .001$) and moral appraiser relativists ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.926$, $p < .01$). A full breakdown of the significance levels and effect sizes for each story can be found in Tables 6, 7 and 8.

IV.2.6. Discussion

In the second experiment, we found that 21%, 21.1%, and 62.1% of participants relativized their moral judgments to the agents' moral frameworks. For moral agent relativists about truth, we found comparable frequencies (20.4%, 22.3%, and 64.2%). We found lower frequencies of moral appraiser relativists about truth, except for the murder scenario (12.1%, 27%, and 3.7%).

Agent relativists about moral judgments are significantly more likely than average to be moral agent relativists about truth in two out of three stories, and they have higher scores on our measure for agent relativism about judgment (Agent-Degree) in all three stories. This suggests that an underlying intuition is at work.

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than other Truth-Categories. However, this still does not inform us as to whether moral agent relativists about truth are more or less likely to be agent relativists about moral judgments – we would merely know that they are more or less likely to have a different distribution within Judgment-Category, without knowing in what category of Judgment-Category they are more or less represented. Thus, an ANOVA with Agent-Degree as the dependent variable is the most reasonable analytic procedure.

			Judgment-Category				
			Unexp.	**Agent**	**Perm.**	**Univ.**	**TOTAL**
Truth-Category	**Appr.**	**Count**	1	4	3	11	**19**
		% within Judgment-Category	100.0	12.1	8.6	12.5	**12.1**
		Adj. resid.	2.7	.0	-.7	.2	
	Agent	**Count**	0	13	6	13	**32**
		% within Judgment-Category	.0	39.4	17.1	14.8	**20.4**
		Adj. resid.	-.5	3.1	-.5	-2.0	
	Perm.	**Count**	0	14	23	25	62
		% within Judgment-Category	.0	42.4	65.7	28.4	39.5
		Adj. resid.	-.8	.4	3.6	-3.2	
	Univ.	**Count**	0	2	3	39	44
		% within Judgment-Category	.0	6.1	8.6	44.3	28.0
		Adj. resid.	-.6	-3.2	-2.9	5.1	
TOTAL		**Count**	1	**33**	35	88	157
		% of Total	.6	**21.0**	22.3	56.1	100.0

Note. The total distribution of agent and appraiser relativists for each variable is highlighted in bold in the marginal rows and column.

Table 4. Experiment 2, story 1: Contingency Table for the Frequency Distribution and Adjusted Residuals (Judgment-Category X Truth-Category)

			Judgment-Category				
			Unexp.	**Agent**	**Perm.**	**Univ.**	**TOTAL**
Truth-Category	**Appr.**	**Count**	3	20	2	43	**68**
		% within Judgment-Category	37.5	37.7	16.7	24.2	**27.1**
		Adj. resid.	.7	2.0	-.8	-1.6	
	Agent	**Count**	2	16	0	38	**56**
		% within Judgment-Category	25.0	30.2	.0	21.3	**22.3**
		Adj. resid.	.2	1.6	-1.9	-.6	
	Perm.	**Count**	3	14	9	23	49
		% within Judgment-Category	37.5	26.4	75.0	12.9	19.5
		Adj. resid.	1.3	1.4	5.0	-4.1	
	Univ.	**Count**	0	3	1	74	78
		% within Judgment-Category	.0	5.7	8.3	41.6	31.1
		Adj. resid.	-1.9	-4.5	-1.7	5.6	
TOTAL		**Count**	8	**53**	12	178	251
		% of Total	3.2	**21.1**	4.8	70.9	100

Note. The total distribution of agent and appraiser relativists for each variable is highlighted in bold in the marginal rows and column.

Table 5. Experiment 2, story 2: Contingency Table for the Frequency Distribution and Adjusted Residuals (Judgment-Category X Truth-Category)

			Judgment-Category				
			Unexp.	**Agent**	**Perm.**	**Univ.**	**TOTAL**
Truth-Category	**Appr.**	**Count**	1	3	0	5	**9**
		% within Judgment-Category	25.0	2.0	.0	9.3	**3.7**
		Adj. resid.	2.3	-1.8	-1.2	2.5	
	Agent	**Count**	1	124	16	15	**156**
		% within Judgment-Category	25.0	82.1	47.1	27.8	**64.2**
		Adj. resid.	-1.6	7.5	-2.2	-6.3	
	Perm.	**Count**	0	3	1	1	5
		% within Judgment-Category	.0	2.0	2.9	1.9	2.1
		Adj. resid.	-.3	-.1	.4	-.1	
	Univ.	**Count**	2	21	17	33	73
		% within Judgment-Category	50.0	13.9	50.0	61.1	30.0
		Adj. resid.	.9	-7.0	2.7	5.6	
TOTAL		**Count**	4	**151**	34	54	243
		% of Total	1.6	**62.1**	14.0	22.2	100.0

Note. The total distribution of agent and appraiser relativists for each variable is highlighted in bold in the marginal rows and column.

Table 6. Experiment 2, story 3: Contingency Table for the Frequency Distribution and Adjusted Residuals (Judgment-Category X Truth-Category)

However, in the murder story, moral appraiser relativists about truth, but not moral agent relativists about truth, were significantly more likely than average to be agent relativists about moral judgments. In line with this, appraiser relativists about truth had higher agent relativism scores for moral judgments (Agent-Degree). A possible explanation for this result is that, for the second story, participants who were classified as agent relativists about moral judgments were not actually relativizing their moral judgments to the agents' moral frameworks. Instead, they might have relativized their moral judgments to the appraisers' moral frameworks. To understand how this is possible, it is important to see that agents performing an act are also potential appraisers of that same act. Thus, when asking if Horace was permitted to kill his child, we do not need to think of Horace as the agent. We can also think of Horace as the individual who will (now, or later) judge his own act. Thus, Horace is also an appraiser. Participants might have reasoned that the murder was permissible because Horace would say it is permissible, and they think that this is true for Horace. In this account, when other appraisers come to the fore, participants correspondingly relativize their truth assessments to the new appraisers. Note that, if this explanation applies, we do not know if the moral relativists were indeed agent relativists about moral judgments. We can only suspect this because they are moral agent relativists about truth.

Nevertheless, it seems that in all stories, at least some people are moral relativists and their moral relativism is a fairly stable intuition. However, we cannot we cannot conclude that agent moral relativism or appraiser moral relativism is a stable intuition or that either is the more prevailing kind of folk moral relativism.

V. Summary and implications for moral philosophy

We provided an overview of the recent debate regarding moral relativism and moral universalism. We argued that analytic philosophers refer to the folk's use of moral concepts in order to back up their claim that morality is universal (Section I) and not relative (Section II). However, in the existing philosophical literature, there is no consensus as to the nature of folk morality, a pattern stemming from the fact that prior authors have generally relied on their own intuitions as to what the folk think – intuitions that vary across authors – rather than employing the results of empirical studies of folk morality. In order to evaluate philosophers' intuitions about

folk morality, it is important to make folk morality itself the subject of direct empirical investigation.

Although a large corpus of psychological research explores lay people's moral psychology, most of this work sheds little light on the extent to which the folk are moral relativists or universalists. Moral psychologists' prior definitions of morality shaped their methods and definitions in a manner that profoundly biased their findings in favour of folk moral universalism. To accurately map the distribution of moral universalism and relativism, we must take up a broader conception of possibly morally relevant acts. As Casebeer has aptly observed, "Given that the domain of what constitutes a moral judgment is itself in contention, we would be best served by casting our nets widely, narrowing them appropriately as the […] psychological and normative […] aspects of morality co-evolve"[49].

Recent findings from survey studies did show that the folk use moral concepts in line with moderate moral relativist theories. Moreover, our results suggest that folk moral relativism is a stable intuition. In two experiments, we found across all scenarios that moral relativists about moral judgments were also more likely to be moral relativists about truth. Thus, folk moral relativism probably exists and cannot be attributed to mere confusion.

How should these results be interpreted in the context of the moral relativism-universalism debate? We documented inter-individual differences in moral outlooks. Such variation is in line with previous suggestions[50] that different individuals employ quite divergent moral language, and it is similarly in accord with previous studies that inform us about folk moral relativism[51]. Likewise, Beebe and Sackris[52] found that younger participants were more relativistic than older participants. Moreover, they also found substantial intra-individual variation: participants' relativism differed across moral issues. Such intra-individual variation was likewise found by Cova[53] and by Goodwin and Darley[54], who suggested that participants' relativism is

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[49] W.D. Casebeer, "Moral cognition and its neural constituents", in *Nature*, 4, 2003, p.842.
[50] e.g. M. Gill, "Indeterminacy and Variability in Meta-Ethic", in *Philosophical Studies*, 145(2), 2009, pp.215-234; W. Sinnott-Armstrong, "Mixed-up meta-ethics", in *Philosophical Issues*, 19(1), 2009, pp.235-256.
[51] H. Sarkissian, J. Park., D. Tien, J.C. Wright, J. Knobe, "Folk Moral Relativism", in *Mind and Language*, 26(4), 2011, pp.482-505.
[52] J. Beebe, D. Sackris, "Moral objectivism across the lifespan", manuscript under review.
[53] F. Cova, J. Ravat, "Sens commun et objectivisme moral : objectivisme "global" ou objectivisme "local" ? Une introduction par l'exemple à la philosophie expérimentale", in *Klesis*, 9, 2008, pp.180-202.
[54] G.P. Goodwin, J. M. Darley, "The Perceived Objectivity of Ethical Beliefs: Psychological

sensitive to the kind of moral act that is at stake. However, in contrast to this inter- and intra-individual variation, philosophers in the analytic tradition have often implicitly assumed that there is only one folk morality as they relied on a "handful of commonsense judgments"[55] to back up their arguments. Thus, the substantial variation in folk morality supports Gill's position that philosophical theories that appeal to lay people's speech acts cannot rely on a small set of examples of moral speech acts, as such arguments fail to reflect the actual distribution of moral reasoning in the folk world.

In sum, recent findings from surveys exploring folk morality raise serious concerns about prevailing methods in analytic philosophy, and these recent findings defuse arguments that morality is by definition universal. But can we adduce survey findings in order to further evaluate moral theories? It seems that, given the variation in moral speech acts, we cannot infer from a uniform folk morality which moral theory, universalism or relativism, is correct. We cannot employ the argument that, given the way individuals use moral concepts, morality is either relative or universal, because there is no uniform folk intuition at work. However, we can adduce other arguments for or against moral universalism and moral relativism and evaluate these arguments on their empirical accuracy. Consider, as a final note, the following suggestions for further research.

Certain philosophers[56] defend moral relativism because it allegedly leads to tolerance while others[57] criticize moral relativism because endorsing it would lead to nihilism. We can thus evaluate moral relativism based on the desirability of its consequences. In order to know if moral relativism increases tolerance, nihilism, or both, it is necessary to measure the folk's morality, for instance by using vignettes as in previous studies. We can then supplement these vignettes with questionnaires probing for individuals' attitudes towards tolerance and nihilism. Such an approach would inform us whether there is a correlation between folk moral relativism and tolerance or nihilism. Subsequent research should then

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Findings and Implications for Public Policy", in *Review of Philosophy and Psychology*, 2010, 1/2, pp.161-188; G.P. Goodwin, J.M. Darley, "Why are some moral beliefs perceived to be more objective than others?", in *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48, 2012, pp.250-56.

[55] M. Gill, "Indeterminacy and Variability in Meta-Ethics", in *Philosophical Studies*, 145(2), 2009, p. 217.

[56] e.g. D.B. Wong, *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

[57] M. Ruse, *Taking Darwin Seriously. A Naturalistic Approach to Philosophy*, Oxford/New York, Basil Blackwell, 1986.

induce moral relativist intuitions in order to test if moral relativism also causes an increase in tolerance or nihilism. Moreover, studies need to make use of behavioral experiments instead of relying on self-reports. Thus, the next step for experimental philosophy is to employ the full range of empirical methods if one wants to evaluate philosophical theories on their merits.

Appendix: Survey questions for order 1

Story 1: Whipping

Scenario 1: Agent-discordant, Appraiser-concordant

Mr. Johnson is an officer on a cargo ship in 2012, carrying goods along the Atlantic coastline. All of the crew members are American, but the ship mostly sails in international waters. When a ship is in international waters, it has to follow the law of the state whose flag it sails under, and each ship can sail under only one flag. This ship does not sail under the U.S. flag. The law of this ship's flag state allows both whipping and food deprivation as punishments.

On this ship, food deprivation is always used to discipline sailors who disobey orders or who are drunk on duty; as a consequence, everyone on this ship believes that using food deprivation as a punishment is morally permissible. Whipping, however, is never used to discipline sailors, and everyone believes that using whipping as a punishment is morally wrong.

One night, while the ship is in international waters, Mr. Johnson finds a sailor drunk at a time when the sailor should have been on watch. After the sailor sobers up, Mr. Johnson punishes the sailor by giving him 5 lashes with a whip. This does not go against the law of the flag state.

Mr. Williams is an officer on another cargo ship in 2012, carrying goods along the Atlantic coastline. Everything on this ship is exactly the same as on Mr. Johnson's ship – as in the first case, all of the crew members are American, but the ship mostly sails in international waters; it has to follow the law of the state whose flag it sails under, and the law of this ship's flag state allows both whipping and food deprivation as a punishment.
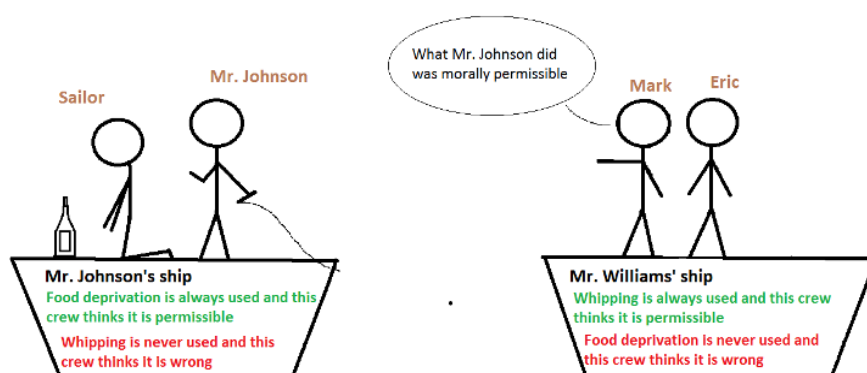
However, there is one difference: On Mr. Williams' ship, whipping is always used to discipline sailors who disobey orders or who are drunk on duty; as a consequence, everyone on this ship believes that using whipping as a punishment is morally permissible. Food deprivation, however, is never used to discipline sailors, and everyone believes that using food deprivation as a punishment is morally wrong.

Mark and Eric are sailors on Mr. Williams' ship. Thus, they believe that whipping is morally permissible, and they believe that food deprivation

is morally wrong. They both know that on Mr. Johnson's ship, the other ship, it is the other way around: They know that there, everyone believes that whipping is morally wrong and that food deprivation is morally permissible.

Mark and Eric have heard that Mr. Johnson whipped a sailor on his ship. Mark says to Eric: "What Mr. Johnson did was morally permissible."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened:

According to you, is what Mark says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, is Mr. Johnson's whipping of the sailor morally permissible?
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Mr. Johnson's behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong)

*Scenario 2: Agent-concordant, Appraiser-discordant*

Remember that on Mr. Williams' ship, whipping is always used to discipline sailors who disobey orders or who are drunk on duty; as a consequence, everyone on this ship believes that using whipping as a punishment is morally permissible. Food deprivation, however, is never used to discipline sailors, and everyone believes that using food deprivation as a punishment is morally wrong.

One night, while the ship is in international waters, Mr. Williams finds a sailor drunk at a time when the sailor should have been on watch. After the sailor sobers up, Mr. Williams punishes the sailor by giving him 5 lashes with a whip. This does not go against the law of the flag state.

Peter and Steve are sailors on Mr. Johnson's ship. Thus, like everyone else on Mr. Johnson's ship, they believe that using whipping as a punishment is morally wrong, and they believe that using food deprivation as a punishment is morally permissible. They both know that on Mr. Williams' ship, the other ship, it is the other way around: They know that there everyone believes that whipping is morally permissible, and that food deprivation is morally wrong.

Peter and Steve have heard that Mr. Williams whipped a sailor on his ship. Peter says to Steve: "What Mr. Williams did was morally permissible."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened.
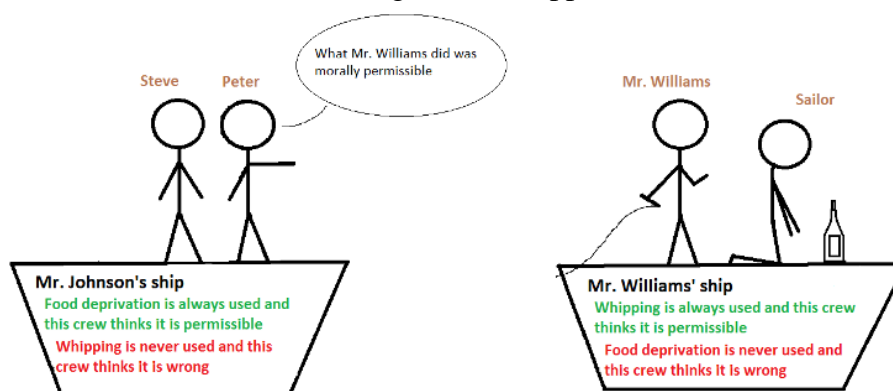
According to you, is what Peter says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, was Mr. Williams' whipping of the sailor morally permissible?
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Mr. Williams' behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong)

Imagine that your colleague is drunk at work. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? (not at all – slightly – moderately – very)

It is morally permissible to punish your colleague by giving him five lashes with a whip.

It is morally permissible to punish your colleague by depriving him of food.

Why was the sailor punished?
1. He burned the flag
2. He was drunk when he should have been on watch
3. He had used violence

Story 2: Murder

Scenario 1: Agent-discordant, Appraiser-concordant

Horace is a Rococar, an extraterrestrial. Rococars have a very different sort of psychology from human beings. They are not at all interested in friendship or love and their main goal is simply to increase the total number of asymmetrical Rococars in the universe. They assign great moral value to life but they do not value beauty at all. Rococars believe that murder is morally wrong.

Most newborn Rococars are ugly, but they do not care about the ugliness. Newborn Rococars are well cared for because new life is valued. Horace's youngest child, though, is uglier than any Rococar ever born. He finds his youngest child so extremely ugly that he decides to kill him.

Pentars are extraterrestrials living on a planet nearby the Rococars' planet. Pentars also have a very different sort of psychology from human beings. They are not at all interested in friendship or love and their main goal is simply to increase the total number of symmetrical Pentars in the universe.

However, there are some differences between Pentars and Rococars: Pentars assign great moral value to beauty but they do not care about life at all. Pentars believe that murder is morally permissible.

Most newborn Pentars are beautiful, but they do not care about the new life. Newborn Pentars are well cared for because new beauty is valued.

Equilateror and Quinten are two other Pentars. Thus, they value beauty but they do not value life in itself. They believe that murder is morally permissible. They both know that for Rococars, it is just the other

way around: They know that Rococars value life and that Rococars do not value beauty. They also know that Rococars believe that murder is morally wrong.

Equilateror and Quinten have heard that Horace the Rococar killed his youngest child.Quinten says to Equilateror: "What Horace did was morally permissible."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened:
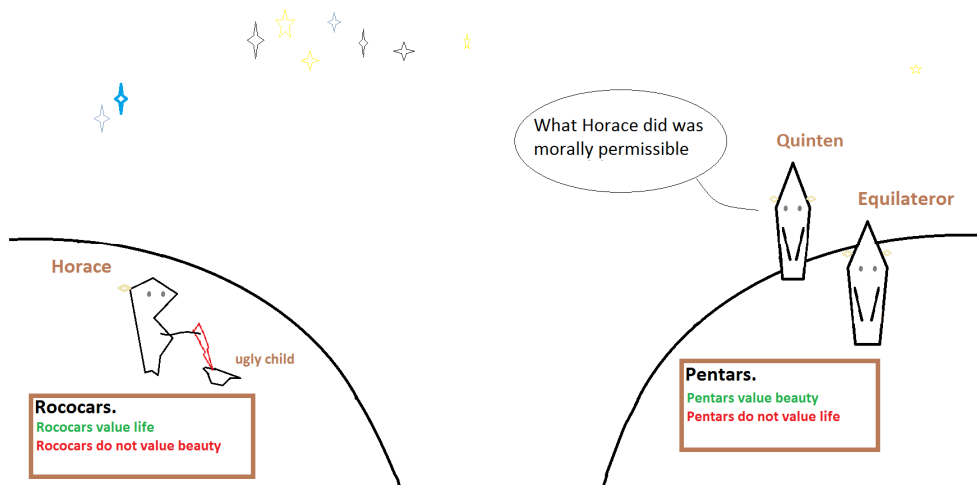
According to you, is what Quinten says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, is it morally permissible that Horace killed his newborn?
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Horaces behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong –very wrong)

*Scenario 2: Agent-concordant, Appraiser-discordant*

Remember that the Pentars value beauty but they do not value life in itself. The Pentars believe that murder is morally permissible. Symetor is a Pentar. Symetor's youngest child is uglier than any Pentar ever born. He finds his youngest child so extremely ugly that he decides to kill him.

Barocar and Ornatar are two Rococars. Thus, they value life but they do not value beauty. Rococars believe that murder is morally wrong. They both know that for Pentars, it is just the other way around: They know that Pentars value beauty and that Pentars do not value life in itself. They also know that Pentars believe that murder is morally permissible.

They have heard that Symetor the Pentar killed his youngest child. Barocar says to Ornatar: What Symetor did was morally permissible.

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened:
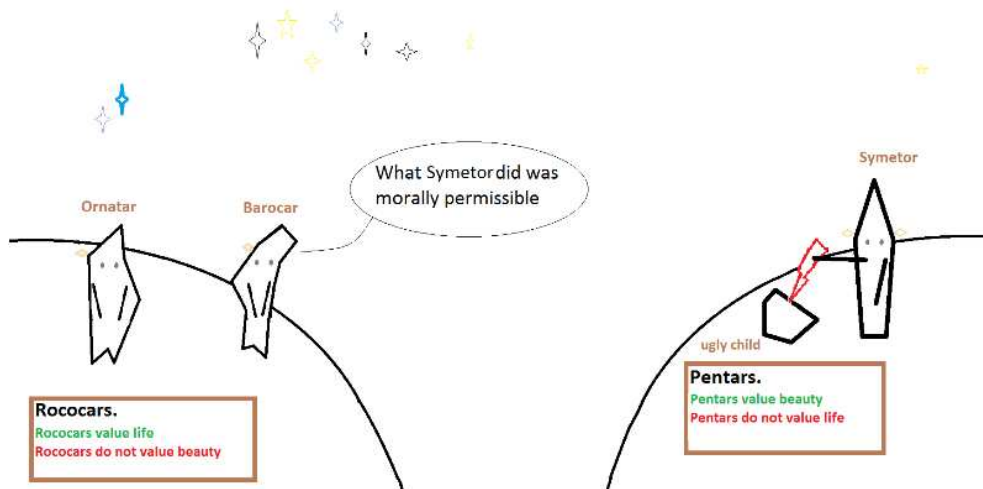
According to you, is what Barocar says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, is it morally permissible that Symetor killed his newborn?
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Symetors behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong)

How much do you value the following? (not at all – slightly – moderately – very)

Beauty

Life

Why did Horace kill his child?

1. It was an accident
2. It was ugly
3. He did not kill his child

Story 3: Duty

Scenario 1: Agent-discordant, Appraiser-concordant

In Kim's country, it is considered one's moral duty to house one's parents and take care of them in one's own home when they are old. However, so that he does not have to take care of them himself, Kim decides to put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them. His parents are not surprised, but they think that he has not done his duty.

In Yan's country, it is considered one's moral duty to put one's parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them when they are old. --Lan and San also live in Yan's country. Thus, they think it is one's moral duty to put one's parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home. They both know that in Kim's country, it is just the other way around: They know that there, it is one's moral duty to house one's parents oneself and take care of them oneself.

Lan and San have heard that Kim nonetheless put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home.Lan says to San: "Kim did his duty."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened :
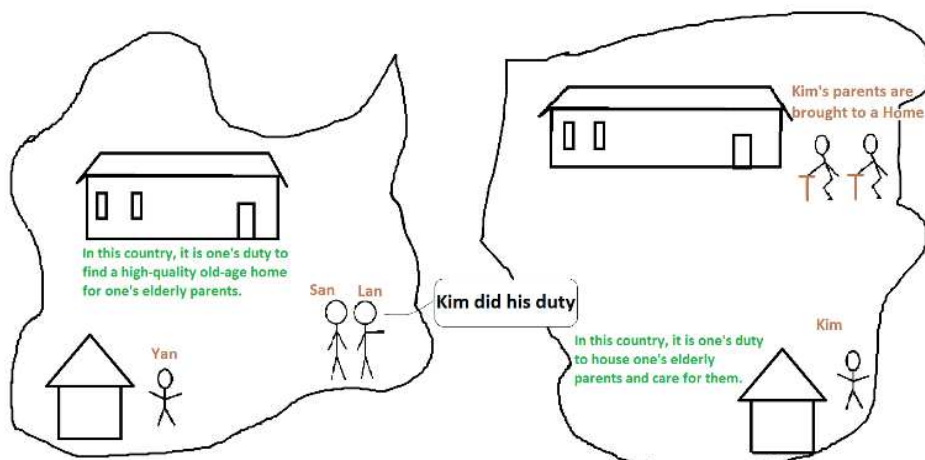
According to you, is what Lan says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, is it Kim's duty to find a high-quality old-age home for his elderly parents?
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Kims behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong)

Scenario 2: Agent-concordant, Appraiser-discordant

Remember that in Yan's country, it is considered one's moral duty to put one's parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them when they are old. Yan decides to put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them. His parents are not surprised, and they think that he has done his duty.

Lin and Min live in Kim's country. In Kim's country, it is considered one's moral duty to house one's parents oneself and take care of them oneself. Lin and Min know that in Yan's country, it is just the other way around: They know that in Yan's country, it is considered one's moral duty to put one's parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home where others will take good care of them when they are old.

They have heard that Yan put his parents in an expensive high-quality old-age home. Lin says to Min: "Yan did his duty."

Here is a schematic drawing of what happened :
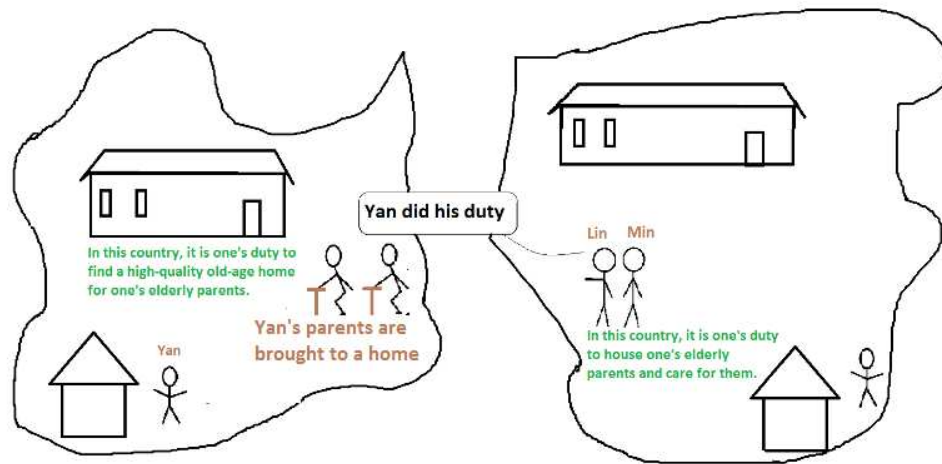
According to you, is what Lin says true or false?
1. True
2. False

According to you, is it Yan's duty to find a high-quality old-age home for his elderly parents
1. Yes
2. No

How morally wrong do you think Yan's behavior is? (not wrong at all – slightly wrong – moderately wrong – very wrong)

Why did Kim bring his parents to an old-age Home?
1. He wanted to show them the architecture of the building.
2. They were old and needed to be taken care of.
3. To visit an acquaintance.