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# IRRECONCILABLE MORAL DISAGREEMENT

Things change, including the things that make moral disagreements. This would seem an obvious truth. But it, rather than its denial, has come to require extensive explication and defense. Philosophers and social commentators have come to presume, or too easily to infer, the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements. These irreconcilable moral disagreements have been offered as evidence in support of moral relativism, and, conversely, moral relativism has been invoked to demonstrate the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements.[1] Irreconcilable moral disagreements are accused of fraying social bonds, but their acknowledgment has also been lauded for promoting tolerance.[2]

The belief that there are irreconcilable moral disagreements has confused moral theory and damaged social practice. It has made efforts to resolve moral disagreements appear futile, and it has encouraged intolerance. It has dampened efforts and hopes for moral concord and has influenced the debate on moral relativism[3] to which it is largely irrelevant.

Fortunately there probably are no irreconcilable moral disagreements. Although I have no arguments for their absolute impossibility, I do hope to show that we have some good grounds for belief that irreconcilable moral disagreements don't exist, and no good grounds for belief that they do. Indeed, I will argue that belief in the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements commits one to doctrines most of us would find unacceptable. The dismissal of irreconcilable moral disagreements makes way for clearer thinking about moral relativism. It also suggests more attractive approaches

to dealing with moral disagreements than belief in irreconcilable moral disagreements suggests.

## ANALYSIS OF TERMS

To qualify as an irreconcilable moral disagreement two conditions must be met: (1) different agents must make incompatible moral judgments, and (2) these agents must be permanently unwilling to change their judgments to eliminate the incompatibility.[4]

The first condition's incompatibility component addresses the disagreement aspect of irreconcilable moral disagreements. Mere difference is insufficient to produce a moral disagreement. "Thou shalt not steal" and "Thou shalt not kill" are different moral judgments but, by themselves, constitute no moral disagreement. It is prima facie possible to follow both injunctions. Moral disagreement requires that the judgments be incompatible. They must recommend inconsistent courses of action.

We require *different agents* to distinguish moral disagreements from moral dilemmas. Incompatible intrapersonal judgments create dilemmas, incompatible interpersonal ones, disagreements.[5] In a dilemma an action is thwarted (if it is) by the direct force of the opposing judgment. In a disagreement, it is the opposing agent whose force must be reckoned with. The opposing judgment is only indirectly responsible for preventing an action (when it is prevented). Some contemporary commentators require that the conflicting judgments be equally correct in order to constitute a genuine dilemma.[6] But that is to give a logical interpretation to an essentially psychological phenomenon.[7] A dilemma exists, as does a disagreement, if neither judgment is believed to be properly subservient to the other. In a disagreement each agent believes that her judgment ought not to submit to the other's judgment, whereas in a dilemma a single agent believes that neither of *her* judgments ought to submit to the other. To prevail in a dilemma, a judgment must overcome the opposed judgment. This is not to say that the opposed judgment is deemed to be justly subordinate. If that occurs the dilemma is dissolved and no longer exists. Rather, it is merely to say that one judgment has issued in action and thereby triumphed in a test of efficacy over the opposing judgment. To prevail in a disagreement, a judgment must have the agent who holds it overcome the holder of the opposing judgment. The opposing judgment itself need suffer no defeat. There is no direct contest



between judgments, even though one of them triumphs in the sense of determining action. Of course the moral disagreement is not necessarily ended with this sort of "triumph." That only happens when the opposing judgment is no longer made. Hence the irreconcilability of irreconcilable moral disagreements refers to the disagreeing agents, not the moral judgments. Judgments are reconciled by showing that their inconsistency is only apparent. Truly inconsistent judgments are indeed irreconcilable. But these inconsistent judgments lead to irreconcilable disagreement only if the agents adhere to those judgments.

The second condition defines the irreconcilability of irreconcilable moral disagreements. If, at *any point*, any of the disagreeing agents were willing to accommodate the opposing judgment(s), the disagreement would not be irreconcilable. Of course an unwillingness to change at time $t$ means that the disagreement is irreconcilable at $t$. But if that is what is meant by irreconcilability, then every moral disagreement is born irreconcilable and is for some time in that state. If the irreconcilability is not to be a trivial feature of moral disagreements, it must be an enduring feature. Its philosophical interest lies in its being an everlasting feature. Without that irreconcilable moral disagreements are simply unreconciled moral disagreements.

A moral disagreement concerning a particular action may not be reconciled in time to have practical significance regarding that action. This confers a certain sort of irreconcilability, in the same sense that a disease that leads to one's death is incurable. Even here we must make two further distinctions. A disease may be incurable for a particular person because she cannot afford medicine. This is a very weak sense of incurable. Let's call it circumstance incurability (which doesn't amount to more than "didn't happen to get cured"). Diseases may also be incurable because effective treatment has not yet been discovered. This is the sense in which tuberculosis was incurable and AIDS is incurable. Call this time-bound incurability. Nothing about tuberculosis, and presumably nothing about AIDS, foreclosed or forecloses the possibility of cure. Of course that possibility is of no use to those who don't get cured in time.

Because there was no moral agreement about whether an atomic bomb should have been used on Nagasaki in 1945, that 1945 disagreement is irreconcilable. If we now reach a consensus about what should have been done, it would make relatively little difference to the 1945 inhabitants of Nagasaki. But *this* irreconcilability is degenerate, a function solely of the past's immutability. *Anything* that wasn't done in the past is now not possible

to do. Nagasaki cannot be unbombed and the 1945 disagreement cannot be reconciled. But it might not have been bombed, and if the disagreement was circumstance irreconcilable rather than time-bound irreconcilable, it might have been reconciled. Indeed it is not clear that any moral disagreement is time-bound irreconcilable and not merely circumstance irreconcilable, that is, whether it couldn't be reconciled "in time" or just wasn't. To establish time-bound irreconcilability a specific argument is required, demonstrating that certain resources were needed to reconcile certain moral disagreements and that these resources were unavailable in time to reconcile the moral disagreements when reconciliation still mattered.

Even if we grant the existence of time-bound irreconcilable moral disagreements, we do not yet have true irreconcilable moral disagreements. We might yet reach a consensus about the bombing of Nagasaki, as the 1945 disputants might have had they lived long enough. Truly irreconcilable moral disagreements can never be reconciled.

## THE ARGUMENTS FROM EXPERIENCE FOR IRRECONCILABLE MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

Various arguments have been advanced for the existence of truly irreconcilable moral disagreements. The simplest is that there are moral disagreements that have resisted efforts to reconcile them. After a time one suspects that they may not be reconcilable. Few of us have worked diligently at a crossword puzzle or a chess problem where failure to find a solution hasn't got us wondering, if not convinced, that the devisers have made a mistake, and that there is no solution. "If the moral disagreement is reconcilable, how come we haven't reconciled it?"

By itself the argument is as weak as my contention that the chess problems I've yet to solve are insoluble. There is no dearth of examples of tasks achieved after a long history of failed attempts. The examples include some from the moral arena. We all know of cases where a long and strongly held moral opinion was changed. Indeed, there are many cases where an entire moral outlook is replaced, for example, in religious conversion. Nor are these "changes of heart" confined to individuals. The moral judgments of social groups also change, even in matters that once provoked violence. Most southern white Americans no longer believe that black Americans ought to sit in the back of the bus, let alone that it is morally permissible to enslave them. These judgments were the subject of apparently irreconcilable moral



disagreements. They no longer are. Note that it is not simply the case that white southerners have given up struggling for Jim Crow; they no longer believe in him. Similar examples can be found across cultures. English disapproval of suttee is codified in Indian law long after the demise of English power in India.

Why and how these changes occur are questions I will examine later. For now it is enough to remark that deeply ingrained and passionately held moral beliefs of individuals, social groups, and entire cultures can and have changed. Their mere existence constitutes no evidence for the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements.

## THE ARGUMENT FROM THEORY

Still, there may be features of certain moral disagreements that prove, or at least suggest, that they are irreconcilable. My inability to solve a chess problem is little reason to think it insoluble. But I may have a positive argument to show the impossibility of there being a solution. Are their characteristics of some moral disagreements that mark them irreconcilable?

The examples given above show that the duration, passion, or content of a moral disagreement does not indicate irreconcilability. Nor does the centrality of a belief to a moral system or way of life confer the immutability that is needed for irreconcilability. Slavery was the core institution in the antebellum South. The South is no longer pro-slavery. One might argue that the South that is not pro-slavery is not the same South that was pro-slavery, and that *that* South's belief in slavery *was* immutable. But such an argument adds a ceteris paribus clause to its claim for the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements that trivializes them. Of course if nothing, or nothing important, changes, certain moral disagreements aren't going to be reconciled. But to show that they are significantly irreconcilable we would need to show that the necessary background changes are themselves impossible. That cannot be shown. At best we might show that it would take a lot, including some unlikely or undesirable events, to reconcile some moral disagreements. That is an important but unsurprising fact.

### Psychological and Sociological Theory

The psychological or sociological bases of the disagreement fare no better as proofs of irreconcilability. There are no plausible psychological theories

that claim that belief or belief systems are immune to change after a certain point. Even those that suggest that certain psychological structures or personality traits are formed early and forever do not include among these permanent features particular beliefs with specific cognitive content. Grouchy people may remain forever grouchy, but that does not tell us what they are going to grouch about. Similarly, there are no theories of social structure or development ruling out changes in particular moral beliefs or the general moral code.

Even if there were such psychological or sociological theories, they would be prima facie refuted by our personal and historical experience. To overcome such refutations a theory would need to explain, for example, why the pro-slavery moral judgment did not meet criteria for immutability, but that other moral judgments did, or at least could have.

## Relativism, Pluralism, and Irreconcilability

Some philosophers have argued that there are irreconcilable moral disagreements because the foundations of morality, or lack thereof, afford no grounds for the reconciliation of certain types of moral disagreements.[8] There are many varieties of moral relativism, but any doctrine deserving of the name must at least maintain that there is no unique, true and consistent set of moral beliefs. Hence there is no guarantee that one of two conflicting moral judgments is false. Both judgments may be true, or, depending on your brand of relativism, neither judgment may have any truth value at all. This predicament is thought to explain why there would be irreconcilable moral disagreements. If there is no truth, or no unique truth, there is no tendency to converge on it. Nor can the partisans of one moral judgment provide decisive moral reasons for the opposing moral judgment's partisans to change their minds. Voilà, irreconcilable moral disagreements.

Even assuming the truth of moral relativism and the general soundness of the above argument, the conclusion is stated too strongly. The conclusion should be "Voilà, moral disagreements that cannot be reconciled through rational moral argumentation." That is not the same thing as irreconcilable moral disagreements. It is not even the same thing as "moral disagreements that can be reconciled only through violent, coercive, manipulative or deceptive means." There are many ways that moral beliefs come to change, and rational argumentation is not the sole palatable one. We may come to accept alien moral judgments out of love or admiration for the alien. We may be



inclined to follow fashion, and our old moral beliefs may become unfashionable. Relativism may tell us that there is no rational basis for change. It does not deny all bases for change.

One form of moral relativism maintains that moral language, like all language, is embedded in a larger system of belief and way of life. Moral terms derive their meanings from this cultural setting. Sufficiently different cultural settings result in moral terms that are untranslatable. Hence moral agreement is unobtainable.

But then so is moral disagreement. We can hardly be said to disagree if we fail to understand each others' assertions. This form of relativism lays the groundwork for moral miscommunication, not moral disagreement. Of course if the miscommunication made reaching agreement impossible, it might be thought to amount to much the same thing as irreconcilable moral disagreements. Permanent misunderstanding, although different, seems no better than permanent disagreement.

Fortunately, even this form of relativism does not entail permanent miscommunication. The miscommunication here is an effect of untranslatability, and the degree of untranslatability is a function of the differences of cultural settings that house the languages. Radical untranslatability would only follow from a complete nonintersection of cultural settings.[9] This in itself is implausible. But the attempt at moral communication that gives rise to the appearance of moral disagreements implies some cultural interaction and overlap. This opens the possibility for what some philosophers call "going native." Living with the other makes it possible to live like the other and thereby speak her language. This form of relativism does not preclude communication because it does not preclude cultural and linguistic change.

Relativism does provide an explanation of the existence of moral disagreements, which may or may not be better than the explanations available to moral realists, but the argument for or against *irreconcilable* moral disagreements is independent of that discussion. The features of moral relativism that are often said to account for, or even make inevitable, irreconcilable moral disagreements can be features of moral realisms. A denial of the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements has no direct or conclusive bearing on the case for relativism.[10]

The case of pluralism is illustrative. Moral pluralism is a doctrine thought to lead to irreconcilable moral disagreements. Often associated with relativism, moral pluralism is equally at home in some realisms. Indeed, a realistic pluralism makes a stronger (although not strong) case for the probability of

irreconcilable moral disagreements than does any relativistic versions. But before turning to that matter, let us examine the argument from a realistic pluralism to irreconcilable moral disagreements.

There are pluralisms of value and pluralisms of principle. A thoroughgoing pluralism of value is one with at least two intrinsic values that are incommensurable. One cannot determine whether a given quantity of one value is greater than a given quantity of the other because the two values cannot be converted into comparable stuff. In fact there is no correct answer to where the greater value lies. Therefore a pluralistic morality that enjoins us to maximize value will encounter situations where it cannot make definitive recommendations.

A pluralism of principle holds that there are at least two true moral principles, neither derived from a common third principle nor ordered for priority of application. Where these principles conflict there is no moral reason to prefer adherence to one rather than the other.

In both forms, pluralism appears to provide grounds for moral disagreements that are rationally irreconcilable, by allowing for conflicts for which there is no appeal to a higher moral authority.[11] This is precisely the sort of support relativism is thought to afford belief in irreconcilable moral disagreements. A realistic pluralism serves the belief at least as well as any relativism. I will now show that it doesn't serve it very well.

Suppose pluralism is true, and Bill and Ted have a moral disagreement because of loyalties to true, equally binding but conflicting principles. There are three different contexts in which this may arise:

(1) Neither Bill nor Ted recognizes the validity of the other's principle.
(2) Each recognizes the validity of the other's principle but believes, mistakenly, that his own has moral priority in the case at hand.
(3) Each recognizes the validity of the other's principle and believes, accurately, that there is no moral reason his own principle ought to prevail.

If either (1) or (2) is the case, there is hope that Bill and Ted can, through reason, change the context of their disagreement to context (3). By hypothesis, (3) is the correct view of the situation, and we have no grounds for holding that reason cannot lead Bill and Ted to the truth. Any argument that claimed that pluralism was true, but that some (most) people could not come to know this through reason, would be committed to claiming the rational



superiority of the arguer or the nonrationality of the argument. Dismissing those positions, we can safely assume that reason can put moral disagreements in context (3).

In (3) we have the following situation: Bill thinks x should be done because of principle z. Ted thinks x should not be done because of principle y. Both acknowledge the validity of both principles and know that there is no *moral reason* to prefer one principle to the other. They may have nonmoral reasons for their preferences, but they know these reasons to be nonmoral. These nonmoral reasons may or may not be convincing to the other person. But their dispute is no longer moral; they agree on all of the relevant moral truths. They may believe that it is morally required that x and not-x both be done (this would be the view of the defenders of genuine, logically interpreted moral dilemmas), but they do not believe that *morality requires* that "their" principle prevail over the conflicting one. Moral pluralism can result in rationally irreconcilable differences, but not rationally irreconcilable *moral* differences.[12]

Incommensurable values or principles resulting from relativism make it that much easier to avoid the inevitability of rationally irreconcilable moral disagreements. If moral relativism is the case (and, of course, can be known to be the case), there is nothing irrational about changing one's value or principle preferences. In the face of disagreement, there might well be good nonmoral reasons to change for the sake of reconciliation. Moral disagreements are often unpleasant affairs. This is not to say that in either relativism or realism there won't be persistent moral disagreements, only that these are neither irreconcilable nor rationally irreconcilable.

The foregoing argument may benefit from an illustration. Assume a pluralism which contained the following two, true, ultimate principles: (1) innocent, biologically human life should never be destroyed or allowed to be destroyed; and (2) under all circumstances a competent woman should have total control of her body and all of its contents.

Let us further assume that everyone recognizes and acknowledges that (1) implies that abortions should not be allowed and that (2) implies that abortions should be allowed. In addition everyone recognizes and acknowledges that these implications are inconsistent and cannot both be realized. Still, some people want to disallow abortions, others to allow them. All are aware that their preferences have no moral bases and that from a moral point of view it is arbitrary whether or not abortions are allowed. Their disagreement may concern a moral matter, but it is not a moral disagreement. Because

morality is not at stake, there might be reason to accommodate the passions of one's opponents.

In sum, while relativism may deny the rational basis for moral change, it also denies the rational basis for firm moral commitment. The self-conscious relativist knows that there are no ultimate rational moral grounds for upholding her end of a moral dispute and therefore may be more likely to reconcile. Even moralists unaware of moral relativism, so long as relativism was the case, would have no moral reasons to maintain their moral commitments. They might think that they had such reasons, but they would not actually have them. This lack of real reasons would tend to undermine (insofar as it had any effect at all) rather than reinforce commitment.

## TOLERANCE AND IRRECONCILABILITY

Tolerance is an unwillingness to change by force, except by the force of reason, beliefs or practices with which one disagrees. There are other, more generous attitudes that may be labeled "tolerance,"[13] but this one is generous enough to serve as an ideal and the only one that has a realistic hope of widespread realization. The question I will examine is whether this kind of tolerance is better fostered by belief or disbelief in irreconcilable moral disagreements.

The response to a moral disagreement depends, in part, on how important the disputants believe it is that their own view prevail. Patrick Buchanan distinguishes between the illicit (such as shredding documents) and the truly immoral (such as abortion) and presumably is more tolerant of the former.[14] Rather than two sharp categories, we can assume a continuum of moral significance partisans attach to disagreements. We begin by looking at a moral disagreement that is felt to be significant, but not at the very highest level of the scale. Suppose parties to such a moral disagreement take it to be irreconcilable. Although not of ultimate importance, it is very important to each that her own view prevail. Because each takes it to be impossible that the other change her moral judgment, the only hope for getting her way is in the face of the other's moral opposition. The alternative is to allow the other's view to prevail. In other words, tolerance entails defeat. Tolerance may be chosen in such circumstances if the cost of abandoning it, moral and otherwise, is deemed greater than the cost of defeat of one's views in the issue at hand. If that is not the case, tolerance is not the preferred option.



Now let us suppose the same moral disagreement is taken to be reconcilable. Tolerance is given greater scope here. Once again it is the best approach if the relative cost of abandoning it is too high. In addition tolerance now holds out hope that the other person (or oneself for that matter) may come round. If one is a relativist, the hope will be based on the possibility of cultural or psychological change. The realist can hope that someone will see the light. In either case nonrational coercion is not the only tactic that can enable one to realize one's moral views. Tolerance no longer entails defeat. Indeed, it may be a tactic for triumph. If my moral judgment is nonrelativistically true, it is most likely to be recognized as such in an atmosphere of free, continuing, respectful, and open-minded debate. On a deeper level this atmosphere might contribute to the moral training and maturing of my benighted opponents, in the long run making them more capable of appreciating my truer moral perspective.[15] Intolerance, therefore, harms the conditions most conducive to my view's ultimate triumph.

Tolerance could be a wise tactic in a world of moral relativism too. The chances for the cultural or psychological changes that I seek in my opponent, which I hope will bring her into agreement with my moral judgment, are increased if she admires and respects me, my culture, or both. These positive feelings are better engendered by tolerance than by intolerance. Once again intolerance is harmful to my cause.

Of course if my interest is restricted to seeing my view prevail *and* I have the power to make it prevail without my opponent's consent, the above arguments for tolerance are weakened. But these are stringent conditions. To begin with I would have to be unconcerned with the fate of my other moral judgments or convinced I will always have the power to make them prevail. I'd also have to be so confident in the adequacy of my strength that I could afford to forgo the chance, or at least decrease it greatly, of ever getting my opponent's voluntary assent to my position. These conditions are rarely met, although, alas, they are frequently thought to be.

There are conditions of moral disagreements where tolerance is not appropriate. These are moral disagreements in which the costs of failure to have your judgment prevail, even in the short run, are greater than the moral and practical costs of intolerance, and the prospects of coercing your opponent are better than the prospects of convincing her. But such a situation can occur regardless of whether the disagreement is thought to be irreconcilable or reconcilable. They occur whenever the moral disagreement is unreconciled and intolerable things are happening. If, for example, opponents of abortion

find that allowing a single abortion is worse than any costs of intolerantly preventing that abortion, including the possible cost of undermining their ability to prevent future abortions by convincing their opponents, then they ought to be intolerant. This is a high standard to meet, but meeting it does not strictly depend on the reconcilability of the moral disagreements. The reconcilability of the moral disagreements might influence one's assessment of the relative costs of tolerance and intolerance, for without a chance of convincing one's opponents down the road, an important potential benefit of tolerance must be discounted. Hence, one good effect of abandoning belief in irreconcilable moral disagreements is to withdraw this limited and indirect aid it gives to intolerance in some circumstances.

A final remark on tolerance: if tolerance is a virtue in one's moral code there is always an intrinsic moral cost in intolerance. The amount of that cost depends on how important a virtue it is. In a pluralistic democracy it is one of the cardinal virtues. And if realism is true, it might well be an important virtue in *the* true morality.[16]

## HOW MORAL DISAGREEMENTS GET RECONCILED

Although there may be no irreconcilable moral disagreements, there certainly are moral disagreements that are very difficult to resolve. The abortion controversy's difficulty in such that it is often offered as an example of an irreconcilable moral disagreement. Of course the context for the abortion debate is nothing like the scenario (3) described earlier, in which all the parties recognized the equal *moral* validity of their opponents' position. Instead we have partisans who either contest the applicability of their opponents' principles to the case at hand or believe those principles to be *morally* subservient to their own. They may even totally reject the moral standing of their opponents' principles. How might reconciliation occur under such conditions?

I will discuss social rather than individual reconciliation. Social reconciliation occurs when the moral disagreement is no longer widespread or deep. We have social agreement on the issue of slavery, although there are surely individuals who still approve of the institution. Although social reconciliation is constituted by a multitude of individual reconciliations, the dynamics of the former can be discussed separately. Social reconciliation is also the more interesting and important phenomenon.



Social reconciliation is never brought about solely through moral argumentation, but neither is moral argumentation wholly ineffective. However it may be in economics, there is a sort of trickle down from professional ethical discourse that affects popular opinion. If a consensus were reached among professional ethicists regarding the moral status of the fetus or the scope of a woman's relevant rights, eventually, mediated through teachers, journalists, and the clergy, that consensus would influence the social debate.[17] Still, the effect would be quite limited. Only a philosopher would be tempted to think it a main factor.

Empirical discoveries shape both public debate and attitudes. If outlawing abortions resulted in the death of many women from illegal abortions, or if there were indisputable proof that fetuses feel pain, the abortion debate would be affected. Cumulative empirical discoveries weighing on one side may help tip the balance of moral opinion.

Realists as well as relativists acknowledge the extent to which moral sentiments are formed on the basis of educational and broader cultural influences. As these may change, so will the sentiments. Imagine the effect on the abortion controversy if: (1) a new pope had a different understanding of God's will; (2) women made up half of the corporate, political, educational, religious, financial, media, and scientific establishments and unplanned pregnancies ruined careers; and (3) organized antiabortion groups were found to be run by corrupt and venal leadership. Sentiments would change, as surely as they would if a severe economic depression led to a profound, fundamentalist-oriented religious revival among the educated middle classes. Of course individual partisans may remain entrenched in their positions heedless of all influences. But they die or become irrelevant, and newcomers to the debate form their ideas in the new, consensus-conducive circumstances.[18]

One need not be a Marxist or a cynic to grant the force of interests in determining morality. A long and bitter dispute tends to create a mutual interest in its resolution. Ultimately compromise becomes appealing when the cost of continued struggle is not worth what might be won by it, given the chances of winning.[19] The ensuing modus vivendi may not represent any change of moral judgment. But if it is a workable, stable compromise, it is likely to bring moral sentiments in line with it. If a political consensus converges on allowing abortions only in the first trimester for judicially certified nontrivial reasons, some may still consider the process murder, others an unjustifiable infringement on women's reproductive rights, but, if all agreed

to live with the compromise, a moral consensus justifying the common practice would likely follow.

## WHY THERE IS BELIEF IN IRRECONCILABLE MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

Philosophers may have mistakenly posited irreconcilable moral disagreements by fallaciously inferring them from moral theory. But for most people it is the elusivity of the "reconciliation experience," even when a disagreement does get reconciled, that accounts for the conviction that some moral disagreements are irreconcilable. There are moral judgments so deep, so connected to psychic, social or epistemic structure, that they cannot be changed lightly, suddenly, or wholesale. Parties to such disagreements don't get up one day and declare, "I was wrong, you were right, I should apologize." Moral conversion, usually the result of many factors operating over an extended period, is often imperceptible. From an individual perspective social change is slow and personal change even slower. The changes are wrought by "interminable," repetitive arguments, technological innovation, educational reforms, urbanizations, suburbanizations, influential books, blockbuster movies, career advances, unemployment, increased wealth, decreased health, parenting, aging, scandals, wars and death. Not only is it often difficult to say how and when one's moral judgment (or one's opponent's judgment) changed, it is common and comforting to forget one ever had a different judgment. The absence of any "reconciliation experience" of our deepest disagreements, combined with the ever-presence of disagreements of this type, some of which endure for generations, quite naturally gives rise to belief in irreconcilability. The difficulty of comprehending a very gradual change inclines us to think that things which can only change gradually can't really change at all.

## CLINCHER AND CONCLUSION

This chapter began with the admission that I could not demonstrate the absolute impossibility of irreconcilable moral disagreements. But a basis has been laid for showing that the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements, at least as social phenomena, entails propositions that are fundamentally racist. If racism is false there are no irreconcilable moral disagreements.



This may not constitute a complete impossibility proof, but I hope it will suffice for most readers.

Racism holds that some human groups, defined by their nationality, language, culture, ancestry, or belief systems, are *biologically* incapable of certain cultural achievements or certain forms of social life. Some paradigmatically racist beliefs are that Jews are biologically incapable of true creativity, Africans of peaceful social life, Poles of intelligent behavior. Although some may want to term "racist" nonbiologically justified negative attitudes toward groups, belief in biological group differences entailing socially significant differences should be sufficient (although not necessary) to meet anyone's definition of racism. All the more so if the biologically mandated social differences are of a moral nature.

Now suppose two human groups, the Jets and the Sharks, are in moral disagreement. The Sharks believe X and the Jets believe not-X. If we are not racist we must hold that the biological makeup of Sharks and Jets would allow for either group to come to hold either belief, since we know that both beliefs are in the human repertoire. To see things as Sharks do may require many and profound changes in Jets. But if racism is false the changes are possible, and if we have not defined Jets as people who believe not-X, or have beliefs or practices that entail belief in not-X, the changes are possible without the Jets ceasing to be Jets.

Of course we might define Jets in such a way that they do cease to be Jets once they give up belief in not-X. One can then maintain that so long as there are Sharks and Jets their moral disagreement will be irreconcilable. But that trivializes the issue. It is tantamount to saying that as long as there are people who hold X and people who hold not-X the disagreement will remain. It gives us no independent grounds for believing we always will have holders of both beliefs. Certainly some significant human groups are defined by their moral beliefs, such as Nazis. Nazis qua Nazis cannot abandon anti-Semitism, but if we are not racist we must believe that Germans, Ukrainians, and Lithuanians can. Moreover, unless we consider anti-Semitism *essential* to their identity, they can do so while remaining German, Ukrainian, and Lithuanian. The fact that, as long as there are Nazis and non-Nazis, particular moral disagreement will persist tells us nothing interesting if we've no reason to believe that Nazis will be always among us.[20]

If there are no irreconcilable moral disagreements, one common argument for relativism must be abandoned, as there is no need to explain away that which doesn't exist. But even if there are irreconcilable moral disagreements,

relativism might not be true, because realism can account for them. Furthermore, if relativism is true, it does not follow that any of our moral disagreements are irreconcilable. Hence the existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements is largely irrelevant to the debate on relativism, although their nonexistence does remove one of the arguments used to support it.

Besides giving proper focus to metaethical discussion, the demise of irreconcilable moral disagreements renews hopes of finding common ground in our most divisive contentions. We will always have moral disagreements, some of which will be exceedingly resistant to resolution. Some moral judgments many of us won't be inclined to tolerate and perhaps there are others that really ought not to be tolerated. But with the specter of irreconcilable moral disagreements exorcised, hope for reconciliation is made possible, and in the wake of that hope reinvigorated tolerance should follow.

If moral theory gives us no reason to believe in irreconcilable moral disagreements, personal and historical experience gives us some reason to disbelieve in them. Rejection of biological racism gives us additional reason for disbelief. Things do change, and moral judgments are just one of those things.

## NOTES

Arthur Goldhammer and Joel Greifinger made helpful suggestions for the final section. I also want to thank Joel Marks and the editors for useful comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

1. See, for instance J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977); P. Hugly and D. Sayward, "Moral Relativism and Deontic Logic," *Synthese* 85 (October 1990), pp. 139–52; and David Wong, *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984).

2. See Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), for the former point; Melvin Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1972), and Wong, *Moral Relativity,* for the latter.

3. See G. Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

4. Throughout this chapter I will speak of agents who make moral judgments



regarding action. But of course some moral judgments are evaluations, and they too can be the subject of moral disagreement. Most of my argument will apply, mutatis mutandis, to evaluative disagreements. In any event philosophers have seen irreconcilable moral disagreements as especially significant when they have practical import.

5. A dilemma can be intracorporate, where the incompatible judgments may be represented by different individuals. It is a dilemma because we have, at least theoretically, a single agent.

6. For a sampling, see E. J. Lemmon, "Moral Dilemmas"; Ruth Barcan Marcus, "Moral Dilemmas and Consistency"; and Bernard Williams, "Ethical Consistency," in *Moral Dilemmas,* ed. C. W. Gowans (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

7. I do not mean to dismiss the import of the logical interpretation for metaethical theory. To see what might be at stake, see Earl Conee, "Against Moral Dilemmas," in Gowans, *Moral Dilemmas,* chap. 2.

8. Wong, *Moral Relativity.*

9. See Donald Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), for interesting discussions on this.

10. David Wong in his "Commentary on Sayre-McCord's 'Being a Realist about Relativism,'" *Philosophical Studies* 61 (February 1991), pp. 177–86, does make the existence of moral disagreements a crucial premise in his argument for relativism, but it is unclear if these disagreements need to be irreconcilable. He claims that relativism gives the best explanation of moral diversity. Although he admits that realisms can account for moral disagreement, he believes they do so by resorting to "insupportable accusations of error." To become acceptable accounts of moral diversity, they would have to give "reasonably plausible explanations of how those communities come to err," and in some instances "plausible and reasonably detailed explanations cannot be given" (pp. 185–86). The first thing to be said in reply to Wong's argument is that it is unfair to demand a detailed (i.e., specific) explanation of general moral error, so long as realisms can give good accounts of specific errors. And this can be done. A pro-choice moral realist is not at all at a loss to account for the pro-lifer's opposition to abortion: pro-lifers mistake the rough extensional equivalence of a biological human and rights-bearing person for intensional equivalence, they desire to punish illicit sex, they are convinced of invalid sorites arguments, they have false religious beliefs, they feel abortion devalues their roles as mothers, they feel abortion threatens male control of reproduction and thereby threatens patriarchal domination—there is no lack of very detailed accounts purporting to explain errors on the very issue Wong uses (in *Moral Relativity*) to exemplify irreconcilable moral disagree-

ments. This is not to deny Wong's assertion that both sides of the abortion debate may have some valid arguments. It is merely to deny that plausible accounts of error are unavailable. But even if Wong is correct that realisms don't give adequate accounts of moral error, he is wrong to think that all realisms need to in order to account for moral diversity. As I argue in the text here, realistic pluralisms need not resort to error theory to account for moral disagreements. Some other arguments for the compatibility of irreconcilable moral disagreements and moral realism of one sort or another can be found in James Sterba, *Contemporary Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1989); D. O. Brink, "Critique of Ethical Skepticism," in Sayre-McCord, *Essays;* and Susan Hurley, "Objectivity and Disagreement," in *Morality and Objectivity* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985). In any case, neither Wong's nor any argument for relativism from diversity depends on the irreconcilability of the diversity.

11. Some pluralisms allude to amorphous authorities, for example, Thomas Nagel's "judgment" (see "The Fragmentation of Value" in Gowans, *Moral Dilemmas*) op.cit.) or David Ross's "considered decisions" in *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1930).

12. Note that this result is not a result of Bill and Ted's not speaking the same moral language but comes about precisely because they do speak the same language.

13. For a typology of tolerance, see Ija Lazari-Pawlowska, "Three Concepts of Tolerance," *Dialectics and Humanism* 14 (Winter 1987), pp. 133–46.

14. Patrick Buchanan, *Right from the Beginning* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), p. 226.

15. See Marvin Berkovits, "Four Perspectives on Moral Argumentation," in *Moral Dilemmas: Issues in the Development of Moral Reasoning* (Chicago: Precedent, 1985), for a discussion of moral argumentations impact on moral development.

16. David Wong (in *Moral Relativity*) argues that belief in irreconcilable moral disagreements (a consequence he sees of an acceptance of relativism) does promote tolerance. He claims that many moralities implicitly endorse "the justification principle," namely that "one should not interfere with the ends of others unless one can justify the interference to be acceptable to them were they fully rational and informed of all relevant circumstances" (p. 181). The existence of irreconcilable moral disagreements would seem to activate this principle, for they would lead to cases when one could not justify interference with the ends of others to those others.

As Wong notes, there is some question whether the justification principle would be adopted by someone who was not a moral realist. But if one *is* a realist



the justification principle is tantamount simply to enjoining tolerance of all activities that are not wrong. For if there is a single true moral code, one would be able to gain acceptance from *fully rational and informed persons* to all of one's correct moral judgments. There is no requirement to respect the judgments of the less than fully rational or fully informed. For the moral realist the justification principle is just an elliptical way of saying that unless a judgment is correct, and known to be correct, it should not be imposed on others. If it is correct, you *can* impose it on the misguided and you won't have to impose it on any others. If it isn't correct, or you are unsure that it is, then of course you shouldn't be imposing it on anyone. If moral realism is true, the refusal of the fully informed and fully rational to accept your judgment is conclusive evidence that it is incorrect. For the realist the justification principle is a safeguard against imposing mistakes, not a genuine principle of tolerance.

Wong claims that a relativist might accept the justification principle out of "sympathy, compassion and concern for another for his or her own sake" (p. 185). And so she might. But on that basis the appeal of the justification principle and the support it gives to tolerance is completely independent of relativism *and* the irreconcilability of the moral disagreements. If I have compassion for the other and know that it is unpleasant for her to be interfered with, I have the same good reason to tolerate her judgments, be they right or wrong, merely unreconciled with my views or irreconcilable.

The justification principle, depending on one's metaethics, either does not promote tolerance or promotes tolerance irrespective of one's belief in irreconcilable moral disagreements.

17. And after enough time professionals do often reach consensus about particular arguments, for example, Hume's critique of the argument from design is widely acknowledged to demolish *that* argument for the traditional Western conception of God, even though individual dissenters may remain.

18. Cf. Thomas Kuhn's account of scientific revolutions in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1962).

19. This is apparently the realization of both sides of the Salvadoran conflict, and at least the majority leadership of the Palestinians. Alas this is not the take of the current (May 1992) Israeli government. Nor was it the view of northern and southern leadership in 1861. Stanley Elkins in *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959) makes an interesting case that we all, slaves included, would have been better off had it been so.

20. An anonymous reviewer for the University of Massachusetts Press has pointed out that *biological* determinism isn't the only possible logical ground for

believing a people absolutely inflexible in moral belief. As the reviewer notes, however, a belief in irreconcilability does "reveal an inability to imagine certain people as historical subjects," and "a susceptibility to imagining certain cultural systems as time-frozen artifacts." I maintain that any sort of determinism that undergirds such imaginative failings is functionally equivalent to the biological determinism that constitutes racism.