**Comments on Jamie Dreier's 'Relativism (and Expressivism) and the
Problem of Disagreement'**

David Barnett, 3/07/09

1.   Realism and Emotivism

Kant says: It is morally wrong to lie to a murderer in order to save your friend's life.

Mill says: It is morally correct to lie to a murderer in order to save your friend's life.

Mill and Kant *disagree*. There is some sort of conflict between the speech acts Mill and Kant each perform, or between the mental states those speech acts express.

Realist explanation in terms of speech acts: Kant has *asserted* that P, and Mill has *denied* that P (or asserted that not-P). When two people assert logically inconsistent propositions, they disagree.

Realist explanation in terms of mental states: Kant *believes* that P, and Mill *disbelieves* that P (or believes that not-P). When two people believe logically inconsistent propositions, they disagree.

Contrast this with a crude emotivism, according to which the sentence 'Lying to a murderer is wrong' is expresses a disapproving attitude toward lying to a murderer, and the sentence 'Lying to a murderer is morally correct' expresses an approving attitude.

The Problem of Disagreement is *not* that a person who says the first asserts correctly that he disapproves, and that the person who says the second asserts correctly that he approves, and so their beliefs are not inconsistent. The same could be said if Kant asserts that he believes that P and Mill asserts that he believes that not-P, where P is straightforwardly a matter of fact. The disagreement shows up in the first-order beliefs themselves—there is some sense in which beliefs in inconsistent propositions *conflict* with one another.

Rather, the problem for emotivism is explaining what it is about Kant's attitude of disapproval and Mill's attitude of approval, such that they constitute a conflict or disagreement. In the case of conflicting beliefs, the idea is that there is an objective standard of truth which can be met only by one of these beliefs. But the whole point of emotivism is that there is no such standard in the case of approval and disapproval.

2.   Indexical Relativism

The properties denoted by moral predicates like 'wrong' are determined by the context of utterance. Each speaker has a *moral system* which assigns a property to the predicate 'wrong'. When that speaker says 'a is wrong', the proposition asserted is that a is F, where F-ness is the property that speaker's moral system assigns to 'wrong'.

Formally speaking, this works just like Kaplan's treatment of indexicals like 'here'. When Mill says 'Konigsberg is a long way from here' and Kant says 'Konigsberg is not a long way from here', the proposition Mill asserts is that Konigsberg is a long way from his house in

London, while Kant asserts that Konigsberg is not a long way from his house in Konigsberg. So, Mill and Kant are not asserting logically inconsistent propositions.

Disagreement Problem: If this is how we should treat the semantics for 'wrong', then there would seem to be no disagreement between Kant and Mill. Mill asserts the proposition that lying to the murderer has the property of promoting the greater good, while Kant asserts the proposition that it has the property of violating the categorical imperative. These propositions are logically consistent, so there would appear to be no conflict, or disagreement.

3.   Expressivism

Rough idea for ought-statements: A statement about what someone ought to do in a given set of circumstances express the speaker's *plans* for what to do in similar circumstances. To avoid the problem of disagreement, the ought-statements are not supposed to *describe* the speaker's plans. Compare with assertions which describe conflicting beliefs.

Possible worlds and hyperplans: If Judith says that John is tall, the proposition asserted is the set of possible worlds (maximal states of affairs) in which John is tall. If Kant says that one ought to tell the truth no matter what, the proposition is a hyperplan (a maximal plan for what to do) under which one always tells the truth.

Most ought-statements mix a normative and a factual component, so they are represented by an ordered pair whose first member is a set of possible worlds and whose second is a hyperplan. For example:

(1) You ought to write the invitation by hand.

This will express a proposition whose first member is the set of worlds which the speaker thinks might be actual and whose second member is a hyperplan which says to write the invitation by hand in all of those worlds.

We don't have plans for every possible circumstance. So our total planning state is a set of hyperplans which agree on all of the circumstances for which we do have plans. So if you have no plan about what to do in circumstance C, your set of hyperplans will include ones which have you doing different things in C.

What about indirect discourse? For example, consider:

(2) Judith thinks you ought to write the invitation by hand.

This asserts the proposition (roughly) that Judith's set of hyperplans have her writing the invitation by hand in all of the circumstances that she thinks you might be in.

What would it mean for me to disagree with Judith about whether you ought to write the invitation by hand? Dreier thinks Gibbard's view has trouble with this. There are three possible attitudes I might have which are different from Judith's.

One possibility is that I think you ought *not* to write the invitation by hand. Gibbard would understand this as a matter of my planning not to write the invitation by hand.

Another possibility is that I think that it is neither the case that you ought to write the invitation by hand, nor that you ought not to write it by hand—that either option is permissible. Now we *might* understand this as my not having a plan either way.

But consider a third possibility: I have no view about whether you ought to write the invitation by hand—maybe I have suspended judgment, or maybe I have never thought about it. This seems different from thinking that it is permissible either way, but Gibbard lacks the resources to make this distinction.

Once the distinction is in place, it seems more natural to regard having no view about what you ought to do as not having a plan. Suppose Judith thinks that you are tall. I might disagree by thinking that you are short. Or I might disagree by thinking you are of average height. But if I have no opinion about whether you are tall, this would not amount to disagreement with Judith. Intuitively, this is because the proposition that you are short and the proposition that your height is average are each inconsistent with the proposition which Judith believes. But if I have no opinion about your height, I don't believe a proposition which is inconsistent with the one Judith believes.

4.   Genuine Relativism

Each of us has a moral system, or perspective. Whether the sentence 'Lying to a murderer is wrong' is assessed as true depends upon what property a person's moral system assigns to 'wrong', and whether lying to a murderer has this property. But the relevant moral system is not that of *the speaker* of the sentence, but rather its *assessor*.

Intuitively, 'Lying to a murderer is wrong' expresses the proposition that lying to a murderer is wrong, no matter who says it. But then when it comes time to assess whether this proposition is true, it can be true relative to the moral system of one assessor but not relative to the moral system of another.

Dreier objects that this fails to handle the problem of disagreement. If Mill says 'Konigsberg is far away from here' and Kant says 'Konigsberg is not far away from here', then they need not disagree, because of the circumstance-sensitivity of what proposition is expressed by these sentences. But how does placing the circumstance-sensitivity into the assessor's circumstance change this?

Dreier admits that the relativist's formalism yields the verdict that Kant and Mill disagree, since one of them assesses the sentence as true and the other as false. But his point is that if you look at how this assessing is supposed to work on the relativist's view, this constitutes 'disagreement' in name only.

Maybe a good way to think about the dialectical situation: If two people give different assessments for 'Konigsberg is far away from Kant's house', then they must have inconsistent beliefs about the geographical facts. And having inconsistent beliefs is tantamount to disagreement. If two people give different assessments for 'Konigsberd is far away from here', they may just be in different locations. And being in different locations is not tantamount to disagreement. If two people give different assessments for 'Lying to a murderer is wrong', then they must have different moral systems. But if having different

moral systems is not a matter of having inconsistent beliefs about the moral facts, what makes this a case of disagreement?

MacFarlane's response is that when challenging the statement 'Lying is wrong', you are entitled to assess it according to your own system, and when responding to a challenge, you are entitled to do so from your own system. But the same is not true for 'Konigsberg is far away from here'. Dreier agrees that there is such a distinction in our practices, but says that what he wants is an *explanation*. We *could* challenge and defend indexical sentences this way if we wanted to, but this would be bizarre and pointless. Why is it not bizarre and pointless in the case of 'Lying to a murderer is wrong'?

5.   Solution to the Problem of Disagreement?

Why do we assess moral sentences according to our own system/perspective/plan, and object to those with other systems/perspectives/plans?

MacFarlane's explanation: Challenging and replying as we do creates a feeling of controversy, which leads us to remove the discomfort by coordinating our attitudes. (How is this different from me challenging a friend when he talks about the weather 'here', in the hope that he will move to New York to avoid further challenges?)

Dreier's main objection: Sometimes it is good for me when others share my plans, but not always.

Dreier's solution: It is incoherent if you prefer chocolate to vanilla, prefer butter pecan to chocolate, and prefer vanilla to butter pecan. No matter what, you will wind up where you would have preferred another flavor. Maybe the incoherence of these attitudes in a single person can explain the intuitive conflict between two people?

To handle the problem raised for Gibbard, there must be some distinction corresponding to that between believing that X is permissible and being uncertain whether it is obligatory. Dreier suggests the distinction between indifference between two brands of cola and indecision between cola or water on a hot day.

This might even carry over for beliefs in inconsistent propositions. If I simply consider the possibility that P and you consider that not-P, this is not disagreement. And there is nothing internally incoherent about my considering P and then considering not-P. It is, however, incoherent to believe that P and believe that not-P. So maybe the moral realist is in the same boat with the relativist and expressivist after all.