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Pluralism and Relativism in Ethics Starting from W. K. Frankena

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This article connects pluralism and relativism in ethics through the path of a classic scholar of 20th century moral philosophy: W. K. Frankena. In normative ethics, Frankena defends a pluralist perspective, because in his theory of obligation there is a plurality of basic moral principles (exactly two) that may conflict with one another and there is no strict order of priority for resolving conflicts between them. His attitude towards ethical relativism is instead negative, because in his view all three versions of relativism in the moral sphere (descriptive, metaethical and normative) are questionable. The author explains the reasons for the plausibility of a pluralist model in normative ethics, but on relativism he shows more openness than Frankena, in particular by defending a moderate version of descriptive and metaethical relativism, for which on certain issues there may be equally justified conflicting moral evaluations. Such a form of relativism, far from constituting a "bogeyman", simply expresses the idea that the correct use of reason does not necessarily lead to a single outcome, but can have a plurality of outlets (without thereby allowing *every* outlet).

Keywords: conflicting moral evaluations, ethical relativism, moral pluralism, normative ethics, meta-ethics, William K. Frankena, Richard B. Brandt

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Brief Premise

The themes of pluralism and relativism are among the most important of our time. I intend to approach them on a strictly ethical level and from a partially historical perspective. In the end, however, I will provide my own evaluation of both.

Frankena, Moral Pluralism and Ethical Relativism

In this paper I will try to connect pluralism and relativism in ethics through the path of a classic thinker of 20th century moral philosophy: William K. Frankena (1908–1994), one of the leading figures of the ethical debate, particularly in the analytical area.[1] In normative ethics, Frankena's theory of moral obligation or moral conduct can be adequately characterized as a form of *pluralism*, because in response to the question "what is the criterion of right action?", the answer of this American philosopher consists in identifying *two* basic moral principles that should serve as a guide for our choices in specific situations: (1) a principle of *beneficence*, which enjoins us (a) not to cause harm, (b) to prevent evil, (c) to eliminate it when it is present, and (d) to positively promote the good;[2] and (2) a principle of *justice*, which requires the moral agent to distribute goods and evils according to a morally just criterion.[3] Frankena, in this respect, criticizes *monistic* normative options, such as the major versions of utilitarianism, for which it is possible to "capture" all our moral duties through a single principle. According to him, we need at least two principles, because beneficence alone does not exhaust all our obligations. We not only have the duty to do as much good as possible and to avoid as much harm as possible (maximizing benefits and minimizing harm, in the language of utilitarianism). There is also a problem of *distribution* of benefits

[1] The *summa* of Frankena's moral thought is contained in his text *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973; first edition 1963), a book translated into many languages and which is still in use today. An important collection of his most relevant essays – starting from his famous article about "The Naturalistic Fallacy" (1939) – can be found in: Id., *Perspectives on Morality: Essays by William K. Frankena*, ed. Kenneth E. Goodpaster (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976).

[2] William K. Frankena, *Ethics* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1973), 47.

[3] Ibidem, 48–51.

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and harms and therefore a fair criterion of distribution is necessary, a criterion logically independent from the principle of beneficence. And in his view, there is no way to establish a precise order of precedence in cases of conflict, namely, a mechanical way to combine the two principles without resorting to intuition.[4] Nevertheless, Frankena is convinced that this kind of theory satisfies better than competing proposals the requirement of conformity with our reflexive intuitions.

If Frankena's attitude towards moral pluralism is therefore positive (at least partially), his attitude towards ethical relativism is instead negative. He distinguishes, as is typical of Anglo-Saxon analytical moral philosophy, three forms of relativism, in his opinion all three questionable. (1) A *descriptive* relativism (of an anthropological and sociological nature), for which the *basic* ethical beliefs of different people and societies are different and even conflicting; (2) a *meta-ethical* relativism, for which there is no rational method to establish which of two or more opposed moral systems or codes is the correct one; (3) a *normative* relativism, according to which what is right or obligatory to do for an individual or a society in a given situation is not right or obligatory for another individual or another society in a situation of the same kind.[5]

[4] In this regard, Frankena's precise words are as follows: "I see no way out of this. It does seem to me that the two principles may come into conflict, both at the level of individual action and at that of social policy, and I know of no formula that will always tell us how to solve such conflicts […]. It is tempting to say that the principle of justice always takes precedence over that of beneficence: do justice though the heavens fall. But is a small injustice never to be preferred to a great evil? […] I am forced to conclude that the problem of conflict that faced the pluralistic deontological theories discussed earlier is still with us" (Frankena, *Ethics*, 52–53). The characteristics of Frankena's theory of obligation correspond perfectly to the definition of moral pluralism commonly adopted in today's analytical ethics, for which *moral pluralism* is a model of theory in normative ethics according to which (1) there is a plurality of basic moral principles; (2) these different principles may conflict with one another; (3) there is no strict order of priority for resolving conflicts between them. See, for example, Brad Hooker, "Ross-style Pluralism versus Rule-consequentialism," *Mind* 105, no. 420 (1996): 531–552; Brad Hooker, *Ideal Code, Real World: A Rule-Consequentialist Theory of Morality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 105; Berys Gaut, "Moral Pluralism," *Philosophical Papers* 22, no. 1 (1993): 17–40; Berys Gaut, "Justifying Moral Pluralism," in: *Ethical Intuitionism: Re-evaluations*, ed. Philip Stratton-Lake (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 137–160.

[5] Frankena, *Ethics*, 109.

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In his view, descriptive relativism can be rejected because it "has not been incontrovertibly established".[6] Meta-ethical relativism is unconvincing because there are rational tools to establish the validity of one moral system against another.[7] Normative relativism is unacceptable because it involves the violation of a principle that is firm beyond all doubt, the universalization principle or the principle of universalizability, according to which similar cases must be evaluated equally.[8]

The Good Reasons for Pluralism in Normative Ethics

How should we evaluate Frankena's theses on both pluralism and relativism? On pluralism in normative ethics, I think Frankena is right. I am not sure that moral obligations are ultimately reducible only to beneficence and justice, just two principles, and in fact there are forms of pluralism in normative ethics that refer to more than two principles (many examples can be given, starting from William David Ross).[9] But on the general idea that our obligations cannot be reduced to a single moral axiom capable of regulating all conflicts, I believe that this American philosopher is on the right side.

We could say that this principle could be a Kantian principle of respect for the inherent value or dignity of all individuals, possibly not limited only to human beings or persons, but extended at least to all sentient beings. The view held by defenders of this thesis is that veracity, fidelity, beneficence, justice, gratitude, and so on, are all forms of respect for other individuals (if I do not keep a promise, I fail to respect the one to whom I have made it; if a tell a lie I do not respect the person who listens; if I cause pain I fail to respect the harmed person etc.); and therefore they can be derived from this general principle, which must be our only moral axiom.

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[6] Ibidem.

[7] Ibidem, 109–110.

[8] Ibidem, 109.

[9] William David Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930). William David Ross, *Foundations of Ethics. The Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Aberdeen, 1935–6* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1939).

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However, such a principle, even if perhaps it succeeds in encompassing all obligations, hardly succeeds in resolving all the conflicts that exist between its components. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how respect can resolve all the disputes between the many components that eventually express it (fidelity, veracity, autonomy, beneficence, gratitude, etc.). I do not want deny that it can play an important role, but it is not easy to understand how it helps us to solve a particular case when the two or more conflicting solutions seem to express respect for the person or human being as an end in itself in different forms. In the debate on euthanasia, for example, both contending parties refer to (appeal to) respect for human dignity. No one is convinced of breaking it and accuses the other of violating it.

Therefore, such possible unification is actually more nominal than real, because it does not allow us to resolve conflicts between norms. I think it is neither in the tasks nor in the possibilities of a plausible moral theory to be *complete* in the sense of telling us in all cases which principle takes precedence and which must yield it. Despite all that can be done to improve conflict resolution methodologies, we must point out that some margin of indeterminacy in moral theories is unavoidable, and that is a good thing. Moral theories should not be a handbook of answers to be applied mechanically, without leaving room for autonomy of judgment by the evaluating subject.[10]

A Defense of a Moderate Version of Relativism

Turning to the issue of relativism, I believe it is possible to express greater openness than Frankena, at least regarding descriptive and metaethical relativism, on which I would like to focus my discussion (the problem of normative relativism appears more complex, and I would like to exclude it from this discussion). I think that the *radical* versions of descriptive and metaethical relativism, for which there are many opposing morals *all* equally valid, appear implausible. But this is not true for *moderate* versions of relativism. Moderate versions of relativism are more

[10] I have further analyzed these points in: Francesco Allegri, "Conflicting Values and Moral Pluralism in Normative Ethics", *Kultura i Wartości* 2022, no. 34: 9–26, http://dx.doi.org/10.17951/kw.2022.34.9-26

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likely to be convincing, as well as not appearing dangerous. They are those versions for which, although there is only one correct option on many moral issues, reason can sometimes legitimize conflicting positions as justified. Such a form of relativism, far from constituting a "bogeyman", simply expresses the idea that the correct use of reason does not necessarily lead to a single outcome, but can have a plurality of outlets (without thereby allowing *every* outlet). In other words, if the presence of adequate methodologies prevents all moral codes from being put on the same level in terms of validity, it does not seem to hinder the possibility that on some specific points there may be conflicting judgments or principles that are equally correct, i.e. both rationally justified.

Going into more detail: asking whether relativism is true means asking whether there are moral judgments in actual conflict (anthropological relativism). And, if so, whether they are equally valid (metaethical relativism).

Starting from descriptive relativism, it is important to point out the expression "actual conflict". Frankena is well aware that descriptive relativism "does not say merely that the ethical judgments of different people and societies are different. For this would be true even if people and societies agreed in their basic ethical judgments and differed only in their *derivative* ones. What […] descriptive relativism says is that the *basic* ethical beliefs of different people and societies are different and even conflicting".[11] He provides the following example:

> the fact that in some primitive societies children believe they should put their parents to death before they get old, whereas we do not, does not prove descriptive relativism. These primitive peoples may believe this because they think their parents will be better off in the hereafter if they enter it while still able-bodied; if this is the case, their ethics and ours are alike in that they rest on the precept that children should do the best they can for their parents. The divergence then, would be in factual, rather than in ethical, beliefs.[12]

Another example of the same kind that can be given concerns the mistreatment of non-human animals. The fact that I think it is unjust to mistreat animals and that a seventeenth-century Cartesian found nothing objectionable about it does not yet prove the truth of anthropological-descriptive relativism. Because the

[11] Frankena, *Ethics*, 109.

[12] Ibidem.

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seventeenth-century Cartesian had factual beliefs about the nature of animals that were different from mine (which are those of current cognitive scientists, neurophysiologists, etc.). For instance, as a good follower of Descartes and Malebranche, he supported the thesis that animals from an ontological point of view do not differ from machines, and like the latter they do not have states of consciousness. And it may be that it is only this element of an extramoral nature that determines our differentiation in the specific evaluation; so much so that once the descriptive dilemma has been resolved, me convincing him that animals are conscious or him convincing me that they are not, our quarrel about the morality or otherwise of that act would disappear, both of us sharing the general principle that we should not inflict gratuitous suffering.

Therefore, for descriptive relativism to be true there must be real disagreement on an ethical level. And this is not easy to ascertain. It is not easy to establish whether there are truly conflicting moral positions (namely conflicts at the level of moral principles and not at the level of concrete norms). Information on this matter can only be obtained from the human and social sciences, and opinions are somewhat divided (which allows relativists and their critics to maintain their own positions). What has just been said (the model exemplified), however, finds many confirmations in the careful investigations of contemporary sociologists and anthropologists. There is an extreme variety regarding the concrete rules, but if we go back to the principles that govern them (that command them), we find an equally great uniformity. Is there uniformity on all moral principles? There are certainly many types of behaviour on which there seems to be universal agreement. In every society, for instance, parents have the task of raising and educating their children and the latter in turn are required to be obedient and to reciprocate the attention they receive. Some types of sexual regulation are equally universal, as well as the prohibition on lying in certain circumstances, the awareness that the interests of the individual are subordinated to those of the community, etc.[13] However, there are also some types of behaviour for which the outlined model does not give the expected answers. For example, just with regard to the mistreatment of non-human animals. Various non-European populations (e.g. the Hopi Indian

[13] Already Kluckhohn in the mid-20th century brought his attention to these points. See Clyde Kluckhohn, "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," *Journal of Philosophy* 52, no. 23 (1955): 663–677.

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tribe), despite not having different beliefs than ours regarding the ability of animals to experience pleasure and pain (they are aware of the fact that non-human animals are subjects of experience: animals experience sensations of pain if they are violently beaten or killed), they have no scruples about inflicting gratuitous suffering on them.[14] But there is no need to refer to non-European peoples to find evidence of the existence of genuine ethical conflicts regarding the attitude to be taken towards animals. It is enough to remain within our community and note the different attitudes on the issue of vegetarians or animal rights associations on the one hand and hunters on the other. It cannot legitimately be thought that the latter, like the followers of Descartes in the seventeenth century, are completely unaware of the ability of animals to experience pleasure and pain. They too are aware that at least some animal species have psychological states. Descriptive relativism is therefore true. Maybe to a minimal extent, but it is true (there are only a few basic ethical beliefs in conflict; in many cases the 'difference at the level of concrete rules, uniformity at the level of principles' model works). There are undoubtedly cases of truly ethical conflicts.

But mere descriptive relativism is not decisive on a philosophical level. Philosophers do not so much care if there is disagreement, as if the disagreement cannot be resolved in rational terms. The fact that there are moral evaluations in actual disagreement is mere anthropological relativism. For philosophical relativism, it is not enough that there is disagreement. It is necessary that there is no rational method for resolving conflicts. Just as the fact that one population considers the earth to be flat and another attributes to it an approximately spherical shape is not sufficient to support astronomical relativism, because we believe that the second population is right and the first is wrong (and we believe we have a method to prove it).

Given that there are (albeit to a considerably lower extent than what we usually think) principles or moral codes in real conflict, are they equally valid? Is there a method to establish who is right and who is wrong? And if so, does it work in all cases? Does it resolve all moral disputes? Frankena's answer to these questions is that conflicting moral positions are not equally valid, because there is a rational method for establishing which position is correct. Although he opposes or does

[14] See Richard Booker Brandt, *Ethical Theory. The Problems of Normative and Critical Ethics* (Englewood Cliff, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1959), 102–103.

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not entirely support the thesis according to which moral judgements are reducible without any loss of meaning to empirical judgements, Frankena does not share the positions of the most radical non-cognitivism (well exemplified by emotivists such as Ayer, for whom the notion of validity is banished from ethics).[15] He believes that there is a method of justification in the moral sphere by which to discriminate correct beliefs from incorrect ones. It consists of the fulfilment of a series of clauses. A moral principle is valid if it satisfies all the clauses of the method. In order for us to judge it as justified, a principle must be chosen (approved) assuming the moral point of view, in conditions of calm, freedom, complete information and conceptual clarity on all the facts relevant to the issue at stake, impartiality, etc.[16] Well, for Frankena, once all the conditions are met, it is no longer possible for ethical disagreement to exist between two persons. That is to say, it is not possible to find two persons who are informed about all aspects of a particular moral issue, are lucid, calm, reflective, impartial (i.e. willing to universalize their positions), and yet take opposite positions regarding the moral problem in question. They must necessarily converge, otherwise this means that one of them does not fully satisfy the clauses of the method of justification (either he is not sufficiently informed, or he is not sufficiently lucid and reflective, etc.). And so for him metaethical relativism is false.

But perhaps it is more reasonable to take a more moderate position, well exemplified by another great American moral philosopher, very close to Frankena, Richard. B. Brandt, Frankena's contemporary and colleague in his department. Brandt adopts a method of justifying moral judgments not dissimilar to that of Frankena, but with somewhat different conclusions. According to Brandt, once all the conditions of the method have been met, it is still possible for ethical disagreement to exist between two persons. That is, for Brandt it is possible to find two persons who are informed on all aspects of a particular moral issue,

[15] See Alfred Jules Ayer, *Language, Truth, and Logic* (London: Gollancz, 1936), especially all the sixth chapter ("Critique of Ethics and Theology").

[16] Frankena, *Ethics*, 110–113. The American philosopher thus summarizes his method of justification: "we may say that a basic moral judgment, principle, or code is justified or «true» if it is or will be agreed to by everyone who takes the moral point of view and is clearheaded and logical and knows all that is relevant about himself, mankind, and the universe" (ibidem, 112).

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are lucid, calm, reflective, impartial (i.e. willing to universalize their positions) and yet take opposite positions regarding the moral problem in question.[17]

Brandt is therefore willing to embrace a form of relativism, albeit a moderate one (because he accepts that there is a rational method for establishing which position is right and which is wrong, even if it does not resolve all controversial cases). Moderate, moreover, because Brandt recognizes that there is a series of fundamental issues for the very existence of civil coexistence on which conflicting principles cannot be equally valid. Brandt says that

> some values, or some institutions with their supporting values, are so inevitable, given human nature and the human situation in society as they are, that we can hardly anticipate serious questioning of them by anybody – much less any conflicting "qualified attitudes", that is, conflicting attitudes that are informed (and so on).[18]

So, for Brandt "ethical relativism may be true", but only "in the sense that there are *some* cases of conflicting ethical judgements that are equally valid"; and it would be a mistake

> to take it as a truth with pervasive scope. Relativism as an emphasis is misleading, because it draws our attention away from the central identities, from widespread agreement on the items we care most about. Furthermore, the actual agreement on the central things suggests the possibility that, with better understanding of the facts, the scope of agreement would be much wider.[19]

I think Brandt is right. Both the thesis according to which if we were lucid, rational, impartial, willing to universalize, we would all arrive at the same moral

[17] R. B. Brandt, "Ethical Relativism" (chapter eleven of *Ethical Theory*, 271–294). The main difference (or one of the main differences) in the theory of justification of the two philosophers in question, which has a decisive weight in the opposite implications that are drawn from it, consists in the fact that, while for Frankena a moral principle is justified (it is valid, it is correct, it is acceptable) if it is approved by *everyone*, once they have taken the moral point of view, are informed, willing to universalize etc., for Brandt it is sufficient that it is approved by *any single individual* who correctly applies the clauses of the method (see Frankena, *Ethics*, 112 and Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, 279–280).

[18] Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, 287–288.

[19] Ibidem.

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positions, and the opposite thesis according to which the satisfaction of these requirements is compatible with any normative option, do not appear convincing.

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Streszczenie

Pluralizm i relatywizm w etyce – wychodząc od W. K. Frankeny

Niniejszy artykuł łączy pluralizm i relatywizm w etyce na przykładzie klasycznego badacza XX-wiecznej filozofii moralnej: W. K. Frankeny. W etyce normatywnej Frankena broni perspektywy pluralistycznej, ponieważ w jego teorii obowiązku jest wiele podstawowych zasad moralnych (dokładnie dwie), które mogą ze sobą kolidować i nie ma ścisłego porządku pierwszeństwa w celu rozwiązania konfliktów między nimi. Jego stosunek do relatywizmu etycznego jest natomiast negatywny, ponieważ jego zdaniem wszystkie trzy wersje relatywizmu w sferze moralnej (opisowa, metaetyczna i normatywna) są wątpliwe. Autor wyjaśnia powody wiarygodności modelu pluralistycznego w etyce normatywnej, ale w kwestii relatywizmu wykazuje większą

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otwartość niż Frankena. W szczególności broni umiarkowanej wersji relatywizmu opisowego i metaetycznego, dla którego w pewnych kwestiach mogą istnieć równie uzasadnione sprzeczne oceny moralne. Taka forma relatywizmu, daleka od bycia „straszakiem", wyraża po prostu ideę, że prawidłowe użycie rozumu niekoniecznie prowadzi do jednego wyniku, ale może przynieść wiele rozwiązań (nie dopuszczając tym samym *wszystkich* rozwiązań).

Słowa kluczowe: konflikt ocen moralnych, relatywizm etyczny, pluralizm moralny, etyka normatywna, metaetyka, William K. Frankena, Richard B. Brandt

Zusammenfassung

Pluralismus und Relativismus in der Ethik ausgehend von W. K. Frankena

Dieser Artikel verbindet Pluralismus und Relativismus in der Ethik am Beispiel eines klassischen Forschers der Moralphilosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts: W. K. Frankena. In der normativen Ethik vertritt Frankena eine pluralistische Perspektive, weil es in seiner Pflichttheorie viele moralische Grundprinzipien gibt (genau zwei), die miteinander in Konflikt geraten können, und weil es keine strikte Rangordnung gibt, um Konflikte zwischen ihnen zu lösen. Seine Haltung gegenüber dem ethischen Relativismus ist hingegen negativ, da seiner Meinung nach alle drei Varianten des Relativismus im moralischen Bereich (deskriptiv, metaethisch und normativ) fragwürdig sind. Der Autor erläutert die Gründe für die Plausibilität des pluralistischen Modells in der normativen Ethik, aber in der Frage des Relativismus zeigt er mehr Offenheit als Frankena. Insbesondere verteidigt er eine gemäßigte Version des deskriptiven und metaethischen Relativismus, für den es gleichermaßen legitime, widersprüchliche moralische Urteile zu bestimmten Themen geben kann. Diese Form des Relativismus ist weit davon entfernt, ein „Schreckgespenst" zu sein, sondern drückt lediglich die Idee aus, dass der richtige Gebrauch der Vernunft nicht notwendigerweise zu einem einzigen Ergebnis führt, sondern mehrere Lösungen hervorbringen kann (und somit nicht *alle* Lösungen zulässt).

Schlüsselworte: Konflikt moralischer Urteile, ethischer Relativismus, moralischer Pluralismus, normative Ethik, Metaethik, William K. Frankena, Richard B. Brandt

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