ABSTRACT. In a recent paper Nicholas Sturgeon claims moral explanations constitute one area of disagreement between moral realists and noncognitivists. The correctness of such explanation is consistent with moral realism but not with noncognitivism. Does this difference characterize other anti-realist views? I argue that it does not. Moral relativism is a distinct anti-realist view. And the correctness of moral explanations is consistent with moral relativism.

I. MORAL REALISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM

Nicholas Sturgeon characterizes moral realism as comprising these theses:

... that our moral terms typically refer to real properties; that moral statements typically express propositions capable of truth and falsity; and that our ordinary methods of arriving at moral judgments provide us with at least some approximate knowledge of moral truths. I suspect that, in addition, we ought not to count a view as realist unless it holds that these moral truths are in some interesting sense independent of the subjective indicators—our moral beliefs and moral feelings, as well as moral conventions constituted by coordinated individual intentions—that we take as guides to them.¹

Sturgeon admits, "This last condition is vague, and I can find no consensus in the literature about exactly how to spell it out . . . ."²

I think the statement of this last condition amounts to saying that moral truth is not code-relative. By a moral code I shall mean a general moral point of view that could be spelled out by specifying a set of norms. A person might possess a moral code without being able to do this spelling out. The vast majority of people who have moral codes are in this position. But the specification of the code is always something which in principle could be done.
The possessor of a moral code almost always thinks of the code as possessed by a group to which that person belongs. To meet changing historical conditions, to shift moral principles, or to provide nuance, it is common for an individual to try to get others in the group to change the code. Since I am regarding a code as a set of norms, such a change results in a distinct code.

A norm is a general statement saying how any person ought to act in certain circumstances, e.g., 'For any person P, if a person Q has a serious and urgent need for an amount of money which P can easily afford to give to Q, and Q asks P for the money, and P is in a position to give Q the money, then P ought to do so'. A particular moral judgment, e.g., 'I ought to give Jones five dollars' will be said to agree with a code containing such a norm if the antecedent conditions are satisfied.

If a person's norms contradict each other then that person's code is inconsistent and all moral judgments agree with the code. In this case nothing is true relative to the code. A moral statement is true relative to the code just in case it agrees with the code and the code is consistent.

One philosophical view of moral truth is that the strongest notion of correctness applicable to moral judgments is code-relative: moral truth is code-relative. This is the principle tenet of moral relativism. The moral realist denies this tenet.

II. MORAL EXPLANATIONS

Sturgeon points out that people who have no thoughts whatever about the nature of moral truth make statements like these:

a. Hitler's moral depravity explains why he instigated and oversaw the destruction of millions of persons.

b. Jane believed that what Albert did was wrong because it was wrong. (Albert was observed striking a cat with a stick.)

c. Poverty and injustice explain why the revolution took place in Nicaragua.

d. Children of all ages thrive when treated with decency and humanity.

There is nothing fancy about these statements. They are items of common sense, more or less. It would be astonishing if all such statements were false.

Suppose some such statement is true. Then there is at least one correct moral explanation of some observation or moral belief. Does this have any bearing on which of the two views, moral realism or moral relativism, is correct?

Sturgeon has this to say:
... consider explanations couched in moral terms. A noncognitivist must surely be suspicious of these, and think it pointless to pursue them, for her view is that moral terms fail to refer. But it is open to a moral realist to think, as I do, that many moral explanations are perfectly respectable, and worth exploring and refining.3

I wish to make two points about this passage. First, noncognitivism is not the only alternative to moral realism. Moral relativism is another alternative. A person might accept the view that moral truth is code-relative without accepting any of the theories of meaning concerning moral statements often associated with noncognitivism. In particular, the relativist is not committed to the view that moral terms do not refer. For the relativist the possession of moral depravity, say, is a code-relative matter. That does not entail that the term 'moral depravity' does not refer.

This leads me to my second point. Sturgeon maintains, in so many words, that if moral terms do not refer then no moral explanation is correct. This point, even if true, has no bearing on the issue of which of the two views, moral realism or moral relativism, is correct. For the relativist is not committed to the view that moral terms do not refer.

Back to the main issue. Suppose some moral explanation is correct. Does it follow that relativism is false? If it does then this argument must be sound.

1. There is at least one correct moral explanation.
2. There exist correct explanations in a given area only if truth in that area is system independent.
3. So moral truth is system independent.

III. EXPLANATIONS IN OTHER NORMATIVE AREAS

People give all kinds of normative explanations in addition to moral explanations. They say such things as:

e. Maude left the theater because the movie was rotten.
f. Anita Ekberg's beauty (in part) explains why she made a lot of money as an actress.
g. John got a poor mark on his essay because it was poorly written.

I think it is clear that at least in some of these areas truth is relative to sets of standards. A native male of Sweden who asserts that Anita Ekberg was beautiful, and a native male of Guadalcanal who denies that she was, might each be correct in their
judgments. The judgments of each might agree with the different sets of standards they respectively hold.

Are any such explanations correct? There is as much credibility to the view that some explanations in these areas are correct as there is to the view that there are correct moral explanations.

Consequently, if the argument 1-3 is sound then analogous arguments ought to prove that truth in these other areas is system-independent. But they clearly do not do that. Thus, the argument 1-3 is not sound. Since the argument is valid, one of the two premises, 1 or 2, is false.

Common sense suggests that premise 1 is true. We make statements like a-d as well as e-g all the time in the course of ordinary conversation. So it looks as if premise 2 is false.

IV. THE RELATIVIST'S ACCOUNT OF CORRECT MORAL EXPLANATIONS

How can explanations in an area be correct if truth in that area is not system-independent? The relativist has an answer to this. Consider:

Maude left the theater because the movie was rotten.

The truth of this might consist in these conditions:

Maude has a consistent set of standards according to which the movie she was watching was rotten; this caused her to leave the theater.

The relativist is not committed to saying that these two sentences are synonymous. The claim is not that the first sentence is elliptical, that its full meaning is brought out by the second sentence. The relativist's claim is that the second claim gives the truth conditions of the first sentence.

This account does need to be complicated by two factors.

First, the explanations are expressed by indexical sentences. Like all indexical sentences their truth conditions have to be relativized to persons and times. Thus, 'The book is red' is true relative to person p and time t if and only if the book demonstrated by p at t is red at t. Sentences a-g have to be treated similarly.

Second, and more important, each of the explanations has a normative component. For example,

Hitler was morally depraved

is a logical consequence of
Hitler's moral depravity explains why he instigated and oversaw the destruction of millions of persons.

For the relativist who conceives moral truth to be code-relative, the truth conditions of the first sentence will be as follows:

'Hitler was morally depraved' is true relative to person p and time t if and only if Hitler possessed attributes which added up to moral depravity according to the consistent moral code p has at t.

This has to be built into the relativist's account of the truth conditions of the second sentence. Accordingly,

'Hitler's moral depravity explains why he instigated and oversaw the destruction of millions of persons' is true relative to person p and time t if and only if (i) Hitler possessed attributes which added up to moral depravity according to the consistent moral code p has at t, and (ii) possessing these attributes caused Hitler to instigate and oversee the destruction of millions of persons.

Similar accounts can be given to the other normative explanations.

V. A SECOND ARGUMENT AGAINST RELATIVISM

At this point the realist might counter the relativist's moves with this argument:

4. There is at least one moral explanation which is correct in a system-independent way.

5. There exist explanations in a given area which are correct in a system-independent way only if truth in that area is system-independent.

6. So truth in the area of morality is system-independent: moral truth is not code-relative.

The relativist will have to agree with the second premise of this argument. For if an explanation is correct in a system-independent way both components, the explanans and explanandum, must be similarly correct. For example, if 'Hitler's moral depravity explains why he instigated and oversaw the destruction of millions of persons' is system-independently correct, so must be 'Hitler was morally depraved'.

But the first premise, 4, is a question begging assumption against the relativist. To simply assume, for example, that the explanation about Hitler is system-independently correct is to assume that 'Hitler was morally depraved' is system-inde-
pendently correct. Against this the relativist contends that moral truth is code-relative. The argument 4-6 does not prove that relativism is wrong. It assumes this in the first premise, 4.

VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The moral relativist can agree with the moral realist and common sense that many normative explanations, including moral explanations, are correct. The relativist and realist disagree about the nature of this correctness. The one says this correctness is code relative; the other denies that it is. An appeal to the common sense judgments we make about these explanations is no help at all in determining which of the two philosophical positions is correct. Common sense is neutral with respect to the nature of both the correctness of ordinary moral explanations as well as the correctness of ordinary moral judgments.  

ENDNOTES


2 Ibid., 117.

3 Ibid., 122.

4 I thank a referee and Robert Turnbull for helpful comments.