This paper is about everyone’s favorite controversial topic: moral relativism. However, I won’t be arguing for or against the proposition that moral values are objective; on this topic I shall remain decidedly—and perhaps frustratingly—neutral. What I will be discussing is a related topic to conventional moral relativism debates: the possibility that moral justification, not just moral facts, could be relative to particular communities. Though philosophers have noted and discussed this possibility (most notably the non-cognitivists, as well as relativists like Gilbert Harman and David Wong), contemporary public political debate about moral issues seems to fail to notice that justificatory standards can even differ amongst communities, nonetheless potentially be truly relative in the sense of there being no objective set of standards that ought to be used to evaluate moral claims.

In this paper, I’ll be (re)introducing this notion to applied moral debates. In particular, I’ll explain why understanding the idea of differing justificatory standards can shed light on why moral (and even scientific!) disagreements between persons such as fundamentalist Christians and non-religious academics seem so entrenched and intractable. I’ll end with an explication of the dangers of relativism (as all such papers about relativism must do) and why this particular form of moral relativism is perhaps the most damning of them all to take seriously.

About justification
Justification is important for all knowledge, not just moral knowledge; in fact, it is often considered one of the three criteria that makes some belief a piece of knowledge. For example, if I believe that I have hands, in order for that belief to be knowledge it first must be a belief; it must be true (I have to actually have hands in order for me to know that I do); and that true belief must be a justified one. For example, I don’t actually know I have hands if I merely guessed that I did and that turned out to be right, just as you didn’t know that the coin would come up heads even if you correctly called it. Some ultra-skeptical philosophers say I can’t ever have justification for things like beliefs about my hands, since I have no evidence to state that I’m not being continually deceived about my existence, Matrix-style. Most people, though, admit that we don’t need that much evidence to be merely justified in stating that we have hands, even if they also believe we can’t ever actually know for sure that we actually have them.

Justification is a matter of having reasons for our beliefs. If I claim that it is true that I have hands, or that it’s daytime, or that I was the one that wrote this paper and not someone at www.fasttermpapers.com, I have to be able to offer evidence for my claim. The average person (not our ultra-skeptic) would accept evidence like “I can see them”, “I can manipulate objects easily”, “I can touch them”, and so on for the truth of my existence-of-my-hands claims. Furthermore, once we’ve all established that I have normal and functioning hands, we would be justified in inferring other propositions, like “Kathryn has fingers”, or “Kathryn can’t walk through walls” (since at the very least my hands would get in the way!).

This is where one can start to see where justification can become relative. If I don’t accept that hands have fingers, then “Kathryn has fingers” does not follow from “Kathryn has hands”. It is not an appropriate move to make in an argument, given my conceptual commitment that “hands do not have fingers”. However, in the moral case, things become even trickier. In the hands case you and I will disagree on the proposition that “Kathryn has fingers” because each of us believes different things: you believe that hands have fingers, and I do not. The disagreement
is, at least in principle, resolvable: if one of us convinces the other that hands really do or do not have fingers on them, then the disagreement disappears. The disagreement had to do with justification only insofar as justification is dependent on our individual beliefs. However, as certain philosophers have pointed out, it is possible that two persons can be familiar with the same evidence, and sometimes even both believe that it is true, and disagree on moral claims. For example, I might support same-sex marriage and a friend might oppose it. The disagreement might be due to the fact that we may disagree over whether or not being brought up in a same-sex household harms children. It is also possible that we disagree on the relevance of that information: I may think that the fact that it doesn’t harm children is in support of my view, and she may think it is irrelevant, and that biblical considerations are more important. Even more oddly, we could both agree on all the evidence and its relevance and still disagree: she could think that the evidence justifies her conclusion and I think it justifies mine.

This is an odd situation to consider, and it has led some to say that when we make moral claims we aren’t talking about facts at all, but instead are talking about our attitudes or emotions, since the disagreement wouldn’t happen if our moral claims were subject to the same kind of justificatory standards as empirical beliefs are (like our beliefs about hands). I don’t think it’s necessary to draw that particular conclusion about our moral claims, but I think the point about justification is correct. Our moral beliefs may be justified in a different way than we justify empirical beliefs—we may not even justify our empirical beliefs in the rigorous rational way that some philosophers think we do. If it’s possible that moral disagreement is due to differences in justification between persons—or as these arguments are typically constructed, differences in justification between communities—then we can see why we’d have to address the question of moral justificatory relativism. Typically we try to resolve disputes about justifying beliefs for moral claims or about the moral claims themselves by meeting in a single “arena of discourse”, if you will, to argue it out and see who comes out more justified at the end. However, if these sets of standards by which we judge when something is justified, what counts as evidence, what follows from what, what’s a valid move to make, who is credible and so on, can radically differ between communities, then we have a problem.

An example from the science side of things

This problem is precisely why certain atheist or scientific figureheads sometimes refuse to debate proponents of creationism—recently Richard Dawkins declined to debate Stephen C. Meyer, founder of the Discovery Institute, a conservative think tank which created the “Teach the Controversy Campaign” which promotes teaching intelligent design in public school science classes. Creationists often take these refusals as a sign that scientists are somehow scared or that their claims are no match for the creationists’ arguments. However, the refusal is more often based in the fact that the scientists realize that there is no real common ground for debate between the two sides when both are deeply committed to different standards for arguing.

In effect, when a scientist and a creationist hold a debate, they are not having an argument with each other but instead are effectively arguing to two separate communities. The creationist may state, “My father ain’t no monkey”; the scientist may patiently respond that the theory of evolution is a theory of very, very gradual change in proportion of traits in populations of living things, not of radical leaps in phenotype in a single individual in a single generation. However, the scientist’s response misses that the creationist is not making an empirical claim about the classificatory status of his father. The creationist instead is referring to a system of

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1 For example, Charles Stevenson.
claims which taken as a whole are a denial of the materialistic foundations of science. When the creationist says that his father is no monkey, he is claiming that human nature is not the same as the nature of animals. It is a metaphysical commitment to the non-material nature of humans that infects not just what he believes to be facts about the origin of man or the creation of the universe, but also what he will accept as evidence against his own claims and how he reasons for them. Since the creationist does not accept the methodology of science and rejects the epistemic authority of empiricism, he will not generally try to refute evidence from evolutionary biology or geophysics unless he is “playing along”, so to speak, in a scientific realm. Instead, the creationist will make appeals to experience and to religious theory shared in his community, things rejected by those within the scientific community as appropriate evidence.

It is easy to argue that the fundamentalists’ reliance on such evidence to justify claims about creationism or homosexuality is simply a tool to get the most persons to believe them. After all, critical thinking is not often explicitly taught in public education, and many Americans are not very well versed in the specific standards for evidence held by theological scholars, philosophers, or those in the various scientific fields. Arguments by creationists that were explicitly formed in order to confuse the public would seem to be a good enough plan, if it were not for the fact that appeals to emotion and to everyday thought are often more compelling than any attempt at rational argument. Although think tanks like the Discovery Institute often have strategic plans for convincing the public to believe their take on certain issues, and these plans are often explicitly based on using rhetoric rather than argumentative rigor, it is absurd and disingenuous to suppose that Christian fundamentalists use these tactics merely for the purposes of propaganda or control. Though politicians and “higher-ups” may be able to manipulate their language for the greatest effect on the populace, fundamentalists at some level genuinely believe that “it makes me feel disgusted” is evidence for the moral wrongness of homosexuality; that “the sunset is beautiful” is evidence for the creation of the universe by some higher being. After all, the point of argument is to get others to believe what one believes, and why would a fundamentalist argue that “same-sex marriage will destroy the traditional family” unless he or she thought it was true? Unless one is a massive conspiracy theorist, we must extend the same charity to the average fundamentalist’s arguments: why offer “it’s in the bible” as evidence unless one thought it really justified one’s claim?

**Why the moral case is more problematic than the scientific case**

Scientists are committed to a background of theories and a system of justification which is ultimately defined by what the current scientific community accepts as evidence. This is why one will often hear fundamentalists claim that science is a “religion” or that scientists are accepting things based on “faith”. Scientists’ claims are justified in the same way as fundamentalists’ claims are; they are just as rooted in a community of persons who argue with one another. However, in the case of empirical claims about the Earth’s age, for example, there is some grounding since scientists have observational data. Even if one wants to go to the relativist extreme and claim that observational data by itself has no priority over any other data—including religious belief—in justifying other claims, most persons, including extreme Christian fundamentalists, accept observation as a valid source of information.

The moral case is a problem here because it is first unclear that there is even any observational data: there are no instruments by which we can measure the “goodness units” of some action. We can’t observe whether or not same-sex sexual relations are sinful in the same

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2 See the strategy document, “the Wedge”: http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.pdf
way we can collect data about sexual preferences. We cannot even appeal to the authority of observational data in the moral case. Though in some sense, when we look at someone committing an immoral act, such as lighting a cat on fire, we “see” or “observe” that it is immoral, the way in which we do this is clearly different from the way that we are observing that the cat is on fire. I have no way to provide a good answer as to what precisely the difference is (if I did, I would have solved several thousand years’ worth of problems in ethics), but it seems apparent that moral cases are subject to problems of relativism that the empirical ones may not have.

Why justificatory relativism is so dangerous
Justificatory relativism is dangerous not just because of the standard reasons moral relativism is dangerous, or even because it poses apparent dangers to scientific discourse. It is particularly dangerous because it means that if moral justificatory relativism is actually true, meaning that there is no single correct means of determining what evidence is appropriate, what types of claims are justified, and what one can rationally infer from some other claim, it means that there is no way to compare moral systems at all, not even on a pragmatic basis, since in order to do so one would have to argue from within some justificatory framework. Justificatory relativism threatens to undermine anything that needs to be justified, which, if you remember correctly, is essentially all of human knowledge. And since there is no way to “justify the justifying”, if you will, since there is no right way to do the process, it seems like nothing at all can be true in any meaningful sense. It even seems odd to say that something is “true for me and false for you” since we both have to justify why that something is true or false for ourselves, and we cannot even be confident that we are doing that appropriately.

This is why, understandably, I haven’t endorsed justificatory relativism in this paper. However, I hope that an understanding of the role of justification in moral arguments has shed some understanding on why certain moral claims just won’t die: it is not because we don’t understand what claims are being made, but how.