Pluralism in Practice

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Imagine an Aristotelian giving money away to a poor person. He judges his own action to be magnanimous. If a Confucian were to observe this action, though, he might conclude that the Aristotelian had violated socio-ethical norms, or $li$. Assuming that other Confucians agreed, the Aristotelian’s conduct could be held up as a negative example to be used in teaching young Confucians. In and of itself, however, the Confucian’s judgment would give the Aristotelian no reason to change his conduct, since “lacking in $li$” is not a category in the language by which he judges conduct. This begins to suggest that Aristotelians and Confucians may assess behavior, intentions, and character traits in different terms. I will summarize this type of difference by saying that different cultures can have different ethical systems.

Western ethical philosophers have tended to downplay or ignore these differences by basing their theorizing almost exclusively on Western ethics (which I call morality). Twentieth-century critics, cognizant of the depth and persistence of differences between ethical systems, have challenged the idea that our understanding of ethics should be based only on morality. Morality seems clearly to be just one ethical schema among many, one instance of a more general phenomenon. While the critics have not denied that it is worthwhile to try to better understand morality, they have insisted that any theory seeking to explain the nature of ethical value itself must be more broadly based. Many of these same critics
have gone on to argue that differences between ethical systems can be irreducible. They reject Kant’s vision of one and only one set of ethical norms applicable to all rational beings in favor of a plurality of ethical systems. I label this position ethical pluralism.

One early theorist who supported ethical pluralism was Ruth Benedict. In her pioneering Patterns of Culture, she wrote that different cultures travel along “different roads in pursuit of different ends, and these ends and these means in one society cannot be judged in terms of those of another society, because they are incommensurable.” Benedict’s invocation of incommensurability to justify ethical pluralism has been followed by many subsequent writers and criticized by many others. Despite the attention that it has received, though, incommensurability remains an obscure concept. It holds out the promise of explaining why ethical systems appear to be persistently, even irreducibly plural, but it is beset with problems of all kinds. In this essay, I begin by considering two particularly vexing problems and the solutions to them that one advocate of incommensurability, Alasdair MacIntyre, has proposed. In each case, I argue that MacIntyre’s solutions are inadequate. In the balance of the essay, I develop an alternative approach to incommensurability that avoids the difficulties that plagued MacIntyre and yet delivers on the idea’s promise to ground ethical pluralism.

Problems with Incommensurability: Translation and Davidson’s Challenge
It is natural for incommensurability to be understood in terms of an inability to translate between two languages. In “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues,” MacIntyre stresses numerous difficulties with translation, among them the fact that Aristotle’s Greek has no word for the Chinese term *li*. *Li*’s original meaning was something like holy rite, and was extended by Confucian thinkers into a quite general norm for proper action. Neither Greek words that were used for religious rituals, nor those used for customs, come close to matching the meaning of *li*. MacIntyre concludes that *li* cannot be translated into Greek, and this is one piece of evidence that the two languages are incommensurable.

As MacIntyre realizes, though, two different problems can arise for theorists who link their notions of incommensurability too closely to translation. One is that it would seem to rule out the possibility that two speakers of the same language might nonetheless adhere to two different, incommensurable conceptual schemes. The other problem is that according to an argument widely attributed to Donald Davidson, the idea that two languages can fail to be inter-translatable—and are thus incommensurable—is actually unintelligible.

MacIntyre seeks to avoid these pitfalls by putting some distance between incommensurability and translation. He insists, for instance, that although Galileo and his Aristotelian contemporaries spoke the same language, the conceptual schemes expressed by their different physical theories were incommensurable. He is never very clear, though, just what conceptual schemes are, and we are left wondering why translation between incommensurable schemes is sometimes
possible and sometimes not. I'll propose a precise and consistent relation between schemes and languages in Part II, and argue that there is actually a sense in which Galileo’s language cannot be translated into the Aristotelians’.

MacIntyre has a more sustained and novel response to the Davidsonian argument.\(^5\) MacIntyre believes that the argument has two premises: (1) all we have to do to assure understanding of another culture’s point of view is to translate their language, and (2) nothing that we can identify as a language could resist translation. MacIntyre contends that these premises rest upon:

- a way of translating texts from alien and different cultures, and of responding to them, which is central to the cosmopolitan cultures of those modern internationalized languages-in-use, such as contemporary Trans-Atlantic and Trans-Pacific English, one of whose central features is that utterance in them presupposes only the most minimal of shared beliefs. These are languages, so far as is possible, for anyone at all to use, for those who are equally at home everywhere and therefore nowhere.\(^6\)

MacIntyre’s idea, which he develops more fully elsewhere, is that certain modern languages that are spoken around the world have been, in a sense, neutered: in order to be usable by people from widely-different cultural backgrounds, these languages have lost some important characteristics that all local languages once had.\(^7\) The chief features that he says internationalized languages have lost are: first, naming systems that presuppose certain beliefs on the part of the language’s speakers, and second, a tight relationship between canonical texts expressing “strong, substantive criteria of truth and rationality” and acceptable utterances.\(^8\) What we are left with are languages in which “the relationship of a
name to what is named will have to be specifiable...independently of any particular scheme of identification embodying the beliefs of some particular community,” and in which formerly canonical texts now serve only as sources for literary allusions, not as standards of truth.9

How does MacIntyre think that the putative transition from local to internationalized languages might answer Davidson’s challenge? Since the new languages have no tight connections to particular sets of beliefs, MacIntyre reasons, the sorts of obstacles that would stand in the way of translating from Aristotle's Greek to Confucius's Chinese, for example, are gone. The plausibility of Davidson's contention that we can translate anything that we can identify as a language into our own language, that is, rests on taking our own language to be one of these neutered modern languages. But once Aristotle and Confucius have been translated into English, they have lost their essential ties to particular beliefs that helped to define their standpoints. Once rendered into English, MacIntyre concludes, they are no longer genuine Confucianism nor genuine Aristotelianism, but merely new menu items for the “modern individualism of aestheticized personal choice.”10 Nothing has been done, in other words, to dissolve the incommensurability between the actual conceptual schemes of Confucianism and Aristotelianism.

I am dissatisfied with MacIntyre’s response to Davidson for two reasons. First, MacIntyre has overstated the extent to which modern languages have been neutered. It seems true that the use of names may have changed somewhat along the lines he describes,11 but the blanket claim that we no longer have canonical texts is surely false, especially in ethics. Many speakers of internationalized English, by no
means limited to so-called fundamentalists, still look to the Bible, for instance, as expressing “strong, substantive criteria” of right and wrong. Many others look to more recent classics, like the Constitution. Admittedly, appeal to the Bible or the Constitution does not always settle disputes. For one thing, contemporary America is composed of many overlapping communities with commitments to different sets of canonical texts. It is also true that canonical texts must be interpreted, and that they therefore supply standards of right and wrong only together with the styles of reasoning and traditions of interpretation that have grown up around them. But in this we are no different from our predecessors of any age: texts are never self-interpreting.12

Second, MacIntyre’s whole discussion of internationalized languages seems to me to misunderstand the nature of Davidson’s argument. The essence of MacIntyre’s response to Davidson, after all, is that although it appears that Confucian terms can be translated into English, this is in fact only a watered-down kind of quasi-translation. This response would only be harmful to Davidson, though, if Davidson’s argument had used our apparent ability to translate Confucian Chinese into English as evidence for his conclusion. As we will see in more detail in Part II, Davidson’s argument does not depend on any specific instances of successful translation, but instead relies on very general features of languages which apply equally to modern and to pre-modern languages. Davidson could easily accept MacIntyre’s claim that current translations from Chinese into English are mere quasi-translations, in fact, because Davidson recognizes that it may be necessary to enrich or revise our language before true translation will be possible. I think we can
conclude that MacIntyre has not succeeded in answering the questions revolving around the idea of translation that immediately confront a defender of incommensurability.

**Comparison and Commensuration**

Historical encounters between cultures with very different ethical systems have not always ended with puzzled mutual incomprehension, as my discussion of incommensurability to this point might have suggested. Some early twentieth-century Chinese intellectuals, for instance, sought to incorporate Western insights into Chinese ethics, and some even turned away from their Confucian upbringings to advocate Western ideologies like anarchism, liberalism, or Marxism. Today some Americans have rejected the teachings of their own traditions to embrace the ethico-religious outlook of Buddhism or Daoism. If the different ethical systems in these examples are or were incommensurable, and if the move from one to another is at least upon occasion more than an “irrational” conversion, then an incommensurability theorist has another challenge to meet: how can two incommensurable systems come to be compared, and one chosen over the other?

MacIntyre’s answer comes in several steps. He points out that even when two conceptual schemes are mutually incomprehensible, it still should be possible for an adherent of one to learn the other from the ground up. Having thus acquired a “second first language,” both standpoints should now be intelligible to such a person. Each of the two standpoints, though, will only be intelligible in its own
terms. A properly educated Greek-Chinese bilingual, for example, would be able to converse with Greek-speaking Aristotelians about whether some action was magnanimous, and also to discuss the fine points of li with Chinese-speaking Confucians. MacIntyre insists, however, that nothing has changed about the relationship between the two languages/conceptual schemes that would allow this bilingual to translate sentences from one to the other.  

MacIntyre adds, though, that such a bilingual “will be able to understand what would have to be involved by way of an extension or enrichment of their own first language-in-use if it were to be able to accommodate a representation of the other.” On the face of it, this claim seems plausible; surely a bilingual would be in the best possible position to see where and how the two languages/conceptual schemes were incompatible, and how one would have to be changed in order to accommodate the other? I’ll suggest in a moment that this picture is actually much too simple, but for the moment let’s follow MacIntyre through to the end of his argument.

He next supposes that the needed enrichment has been carried out, and that each of the two “incompatible and incommensurable bodies of theory and practice has passed beyond the initial stage of partial incomprehension and partial misrepresentation of the other, by so enriching its linguistic and conceptual resources that it is able to provide an accurate representation of the other.” The final stage of the process occurs when adherents of one or the other of the rival traditions come to recognize the other tradition as superior, because (1) they see that their own tradition has failed by its own standards, and (2) the other tradition
has the resources to explain the failure in considerable detail—"why it succeeded and why it failed at just the points and in just the ways" that it did. Rational choice of one theory over the other is thus possible, even though the two theories have remained, MacIntyre insists, incommensurable throughout.

The key step in the process occurs when the bodies of theory are enriched in such a way that, despite the fact that they are still mutually incommensurable, each can accurately represent the other in its language. MacIntyre never explains just what it takes to be able to accurately represent something. Given his repeated mention of "enrichment," I gather that he is convinced that such a representation takes place by adding new words to the old language. His idea seems to be that the Aristotelians, having mastered Confucian Chinese as a second first language, could introduce a whole series of new terms into their Greek, each corresponding in meaning and reference to problematic (from the perspective of an Aristotelian moralist) Confucian notions. The combination of existing Greek grammar and these new terms might be thought to enable accurate representation of Confucian discourse in Aristotelian Greek.

Suppose it is possible, therefore, for a bilingual Greek-Chinese speaker to introduce all the specialized terms of Confucian ethics into Greek. This would be something like an English speaker’s anglicizing foreign words, as when déja vu becomes deja vu, except that our bilingual could only communicate with other bilinguals or with Greek speakers who had learned the relevant concepts from the ground up, as a new part of Greek. Would such a process allow for comparison between the two theories despite the fact that they are still incommensurable?
Certain kinds of comparison were always possible. If an Aristotelian and a Confucian had observed someone performing an action, we could have asked them for their respective assessments. We might learn that Confucians and Aristotelians don’t always approve of the same actions. Each could give us reasons, furthermore, for their assessment, although these reasons would of course be couched in their own theoretical languages. The question is, does the fact that both theories can come to be “accurately represented” in one and the same language allow for some new type of comparison that makes rational choice between the theories possible?

I can’t see how it would. If English and Chinese are incommensurable, why would removing the italics from Chinese words affect our ability to choose between a theory centered on li (instead of li) and a theory centered on virtue and the mean (or moral obligation or human rights)? Even though both theories are now expressed in the same language, they still are two separate and incommensurable theories, each with its own, distinctive concerns. If anyone is tempted to answer “now that they’re part of the same language, we can try to find a new theory that contains versions of both sets of concepts—a theory that combines a respect for li with protection for individual human rights, for example,” I would agree wholeheartedly, but point out that you’re not comparing the old theories at all, but rather constructing a new theory with new and somewhat different concepts (even if you still label them “li” and “human rights”). It also is true that if someone finds that an ethical theory has failed by its own standards, he or she might look for alternatives, and stick with one that didn’t seem to have the same internal inconsistencies as the first. This might be “rational choice,” but it is not obviously
“comparison” of the two theories. MacIntyre is right to see that internal criticism and language-enrichment are important parts of cross-cultural comparison, but his conception of the constraints on and the effects of linguistic change is much too simple. I’ll explain what goes on in actual cross-cultural comparison near the end of Part II.

A Different Picture: Translation, Languages and Schemes

Ethical language, like all language, can be viewed from a number of different perspectives. We can consider the ends it can be made to serve, the norms that constrain its proper use, or the concepts it can express.\(^20\) We can think of it as growing and changing through time, or as an abstract system of relationships at a particular point in time. The picture of incommensurability that I will sketch in this section draws on all these perspectives. In order to show how these different aspects of language relate to one another, I initially need to distinguish three concepts: \textit{language-in-use, conceptual scheme, and discourse}.

\textit{Language-in-use} is language viewed as a social practice engaged in by groups of people.\(^21\) English, which has been spoken and written by certain groups for hundreds of years, is one example. Like many complex social practices, language-in-use is a difficult concept to define precisely. Languages-in-use are not individuated by particular sets of structural characteristics. It is evident that the vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation of English, for example, have changed over time without the language ceasing to be English. Social perception is one useful criterion
of identity: what do people count as instances of the same language? Different languages-in-use are not mutually intelligible, but only when applied in highly artificial conditions can we use mutual intelligibility to individuate languages-in-use. It is impossible, for instance, to put Confucius and Aristotle together in a room and test to see if they understand one another, since they have both been dead for more than two thousand years. Even when we are able to test two people, if they only partially understand one another, it remains ambiguous whether they speak the same language-in-use and we would have to fall back on social perception.

A very different perspective on language is that afforded by the conceptual scheme, or simply scheme. Schemes are abstractions: snapshots of all the things that can be said in a language at a given point in time. A scheme is expressed by a language-in-use, which means that the scheme gives an accounting of all the sentences that are “up for grabs as true or false” in a particular language at a particular time. A scheme does not, in other words, primarily tell me what’s true (for instance, that dogs bark); it tells me instead that my language contains the concepts dog and bark, and that I can say, among many other things, both “Dogs bark” and “Dogs don’t bark.”

The conceptual scheme stresses the formal, systematic character of language. The discourse, in contrast, focuses our attention on the concrete purposes to which languages-in-use are put. A discourse is a particular arena of language use. Examples are political discourse, ethical or moral discourse, religious discourse, aesthetic discourse, scientific discourse, and biological discourse. Some discourses, as this list makes evident, are sub-sets of others. In each case, language use is combined with
other activities in the pursuit of one or more goals. These goals, along with the goals of higher-level discourses and the standards recognized within the relevant discourses, constrain what is said and otherwise done within any given discourse.

I will elaborate on different facets of each of these three perspectives on language as I proceed through this section and the next. Before doing that, though, I need to introduce one final set of terms: *incommensurable* and *incommensurate*. Instead of making *incommensurable* into a vague, all-purpose term, applicable to languages, words, and conceptual scheme alike, I strive for more precision by separating out two notions. I will say that two languages-in-use are *incommensurate* if and only if concepts expressible in one cannot be expressed, at a particular point in time, in the other. Two conceptual schemes, in contrast, are *incommensurable* if and only if concepts expressible by one cannot be expressed in the other. The difference between the two notions turns on the fact that languages-in-use, being dynamic social practices, can change without losing their identity, while conceptual schemes, being momentary abstractions, cannot change without becoming new conceptual schemes. Two languages-in-use can be incommensurate at one time and not at another, but if two schemes are incommensurable they are always incommensurable. Whenever the conceptual schemes expressed by two different languages-in-use are incommensurable, the languages-in-use are incommensurate. Two incommensurate languages-in-use can become commensurate, therefore, only if the scheme expressed by one or both of the languages changes.

One final complication of my picture is prompted by situations like that faced, according to MacIntyre, by Galileo and his Aristotelian rivals: two
incommensurable schemes within one and the same language-in-use. The same situation results, I said above, from an attempt to add Confucian ethical terminology to Aristotelian Greek. The explanation of this possibility lies in seeing that a fragment of a given language-in-use corresponds to each discourse in which speakers of the language engage. Corresponding to culinary discourse, for instance, are all the terms—both common and specialized—that are used in the buying, selling, cooking, and consuming of food. It should be apparent that the contents of various language fragments can overlap, or even be subsets of larger fragments. As long as a particular discourse is fairly isolated, one language-in-use might contain two incommensurate fragments, each corresponding to that discourse. In such a situation there would be no single conceptual scheme expressed by the entire language-in-use; instead there would be two, largely overlapping schemes. The discourse in question must be isolated, in the sense that its terminology not permeate the language, because if the incommensurateness were more widespread, the mutual unintelligibility that would likely result between the two sets of speakers would suggest that what had been one language-in-use has now become two.

It should now be possible to clear up the relationship between translation and incommensurability. Confucian terms like “li” cannot be rendered in Aristotle’s Greek because the concepts for which they stand are inexpressible in Aristotle’s Greek as it stands: as MacIntyre points out, none of the terms that Aristotle would have had at his disposal, singly or in combination, can capture the same meaning. How does MacIntyre know this? Ideally because he has learned both languages as what he calls second first languages, though in actuality MacIntyre is relying on the
work of specialists for his information about Confucianism. Based on his understandings of the two languages/conceptual schemes, there is no way to express the content of a Chinese sentence containing “li,” among other terms, with a corresponding Greek sentence.²⁴

MacIntyre does say quite a lot in English, of course, about both the Confucian and the Aristotelian ethical systems. Does this mean that Confucian Chinese and Aristotelian Greek are at least commensurate with English, even if they are not commensurate with each other? If not, how could MacIntyre tell us so much about them in English? I believe, though I will not argue for it now, that neither Confucian Chinese nor Aristotelian Greek is commensurate with English. The answer to the apparent puzzle that results lies in seeing that MacIntyre is not, in fact, writing only in English. He uses numerous romanized terms like ren and li, psyche and telos. He uses these words not simply for effect, but because he believes he could not express the proper relation between the relevant Greek concepts or Chinese concepts any other way (short of writing entirely in Greek or Chinese). Although most of the words and the whole grammatical structure of the language in which he writes belong to English, that is, he is not writing any English familiar to his audience, but rather endeavoring to teach them the Confucian and Greek ethical systems in hybrid languages, English-Greek and English-Chinese.

I have already explained why simply dumping a whole set of new words into Greek, each corresponding to a problematic Chinese term, will not allow us to overcome the incommensurability between the two conceptual schemes, but merely shifts it to an incommensurateness between two competing fragments of Greek.
This does not mean, however, that incommensurateness is a permanent relation. It can be overcome so long as speakers of one or the other of the incommensurate languages-in-use are willing to revise their languages. If we reinterpret one of Thomas Kuhn’s famous examples of scientific incommensurability to mesh with the picture I am developing, we would conclude that the scientific fragment of Joseph Priestly’s language was incommensurate with Lavoisier’s. English sentences concerned with phlogiston and other related terms could not be expressed—were not candidates for truth or falsity—in Lavoisier’s French. English natural philosophers who came to speak of oxygen and the like in lieu of phlogiston had revised their language-in-use, making it commensurate with Lavoisier’s. If Aristotelians, Confucians, or both were willing to make revisions in a similar spirit, then their ethical languages might become commensurate.

What, then, of Davidson’s argument that translation is always possible? Davidson essentially believes that a language’s sentences can always be translated into sentences with the same propositional content in any other sufficiently rich language, and furthermore that there are no limits, at least in principle, on how languages can be enriched or revised. I will refer to this idea as the Accessibility of Content Principle, which can be summarized as:

Any sentence in a language L is in principle translatable into a sentence with the same propositional content in any language L’.

The Principle says, in essence: yes, two languages can be incommensurate, but that has little theoretical significance, since this incommensurateness can always be overcome in principle.
We should first note that MacIntyre, like some others who have turned this argument to their own purposes, ignores the extent to which Davidson (often only implicitly, I admit) acknowledges that real change may be necessary for one language to be able to translate another. Be that as it may, MacIntyre is right that Davidson has long been perceived as no friend of incommensurability. Davidson has written that incommensurabilism “is a heady and exotic doctrine, or would be if we could make good sense of it. The trouble is, as so often in philosophy, it is hard to improve intelligibility while retaining the excitement.”

In approaching incommensurability, I have decided to strive for intelligibility at the risk of losing some of the excitement. By shifting my focus from incommensurable languages to incommensurate ones, I have removed any incompatibility between my theory and the Accessibility of Content Principle. As far as I can tell, the Principle will be true for at least the vast majority of cases, including every case that we humans have encountered so far. The Principle might have exceptions, for instance if we discover a species with which we can communicate about many topics, but which has a hard-wired inability to conceive of certain other things that we talk about. At least for the time being, this sort of exception has no bearing on relations between the ethical languages with which we are concerned, and thus no current bearing on ethical pluralism. For the purposes of this essay, therefore, I will treat the Principle as true.

Discourses and their Constraints
Davidson would say that by granting that two languages can never be incommensurable, I have drained the excitement out of the idea. I believe he would be wrong. The key to seeing that incommensurateness remains important despite the Principle lies in unpacking the Principle’s *in principle* proviso. The most common explication of this proviso is that practical concerns like insufficient time, ingenuity, or contact with speakers of the target language are excluded from consideration. Incommensurateness would indeed be uninteresting if all it meant was that speakers of one language simply hadn’t had enough time to figure out how to express another language’s sentences. I will refer to this sort of practical consideration as a *fieldwork constraint*.

Fieldwork constraints are not the only type of practical limitations that the proviso idealizes away. The Principle relies on the proviso to ensure that a language-in-use can be changed in any way necessary. What would happen, though, if speakers of the language were uninterested in changing their language, or were positively opposed to the changes that would be needed to express some new content? Unlike an abstract conceptual scheme, recall, a language-in-use is a social practice that communities engage in for concrete purposes. Suppose these purposes are not served by the linguistic changes required to overcome incommensurateness?

I will call this second kind of practical limitation a *discourse constraint*, since the individual or communal goals which could hinder change are parts of the various discourses in which we use language. Discourse constraints cannot be dismissed quite as rapidly as fieldwork constraints, for the sources of discourse
constraints can be deeply rooted in a culture. Wilhelm von Humboldt, a pioneering student of non-Western languages, wrote more than 150 years ago that “[e]very language would be able to indicate everything, if the people it belongs to were to traverse every stage of their culture.” I reject the teleology built into Humboldt’s picture, but the remark is perceptive nonetheless. The expressive capacity of a language-in-use is constrained by the culture of the language’s speakers, and changing a culture is often no simple matter. Despite the truth of the Principle, the importance of discourse constraints makes incommensurateness important. In the remainder of this section, I will examine two types of discourse constraints: *discourse-governing norms* and *purposes*.

**Discourse-Governing Norms**

Some discourses, like the moral or the aesthetic, have as their subject matter certain types of norms. “Do not inflict unnecessary pain” is an example from moral discourse. I will call such an injunction a *simple norm*. A norm becomes *discourse-governing* when it functions to regulate additional discourses. Epistemic norms, for instance, concern the standards to which we ought to adhere when deciding what to believe: do we accept something because it is asserted in a newspaper, or do we need more evidence? How do we judge scientific theories? What makes for a good judge of character? These questions are part of epistemic discourse, and relative to that discourse, their answers are first-order norms. Many other discourses, though, take the deliverances of epistemic discourse more-or-less for granted. A practicing
scientist, for instance, rarely steps back to ask herself whether the fact that her theory accounts for all known data and is supported by repeatable experiments should give her confidence that the theory is true; rather, she accepts these norms as guiding her scientific practice and discourse. Many cultures’ ethical discourses are also regulated by discourse-governing epistemic norms. It is a commonplace in our culture, for instance, that for one to make a fair moral judgment, one must take care to weigh competing interests carefully. If I were to object to a proposed tax plan as unjust because it increased my burden more than it did others’, for instance, I could be judged to have violated relevant epistemic norms if I failed to take into account that others had previously born a disproportionate burden.

A recent analysis of the roles that discourse-governing norms can play in both intra- and inter-cultural ethical disputes is Allan Gibbard’s discussion of normative objectivity in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings*. In one example, he imagines himself arguing with an “ideally coherent anorexic” who believes that it “makes sense to starve herself to death for the sake of a trim figure.”

Now suppose the anorexic were to challenge the epistemic basis for Gibbard’s conviction that her course of action is irrational. Gibbard writes that:

I of course can issue the same challenge to her, and the mutual challenges may do nothing to advance the conversation. They may be met with mutual dogmatism. Or instead they may undermine the confidence of both of us, leaving us normative skeptics. They may, on the other hand, allow for some further assessment of our opposing normative claims. She, after all, can lay claim to one special source of
normative authority: it is she who is living her life; it is she who experiences what it is really like to be in her circumstance. I must answer this epistemological argument with one that favors my own normative authority, or else I must give up the claim I have been asserting. This may in the end not resolve our fundamental disagreement, but then again it might.  

How might the disagreement be resolved? If Gibbard comes to realize that the anorexic has a convincing story she can tell explaining how she knows that she’s being rational, and he has no such story for himself, he might give in. He might grant, in other words, that the discourse-governing norms that he accepts as regulating his discussion of rationality do not give him grounds for rejecting this particular anorexic’s claim to be rational. Not to give in would be dogmatic, since it would mean refusing to grant the anorexic epistemic legitimacy, despite the fact that she meets all the requirements of his own epistemic norms.

This is not to imply that dogma has no place in debates between discourses. As Gibbard points out, “[d]ogma has a price. Ordinarily it ends discussion. One can be baldly dogmatic toward someone only if one is willing to dispense with him as a discussant.” Sometimes groups may be willing to pay these prices. Or they may find other ways to exclude others, short of mere dogmatism. They may be able to explain to their own satisfaction why members of the other group are poor normative judges, even if they fail to convince the others. This can happen, for instance, when two groups’ epistemic norms differ. Consider what might happen if MacIntyre’s Aristotelians tried to convince the Confucians to abandon judging things
in terms of what the Aristotelians might term "your so-called li." Supposing that enough of the non-ethical fragments of their languages were not incommensurate, they might be able to debate this idea without the Aristotelians being able to "accurately represent"—recall that MacIntyre thought this necessary—li in their language.

The epistemic norms to which the Confucians might appeal in order to justify or explain the importance of li would include belief in the words of the sages, both as recorded in the various Classics and as confirmed by the spontaneous reactions of properly-trained contemporary Confucians. Aristotelians might insist on reasoning from certain first principles which are necessary for objectivity, an objectivity which, MacIntyre says, "is already itself understood in a specifically Aristotelian way as both presupposing and employing formal and teleological principles alien to many rival modes of thought."33 Whether or not these differing epistemic notions would be incommensurate themselves, the result of this debate is almost sure to be inconclusive.

Had the discussion led the two groups to discover that they shared epistemic norms, the result might have been to put pressure on one or both to revise their ethical languages, or else perhaps to recognize that under their different social and physical environments, the same epistemic norms lead to different ethical norms.34 Either outcome might have been enough to allow them to engage in further trade, debate, or whatever it was that brought them together in the first place. An inconclusive result, though, would tend to lessen or even sever mutual interaction, just like a thoroughly dogmatic response. I noted above that Gibbard has suggested
that we might be unwilling to settle for such results due to the costs or prices that would have to be paid. I now want to look at the issue of costs more carefully. We will see that not only can costs sometimes drive us together, but they can also serve to keep us apart.

**Purposes**

Discourses are carried on within particular *institutional contexts*, and these contexts make available a variety of purposes for which one might engage in a given discourse. In its narrowest sense, for instance, scientific discourse is carried on in labs and conferences among professional researchers; if we speak more broadly, we will see scientific discourse in newspaper articles and in discussions between non-specialists (like philosophers), in children’s television shows and in high school biology classes. In similar fashion, the contexts in which we find ethical or moral discussion in our society also vary widely. Moral considerations are debated in courts, and so become intertwined with legal discourse. Morality is taught in churches, in homes, and in schools. It is invoked in political discussions, and it is dissected in philosophical journals.

With different settings come different purposes that participation in a discourse might promote. A recent *Los Angeles Times* article on the challenges atheists faced when raising children quoted several members of the clergy insisting that the only justification for morality was God’s will: without religious faith to back it up, they said, morality would degenerate into a terrible subjectivism. What
purposes might be served by such an assertion? Decreasing the number of children that turn into moral degenerates, advancing the debate over “why be moral?” and bringing more people back to the church are a few of the possibilities. This last purpose might well further a clergyperson’s ability to make a living, as well as to save souls; the first would improve social harmony. The second, which involves an academic debate, might be sought out of curiosity, desire for the truth, or desire to win professional esteem, among other reasons.

My point is not that hidden behind seemingly disinterested discussions of morality we find selfish motives, though that will sometimes be the case. My goal is rather to flesh out abstract talk of “costs”: every discourse, including ethical discourse, involves concrete purposes that can be furthered or frustrated if the people engaging in the discourses choose to revise their language or the norms by which the discourse is constrained. How might the costs that can be associated with language revision work to keep Confucian ethical talk incommensurate with Aristotelian? The early Confucians were masters of the intricate rituals that had been tightly linked to the exercise of authority on all levels of the Shang and Zhou states. As the Zhou Kingdom disintegrated into several warring states, the central practical goal of Confucius and his followers came to be reuniting and re-harmonizing the land under a humane, ritually-proper leader. They developed an extensive philosophic explanation of the need of society for proper ritual (li). Their theorizing about li was no simple rationalization of their own importance to society, but profound philosophy—arguably of relevance even to the contemporary West. At the same time, though, a revision of their ethical language such as to downplay
the importance of *li* would have deprived them of much of their livelihood. Their concrete purposes, the discourse-governing norms to which their ethical discourse was subject, and their first-order ethical beliefs all tended to reinforce one another. It is thus no coincidence that they vigorously opposed the attempts of rivals like the Mohists and Legalists to remove *li* from the center of attention.

In order for two incommensurate ethical systems to reach the point that they actually can be compared, and one assessed in terms of the other, a very different process from the one MacIntyre envisions will have to take place. MacIntyre is correct to see that criticism internal to one system—often accompanied, to be sure, by various sorts of external stimuli—can induce people to look to other cultures’ systems in search of answers. Incommensurateness must be overcome via linguistic revision, however, before real comparison can begin. I have discussed the case of Liang Qichao, an early twentieth-century Chinese intellectual, in considerable detail in other writings. Liang was driven to criticize the Chinese ethical tradition in part because of a strongly felt goal of saving his nationality from extinction. I have found that on the way to comparing the Confucian ethical tradition with various Western ethical theories, he reinterprets both so as to arrive at a hybrid system that is neither his original Chinese conceptual scheme, nor a completely Western one, in which both quasi-Confucian and quasi-Western concepts can be expressed. Although I cannot go into the details here, I show elsewhere that the sum of Liang’s purposes and discourse-governing norms, many of which remain distinctly Confucian, have the result that the hybrid at which he arrives is much closer to the Chinese system with which he began than to the Western systems he studied.\(^\text{36}\)
Liang’s case, linguistic revision allowed him to overcome incommensurateness, but the discourse constraints of Confucian ethical discourse continued to make their presence felt nonetheless.

As far as MacIntyre’s Confucians and Aristotelians are concerned, though, both very different discourse-governing norms and different purposes for engaging in ethical discourse make it likely that neither group would be willing to revise its ethical languages in such a way as to overcome the initial incommensurateness. Without some significant stimulus that changes this equation, the two languages are likely to remain incommensurate, with neither side able to express concepts central to the other’s ethical thought, indefinitely. Even after acknowledging the truth of the Accessibility of Content Principle, that is, we are left with a version of incommensurability that, while not perhaps the exciting (and unintelligible) thesis that Davidson and others have taken themselves to be opposing, is nonetheless important to a fuller understanding of the role of language in our lives and cultures—and is quite possibly all that proponents of incommensurability have ever really wanted. In the final section of the essay, I will consider to what extent ethical pluralism can be said to follow from my understanding of incommensurability.

The Tie to Pluralism

At the very beginning of this essay, I defined ethical pluralism as the view that ethical systems were irreducibly plural. The terms of this definition need some clarification. Saying that ethical systems are plural, to begin with, is not the same as
saying that adherents of one system cannot assess the conduct of adherents of another system. Recall the magnanimous Aristotelian who was criticized by a Confucian, despite the mutual incommensurateness of their ethical languages. We can agree that ethical systems are plural, in other words, without insisting on judging people only in their own terms.

Our next question is how to interpret the requirement that ethical systems be not just plural, but irreducibly plural. The irreducibility in question can be interpreted in more than one way. Are the systems in question to be thought of as abstractions, akin to my notion of conceptual scheme, or as embodied practices, more like my languages-in-use? Are they irreducible, in other words, in practice or in principle?

Since I have maintained that conceptual schemes can be mutually incommensurable, it follows that if ethical systems are modeled on such schemes, then they can be irreducible in principle. This is all the more true since abstractions of ethical systems would have to be considerably more narrowly-defined than the corresponding conceptual scheme, for the following reason: schemes, recall, are essentially lists of sentences that are potentially true or false. They tell us what words and sentences a given language has at its disposal. They don't tell us what is true and what is false. An ethical system, in contrast, will tell us that lying is wrong, not that it is either wrong or not wrong. Countless sentences and combinations of concepts that are countenanced by a given conceptual scheme, that is, will be ruled out by the ethical system to which it corresponds. If schemes can be incommensurable, therefore, then surely ethical systems can be as well. Since two
incommensurable systems can never be completely compared to one another, we seem to have arrived at one version of irreducible pluralism.

It is not, however, a particularly interesting pluralism. Far more important and interesting are real ethical systems: not some abstraction from Confucianism at a particular moment, but Confucianism as it historically lived and breathed (and perhaps continues to live and breathe). Are the ethical systems of actual cultures, with their capacity to grow and change, irreducibly plural? With the move from static abstraction to dynamic reality, we move from potentially incommensurable relations to potentially incommensurate ones. It immediately follows that any pluralism that results must be practical rather than principled. If actual ethical systems are persistently plural, it is only because of contingent factors that could, at least in our imagination, be removed. Among the cultures that have interacted with one another and yet have incommensurate ethical languages, we can expect that discourse constraints have hindered commensuration. These cultures, we might say, demonstrate a modest kind of ethical pluralism: their ethical systems have proved to be irreducibly plural in practice.

Pluralism-in-practice seems particularly appropriate for ethics, which after all is concerned above all with practice—how we should act, what sorts of people we should become—much more than with theory. What are the practical implications of recognizing that we may well face pluralism-in-practice in today's world? The lesson of pluralism-in-practice is that ethical languages are tied together with other aspects of groups' cultures so as to be resistant to change. We can thus expect that the differences we now perceive between our own ethical system and
other systems, and even those among the ethical systems of different sub-cultures within our country, will continue well into the future. Whether this diverse future will be a peaceful one depends on whether the norms of different groups’ ethical systems include injunctions to be tolerant of peoples whose ethical systems persistently differ from their own.\textsuperscript{37}
On “styles of reasoning,” see Ian Hacking, “Language, Truth, and Reason.” in *Rationality and Relativism*, Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes, eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 48-66; that texts do not interpret themselves is of course one of Wittgenstein’s most important lessons.

13 MacIntyre 1991, 111.

14 MacIntyre 1991, 111.

15 MacIntyre 1991, 117.

16 MacIntyre 1991, 117.

17 Davidson would reject this approach out of hand, since his holistic approach to the theory of meaning will not countenance terms’ having atomistic references and meanings. I will discuss a different kind of enrichment, more congenial to Davidson in Part II.

18 One important assumption that this picture requires is that the grammar of Chinese is not one of the sources of incommensurability. Some discussions of linguistic relativity tend toward the opposite position, for instance, by suggesting that Chinese has difficulty expressing counterfactuals – Alfred Bloom, *The Linguistic Shaping of Thought: A Study in the Impact of Language on Thinking in China and the West* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1981). Even if this is true – and Bloom’s evidence is spotty at best— though it does not by itself have the consequence that Chinese is incommensurable with English or with Greek. At most, Bloom shows that some things are easier to express in English than in Chinese, but these things are nonetheless expressible in Chinese without any linguistic innovation. Incommensurability thus is not at issue.

19 This is not to suggest that “actions” are pure, empirical data, nor that “observations” is somehow language neutral. Confucians might not see an action where Aristotelians do, but I presume most of the time they will, even if they disagree vehemently about what action in was.

20 Some philosophers have argued that ethical language differs considerably from other types of languages, even to the extent of not expressing propositional content. In Angle 1994, Ch.2, I argue that while ethics might have an unusual metaphysics and epistemology, its semantics is quite ordinary.

21 MacIntyre employs the term “language-in-use” in a somewhat similar way; see MacIntyre 1988, ch. XIX.

22 The phrase, though not the understanding of conceptual scheme, is Ian Hacking’s; see Hacking 1982.

23 Conceptual schemes will, of course, tell us what is conceptually true, although according to my definition of conceptual scheme, this may be limited to (1) facts about logic and (2) trivial facts about the language to which the conceptual scheme is related, such as “it is conceptually true: ‘snow is white’ is true in English if and only if snow is white.”

24 This assertion deserves much more discussion than either MacIntyre gives it or I have time for. While it is easy to demonstrate with simple, artificial language that one such language can be unable to express concepts contained in another, proving that natural languages can exhibit similar failures is far more complex, and depends on which semantic theory one accepts as the best for modeling the conceptual
concepts of natural language. For an extended discussion based on Davidsonian semantics, see Angle 1994, ch. 4.

25 Steven Lukes and Martin Hollis, for instance, persistently interpret Davidson as believing that we must attribute some particular “core of beliefs” to others if we are to find them explicable. This (as they also point out) is actually their own argument, which they incorrectly read into Davidson. See e.g., Steven Lukes, “Relativism in its Place.” in *Rationality and Relativism*, eds. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 261-305.

26 An earlier effort to make sense of incommensurability in Davidsonian terms is Chapter 9 of Ramberg, 1989. Ramberg’s account is insightful and I have learned much from him. We apart company, though, when it comes to elucidating how incommensurability can explain breakdowns of communication: Ramberg believes that this is a matter of the disruption of our “linguistic conventions” (130) while I resist appeal to conventions and instead turn to discourse constraints – like Davidson; see “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs.” in *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*. Ernest LePore, ed. (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 433-446. For an excellent argument, very much in the Davidsonian spirit, against relying on “linguistic conventions” in our analyses see also Robert Brandom, *Making It Explicit: Reasoning, Representing, and Discursive Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1994).


28 This type of exception was suggested to me by Brian Loar.


31 Gibbard 1990, 193.

32 Gibbard 1990, 197.


34 Although he does’t discuss the possibility that the first-order norms in question might be incommensurable, Gibbard does point out the possibility that the same epistemic norms might, in different environments, yield different first-order norms; he terms it “relativism.” See 1990, 208-2011.


36 See Angle 1994, chs. 3 and 5.

37 My thanks to Michael Barnhart and Samuel Fleishacker for their astute and generous comments on an earlier draft of this essay, and to Manyul Im for first suggesting that I distinguish between “incommensurable” and “incommensurate.”