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Relativising the Ideal Observer Theory

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Attitudinal metaethical theories come in objectivist and relativist kinds. An attitudinal metaethics analyzes the moral properties of action (right, wrong, indifferent, supererogatory) in terms of the attitudes of individuals or society. Some relativist theories allow that some act, A, is morally right *vis-à-vis* Eric in virtue of his approving A, but wrong *vis-à-vis* Miriam in virtue of her disapproving of A. There are several versions of absolutist attitudinal theories. Brentano advanced the thesis that moral judgments amount to claims about the correctness and incorrectness of attitudes. It is nonrelativistic, as a particular act A could not be correctly approved and disapproved of or, to use his locution, correctly loved and hated at once. Either Eric or Miriam or both are mistaken in their moral judgments. A more familiar objectivist thesis is that an act is right if and only if it would be approved of under idealized circumstances, conditions which constitute the moral point of view. Thus, the ideal observer ethical theory maintains an act is right if and only if it would be approved of by an ideal observer. Eric is right if and only if an ideal observer would approve of A.

Although most forms of the ideal observer theory are objectivist, Thomas Carson in *The Status of Morality* has recently advanced an intriguing ideal observer theory (henceforth IOT and IO for ideal observer) which combines objectivist and relativistic elements.¹ According to Carson, the standard for the truth or correctness of moral judgments, including judgments about rightness and wrongness of actions, lies in what individuals would approve of were they to satisfy certain ideal conditions, conditions I spell out below. Unlike earlier ideal observer theorists like Roderick Firth, Carson contends that IOs may disagree. Some given act, A, may be both morally right and wrong at once in that Eric, if an IO,

¹ Thomas Carson, *The Status of Morality* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1984). References to Carson's work and noted in the text.

would approve of it and Miriam, if an IO, would disapprove. One and the same moral judgment can be both true (correct) for some people and false (incorrect) for others. He endeavors to retain an objectivist component to moral judgments; Miriam may disapprove of A and be mistaken, as her current judgment would not conform to the judgment she would have made if she were an IO.

The paper is divided into three sections. In the first I advance a version of Firth's IOT, defending it against some of Carson's criticism. In the second I assess Carson's own reading of the moral point of view. Section three considers Carson's central objection to an objectivist IOT like Firth's. I conclude that an objectivist Firthian IOT has resources to meet Carson's objections.

I. Firthian Ideal Observers

In an important article in the 1950s, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer Theory," Firth argues that moral judgments can be analyzed in terms of conditionals about how an ideal observer would respond to the relevant act, state, or moral principle.² He held that an act is right if it would be approved of by a being that is omniscient with respect to the nonethical facts, omniperceptive (that is, able to appreciate imaginatively the matter from the standpoint of all involved parties), dispassionate, disinterested, consistent, and otherwise a normal human being. His IOT is not committed to there being such an IO, but to it being the case that if there were one it would approve, disapprove, and withhold judgment on the good, the bad, and the morally indifferent respectively. A case for Firth's IOT can be built upon our intuitions concerning how to settle disputes in ethics. As I review each of the conditions Firth's IO is to satisfy I will draw some attention to this intuitive backing.

Firth's first condition, omniscience of the nonethical, may seem a tall order. Still, it is immensely plausible to hold that an ideal moral judgment be made under conditions of correct beliefs about the world, the observer not suffering from conceptual confusion or ignorant of relevant data. Many disputes in ethics turn on the settlement of factual questions. Thus, you and I may have different views about pollution control in virtue of our different beliefs about the risks involved, the prospects of future science to dispose of waste, the economic and social impact of shifting from hard to soft energy technology, and so on. If we take the moral point of view to

² Roderick Firth, "Ethical Absolutism and the Ideal Observer," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 12 (March 1952). Compare a similar, but less sophisticated version of the ideal observer theory advanced by Frank Sharp in *Good Will and Ill Will* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

rest upon correct beliefs about such matters involved, *a fortiori* being omniscient about the relevant nonethical facts hardly excludes one from the moral point of view. The IOT specifies that this omniscience is with respect to the nonethical, for if it is widened to include the ethical, the resultant IOT counts as being circular and uninteresting. It would be the unilluminating theory that something's being right may be understood or identified as that which a being would know to be right if that being knew everything that is right.

Carson criticizes Firth's condition of omniscience on two grounds. One is that the moral point of view only requires the IO to grasp the truth of the *relevant* beliefs, and the second is that the omniscience condition prohibits any human from occupying the ideal moral perspective. I assess briefly this second point here and consider Carson's delimitation of the relevant beliefs in section two.

Carson writes:

The trouble with this is that the ideal observer's omniscience is incompatible with his humanity. Human beings are not capable of knowing everything. It is not intelligible to ask how someone would react to various things if he were omniscient. (p. 57)

Perhaps Carson's chief worry is over whether counterfactual statements about how a human being would judge actions if she were omniscient have definite truth value. More will be said on this below, but I note here that I do not share Carson's conviction about unintelligibility. If I were omniscient, I would correctly judge the distance from London to Chicago. Is it metaphysically impossible for a human being to be (or become) omniscient? I doubt it. Could not God simply create a human who knew the truth value of all propositions? Perhaps an argument that such a creation is impossible could be developed on the grounds that a creature with a finite brain could not grasp uncountably many propositions or that, if being were omniscient, we would not count it among the natural kind humans. Neither argument seems to me promising, but even if some such argument is successful, it does not follow there could not be an omniscient being, and thus one satisfying the first condition of being an ideal moral judge. The important point with respect to understanding our moral judgments is that the Firthian IOT contends that they are correct if they would be approved of by an IO, never mind whether the IO be human or not. More will be said about Firth's "otherwise normal human" condition below. I do not think the IOT should be species specific.

Firth's second condition is that the IO be conceived of as richly appreciating imaginatively the weal and woe of all involved or affected by action. Firth terms this omniperception. This condition receives some backing from consideration of our moral disagreements. You and I may persist in

our opposite views about pollution even after we reach factual agreement. Our difference may stem from my failing to fully appreciate what the relevant pollutants smell like or my difficulty in appreciating emotionally what it is like to mine coal. Carson has an illuminating account of what it is to appreciate emotionally the inner life of others. I believe omniperception does aptly characterize the ideal moral point of view and as Carson does not offer reason to think otherwise, I will not defend it further here. I note only that a critic may wish to restrict omniperception to the IO grasping some restricted group of *relevant* persons' inner lives other than all (*omni*) persons *toto* or the critic may wish to collapse the condition of being omniperceptive into being omniscient. If a being is omniscient, why not expect this knowledge to include all of what is identified as omniperception? I think the IOT defender can accept the latter point and take omniperception to be a gloss as to what is included within the scope of omniscience. I will treat them separately here, but nothing requires significant alteration in what follows if one were to collapse the two. As for whether the IO need be imagined to be *omni*-perceptive as opposed to *relevantly* perceptive, the same reflections noted above about omniscience apply. I assess Carson's project of delimiting the relevant data in moral judgments in section two.

Firth's two conditions of being disinterested and dispassionate may be treated together. The notion behind both is that a person occupying the ideal moral point of view would not make her moral judgments rest upon particularized interests and passions, that is, so tying her judgments to individuals such that she would approve of Miriam's doing A, but not Megan's, simply because the one is Miriam and the other Megan. The moral point of view is thus characterized by an impartiality. If what Mother Teresa does in feeding the hungry in Calcutta is morally right, then anyone else similarly situated does right as well. I believe attention to our ordinary moral judgments lends support to this tenet. Even given you and I agree on the facts and have an equally powerful appreciation of persons' emotional lives, our disagreement may persist because, say, I stand to gain enormously financially if we follow my course. Presumably I am subject to legitimate moral criticism if my judgments rest principally on narrow, particularized self-interest, ignoring altogether the claims of others even when their case matches mine in every detail but one, namely it is their claim, not mine. The IOT need not deny particularized obligations such as the duty of Rob and Ann to their daughter Jessica. The IOT does not entail an IO would disapprove of the relevant behavior. Indeed, I think there is reason to believe an IO would approve.

Carson insists the characterization of the IO need not include disinterestedness and dispassionateness. He is skeptical about there being good reasons for thinking “that attitudes that are dependent on one’s being partial or having desires that involve essential reference to particular things are incorrect” (p. 78). The IOT which insists the IO does not have particularized passions and desires need not insist that every judgment prompted by partiality to self is mistaken. An impartial IO may well approve of persons having some preferential self-interest. Perhaps we can even imagine a being like the God of Christian theism who forms all the right moral judgments with respect to his creatures because they are *his*, God’s judgments involving essential reference to a particular thing, namely himself. Some Christian ethicists seem to form judgments in ways that account for treating others *as* brothers and sisters, children of a particular Divine Being. All of this may be accommodated within an overarching IOT. Imagine the God of Christian theism and his judgments are all correct, albeit they embed a certain partiality and particularity. The IO theorists may simply claim if there were an IO meeting the Firthian standards, she would approve of all God’s judgments.

Carson offers the following example of a judgment’s being formed on partial grounds.

Let us assume that Firth’s claims about the meaning of moral terms are correct, i.e. that in making a moral judgement about something one is claiming that all people who are fully informed and impartial, etc., would have a certain sort of attitude about it. Suppose that a certain act A is morally wrong in Firth’s sense, i.e., assume that any ideal observer would have an unfavorable attitude about it. Suppose also that S who is fully informed but does not view A impartially has a favorable (or at least not an unfavorable) attitude about A and claims that it is morally permissible. (It might help to suppose that act A is S’s successfully embezzling money from a bank.) If Firth is correct, then S is simply mistaken in holding that A is permissible. However, we still would have no basis for saying that it is incorrect for S to have a favorable attitude about A. The fact that an attitude would not be held by anyone who was fully informed and impartial does not (by itself) show that the attitude in question is, in any sense, mistaken or incorrect. (p. 78)

As suggested above, it seems to me that we do ordinarily take someone to be subject to legitimate moral criticism when his or her views would be unacceptable to one taking an overarching impartial point of view. Carson’s case above of S seems to be a case in point. I believe S’s favorable attitude toward embezzlement is mistaken for precisely the reason Carson specifies. In developing a proper characterization of the ideal moral point of view we can, I think, do no better than reflect upon our ordinary moral judgments, reflect on the pre-philosophical data, and guide our philosophical reflection by our best intuitions on the nature of morality.³ I

³ See, for example, Dan Brock, “The Justification of Morality,” *American Philosophical*

believe impartiality is as deeply embedded in the moral point of view as having sound factual judgments. I believe this judgment is supported, in part, by Carson's own work. While he endeavors not to cite explicitly the condition of impartiality, several of his IO characterizations seem to rest upon concern that particularized interests not guide moral decisions. More on this below.

Before proceeding to discuss Firth's final IO conditions, I consider briefly an additional criticism Carson raised because of its general importance. He characterizes Firth's stance and then criticizes it.

Since we take an impartial perspective to be necessary for a rational inquiry into the question 'is X right?' or 'is X good?', the meaning of 'X is right' and 'X is good' must, in some way, be analyzed in terms of impartiality. Let us grant Firth his assumption — the conclusion still does not follow. In general, the fact that we take a certain procedure, *p*, to be reliable for determining whether something is *t* does not entail that the ultimate analysis of *p* must include some reference to *t*. (p. 77)

As I noted above and sought to bring out in assessing Carson's example of embezzlement, impartiality seems to be a central feature of the moral point of view. Carson's point in the above passage is well taken in its insistence that if *p* is a reliable procedure to determine some truth, *t*, it does not follow that *p* must enter into an analysis of *t*. We can imagine science fiction cases in which palm reading is a reliable means by which to discover truths about the origin of our solar system, but we would not wish to analyze truths about the latter in terms of oracular pronouncements based upon examining hands. The rationale for including impartiality in the analysis of what it is to be right is, I think, as strong as the case for assuming the moral point of view includes omniscience of the nonethical or being fully informed (to use Carson's preferred condition). Perhaps the fact that being fully informed of nonempirical matters is a necessary element of the procedure of determining the rightness of an action does not entail in an *obvious* way that it needs to be part of the analysis of an act's rightness. Nonetheless, I agree with Firth and Carson that at least being fully informed should form part of such an analysis. The claim that being well informed merely contributes to getting the right answer as to what is morally right would, on a Firthian or Carson reading, be like assuming having true beliefs which are justified and justified by some process which is reliable (Gettier-immune) has nothing to do with the analysis of knowledge but only identifies a procedure by which to achieve knowledge. I believe that whatever rationale Carson marshals on behalf of including

Quarterly 14 (January 1977), and Michael DePaul, "Reflective Equilibrium and Foundationalism," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 23 (January 1986).

being fully informed of the nonempirical applies with equal force on behalf of being impartial.⁴

Firth's two final conditions may be stated briskly, namely the IO is to be thought of as consistent and otherwise a normal human being. I see no reason to note explicitly consistency, for reasons which will come to the fore in section three. *Contra* Carson, I do not think distinct IOs would be inconsistent with each other, nor can I think of any reason for thinking an IO that satisfies Firth's other conditions would contradict herself. The final IO qualification about species membership seems puzzling. Firth did not want to design a theory which holds only for humans, or insists upon invisioning a *homo sapien* as opposed to some other intelligent life form, Martians say. I believe the human qualifier is designed to insist that the IO's judgments are solely a function of the above conditions he specifies. Thus, the observer's approval and disapproval are grounded upon his omniscience, omnipercipience, and impartiality *qua* dispassionateness and disinterest. It is not prompted by, say, some neurological wiring behaving amiss or by some brain tumor causing him to approve of the very thing he would otherwise disapprove of. More on this later.

To summarize, the Firthian IOT emerging from the above discussion is that an act is morally right if and only if it would be approved of by a being in virtue of his omniscience of the nonethical, omnipercipience, and his approval is not prompted by particular interests and passions.

II. Carson's Ideal Observer Theory

Carson characterizes the IO in his theory as one who satisfies the following five conditions. An IO is one who (1) is fully informed of the nonempirical, and also possesses knowledge and vivid representation of the experiences of other people; (2) is fully acquainted with all relevant moral principles; (3) is such that his views and attitudes are not dependent upon being influenced by non-IOs; (4) has attitudes which do not involve emotional displacement and self-deception; and, finally, (5) is human.

Some of the conditions Carson cites do not call for much comment here. His depiction of the importance of having a vivid appreciation of others' experiences seems to me insightful and illuminating. This is covered by Firth's omnipercipience condition. I believe Carson's portrayal of emotional displacement and self-deception are covered by Firthian impartiality and omniscience. According to Carson, emotional displacement occurs when one represses or fails in some sense to come to terms with a

⁴ Note the important distinction between impartiality and neutrality in "The Neutrality of the Moral Philosopher" by Mary Midgley, *Aristotelian Society Proceedings* 74 (1973-74): 211-30.

given emotion. As a result, frustration about, say, one's employment may spill over and infect one's other judgments, unduly influencing one's moral attitudes. By self-deception Carson seeks to earmark familiar 'sour grapes' attitudes and our tendency to 'make a virtue of necessity.' These all seem to reflect a failure to be truly impartial. Presumably sour-grapes and virtue-of-necessity attitudes emerge as a result of obstructions to our particularized interests and passions. Because *I* cannot get the grapes, they must be sour. If a being suffered from the emotional displacement Carson cites, I believe it would be problematic to still suppose it to be omniscient. Wouldn't the being know its attitudes were not formed in virtue of the event at hand, but based instead upon something altogether different? You or I may allow our antagonism to a department chair to influence our view of Libya, but we could hardly thereby report that our view of Libya was well grounded in virtue of that influence. The Firthian IOT specifies the conditions influencing or determining the IO's approval and disapproval. Cases of emotional displacement and the like introduce other conditions determining IO judgment. Such judgments would not, then, be those to be selected as moral. I further clarify this point in section three.

The same reflections above apply, I believe, to Carson's insistence the IO's views and attitudes not be influenced by non-IOs. Presumably this condition is introduced to protect the notion that the IO is indeed correctly informed of the data at hand and not unduly influenced to think things differently because of her upbringing or social group. This I take to be secured in the Firthian framework with its insistence upon omniscience and impartiality. Carson writes:

We should also require that the attitudes of an ideal observer not be dependent on the direct or indirect influence of people who are ignorant of relevant information or who fall short of being ideal observers in other respects. An attitude is correct if it could have arisen in a world in which all past and present people were ideal observers. The reason that some such condition is necessary is that there may be views and corresponding attitudes that could not arise in a world in which all people were ideal observers, but which an ideal observer could accept as a result of moral training or the influence of others. For example, if no one had ever held (what I take to be) mistaken beliefs to the effect that God abhors and punishes homosexuality and all forms of premarital sex, then it is unlikely that anyone could be horrified by all forms of homosexual and premarital sexual activity or view them as great moral evils. (p. 68)

Assume Carson is right about such beliefs being mistaken and that God endorses a liberal sex ethic. If someone were to form judgments on the basis of faulty theology and faulty metaphysics, I take it we would not consider the being omniscient. Thus far, I see no reason to think we need to further expand the Firthian IOT articulated above.

Carson offers an analysis of what constitutes the *relevant* information an IO would require in her making moral judgments. By locating a nar-

rower class of beliefs required by the IO occupying the moral point of view, Carson makes it more accessible. As suggested above, I do not think an able Firthian IOT need construe the moral point of view in a way which makes it occupiable by humans. It would suffice to specify that an act's being right means it would be approved of by the Firthians IO. Our judgments are right if an IO would approve. Carson's restricted class of relevant beliefs endeavors to identify those critical for us to grasp in forming correct moral judgments.

A fact X is relevant to a judgement about y if and only if either (1) knowing X would make a difference to an ideal observer's reaction to Y, or (2) X is a member of a group of facts G such that knowing G would make a difference in an ideal observer's reactions to Y, and there is no subset of G the knowledge of which would have exactly the same effects on his reactions to Y. (p. 58)

Thus, for Carson one could grasp the relevant data upon which to base proper moral judgments without having to grasp all data and to enjoy the cognitive scope and power of an omniscient being.

I have some quibbles about Carson's relevance criterion concerning how to spell out what may be counted as making a difference to an IO's reaction. Given a narrow reading, the relevance criterion may raise the following puzzle. An IO may fully and unequivocally disapprove of Y in virtue of grasping some fact Z, e.g., Y involves the breaking of a solemn promise to someone. However, there is some other fact X to the effect that Y involves breaking a different solemn promise to someone else. If the IO knew X, instead of Z, she would disapprove of Y with exactly the same vigor; furthermore knowing both X and Z together would cause the IO to have no more disapproval about Y than she has if she grasped only one of X or Z. X may still be relevant to the IO's judgment and yet not be so on criterion one. What of criterion two? It is not clear that in the case of the IO's knowing the two facts, X and Z, both will turn out to be relevant. X and Z may both be considered members of G; knowing G grounds the IO's disapproval. However there is a subset of G, facts involving Z but excluding X, which would produce exactly the same forceful disapproval of Y as would the IO's grasp of a subset of G consisting of facts including X but excluding Y. But putting this problem to one side, another difficulty arises for the project of identifying what is relevant and what is not relevant.

One difficulty facing the view that an IO is one who knows the relevant facts, where relevancy is construed to be less than what is grasped by an omniscient being, is that it is problematic identifying just what are the relevant facts or knowing that, if you happen to grasp the ostensibly complete set, G, of them, you have indeed grasped the full set. How do you

know when it is that you have grasped all the relevant facts such that there is no other fact, Z, which might undermine your convictions based upon G alone? Admittedly, it would be an embarrassment to a theory to claim that it is impossible for any person to grasp the moral character of some fact unless she grasps *all* facts, including the truth of Goldbach's conjecture. The Firthian IOT need not be committed to this. It can allow that you and I know some moral facts without being omniscient and yet claim that what it means for, say, the appropriate acts to be morally right is that they would be approved of by an omniscient IO. Arguably, one need not be omniscient oneself in order to know that an omniscient being would know certain items ($2 + 2 = 4$ and so on). The Firthian IO can provide a useful way to delimit that which is relevant and not relevant in moral deliberations. Facts which are not relevant to Y are such that grasping them does not provide any reason at all for the IO's approval or disapproval. Returning to our X and Z case, the IO is supposed to grasp both. Both are relevant because both provide a reason for the IO's disapproval, even if it were the case that either one of them provide sufficient reason for the IO's full, unequivocal disapproval. Thus, Firth's theory has the advantage of being able to offer a schema for distinguishing what is relevant and irrelevant for moral judgments. It can also delimit what is important for us with respect to our moral claims. Other things being equal, the relevantly important data for us is the data which may rationally ground or justify our correctly identifying the appropriate attitudes of the IO.

As suggested above, it is important for Carson not to require omniscience as a condition for IOhood. He wishes to make IOhood occupiable by us; you and I grasp relevant data, fully apprised emotionally of the inner life of the involved parties, not subject to self deception, and so on. His version of the IOT is:

It is correct (in a sense that is opposed to mistaken) for S to accept a favorable (unfavorable) moral judgment about X if, and only if, S would have a favorable (unfavorable) attitude about X if he possessed all of the essential features of an ideal observer. (pp. 94, 95)

Despite his insistence about the essential features of being an IO, he claims that different parties could be IOs and yet have conflicting attitudes, you *qua* IO approving Y and me *qua* IO disapproving of Y. Carson does not thereby accept what he takes to be the most radical form of relativism, abandoning every sense in which we may speak of moral judgments being correct. Rather, he charges that if it is the case that I would approve of Y from the IO point of view, then Y is 'correct for me' (his locution), whether or not I do in fact approve of it or whether you *qua* IO would disapprove of it, thus making not-Y 'correct for you'. Carson summarizes:

Given the objectivity of morals, if one's own views are correct, then all conflicting views must be mistaken. If my version of relativism is true, however, the fact that one's own views are correct does not imply that those who have conflicting views are mistaken. (p. 127)

Carson is neither an unqualified objectivist nor a relativist. Against unqualified objectivism there are no moral views which are correct for all rational beings. Against unqualified relativism, some moral views you now hold may not be correct for you. Your current views may be such that you would not hold them if you were an IO.

Is Carson's claim correct that different IOs, as conceived in either Firth's or Carson's IOT, would disagree? His central rationale for making moral correctness relative to each person's judgment under idealized conditions is that Firthian IOs, and even IOs with the features Carson commends, could disagree. I weigh this charge in detail in the next section. If Carson fails to make a convincing case for this disagreement, then the motivation for giving up a Firthian IOT is weakened considerably.

III. A Case Against the Firthian Ideal Observer Theory

Carson holds that our ordinary moral judgments are neutral with respect to objectivism and relativism. Thus, appeal to our pre-analytic moral intuitions and judgments does not provide grounds for preferring objectivism.

It is not clear that all moral judgements assert the correctness of certain attitudes for all conceivable rational beings. For instance, when I say that murder is wrong it is not certain that I am saying that it is correct for martians and all other conceivable rational creatures to have an unfavorable attitude about murder. Such considerations are very remote from our ordinary thinking about moral questions. Since almost no one has ever even asked, much less answered, the question 'could it be correct for an extraterrestrial creature to approve of the killing of innocent human beings?' it seems that no answer to such a question can be said to be presupposed in our ordinary moral judgements and moral concepts. (p. 42)

Carson charges that not only is there no objectivist (correct of all creatures) element built into our ordinary moral concepts, but that individuals equipped with all the cognitive and affective power Firth identifies would not identify the same acts or states as correct for all.

Firth gives no reasons to suppose that ideal observers could not have incompatible attitudes about such questions (moral questions about the propriety of lying). Moreover, it seems reasonably certain that they could. For the essential characteristics of an ideal observer are not sufficient to (causally) determine his attitude about such questions. People's attitudes about such things as lying depend, in large measure, on their background and moral training. Given appropriate differences in background and moral training, it is quite possible that there are issues about which two ideal observers could have conflicting attitudes that were characterized by a demand quality. Firth's theory does nothing to rule out the possibility that different ideal observers could have received radically different kinds of moral training. (p. 5)

Carson offers a thought experiment illustrating his position.

Suppose that there were martians who, aside from not being human, possessed all of the other characteristics of ideal observers. Suppose also that the views and attitudes of the martians differed from those of human ideal observers on numerous matters. From the standpoint of the ideal observer theory there is no reason to prefer the views of the one to the other. Rather we must conclude that the views or attitudes of the martian ideal observers are correct for the martians and that the views or attitudes of human ideal observers are true for us. (The requirements for being martian ideal observer are just the same as those for being a human ideal observer, except that one must be a martian rather than a human.) (p. 76)

His thesis is that without his person-relativized IOT, the IOT collapses in absurdity.

Without some such requirement it is clear that the IOT cannot support any kind of objectivist view. For there are absolutely no moral issues concerning which there would be unanimous agreement (either in attitudes or judgements) among all possible creatures who are fully informed and capable of vividly representing all of the relevant facts, etc. For any view or attitude, however absurd or objectionable, one can easily conceive of a possible creature who knows all of the relevant facts, etc., and who holds the view or attitude in question. It thus seems clear that the conception of an ideal observer can, at most, provide criteria for the correctness of the views and attitudes of human beings. (pp. 75 and 76)

Carson can certainly allow that all human beings would embrace the same moral judgments and thereby conclude that such a judgment is correct for all human beings. But it by no means follows that this judgment is true or correct for all rational persons whatever, whether these be gods, extraterrestrials, angels or terrestrial rational beings who do not belong to our species.

Carson's theory is creative and impressive, but I believe he fails to build successfully a case against a Firthian IOT. I note first that Carson's reading of our ordinary moral judgments seems to me problematic. It is probably true that no one, or very few, who make moral judgments consider whether martians, if they exist, would make similar judgments. But then it is also probably true that no one, or very few, who make nonethical, empirical judgments consider whether martians, if they exist, would make similar judgments. Carson thinks relativity enters into the ethical and not the empirical.

Thus the IOT does not allow us to say that moral judgements are correct in the strong sense that we ordinarily take empirical judgements to be. For example, we take the claim that the earth is round to entail that it would be incorrect for any rational being to deny that it is round. Proponents of the ideal observer theory cannot hold that moral judgements are correct in this way. (p. 76)

But if the matter of martian compliance is remote from our empirical judgments, why exempt them from relativity? I think what temptation

there is to believe martians could correctly disapprove of what we correctly approve of may at least be reduced when noting that both terrestrial and human IO judgment must, *ex hypothesi*, be based on the same clear nonempirical data, equally powerful grasp of the mental life of all involved, and not prompted by particular interests and passions. Carson is not proposing merely that it is possible for terrestrials to be epistemically justified in believing P and extraterrestrials in believing not P. Extraterrestrials might lack altogether the power to grasp the nature of our experiences. Once equally powerful cognitive ability and scope is attributed to each, accounting for any disagreement at all is problematic, much less accounting for a disagreement in which both parties are correct.

On what grounds could IO martians and IO humans disagree about killing a particular human being? Consider this question in light of the Firthian IOT developed in section one. Could they disagree in virtue of the fact that the human IO knows some information about humans which the martian IO lacks? This is ruled out by the thesis that both must be considered omniscient with respect to the nonempirical in order for both to be IOs. One cannot know some fact the other does not.⁵ Could their disagreement arise because one has a more powerful, vivid appreciation of the mental life of humans? This, too, is impermissible on the Firthian IOT. In order to qualify for IOhood, they must both be omniscient, exercising an unsurpassably great sense of each of the involved parties. Might not their disagreement arise in virtue of one having particular species or planetary interests the other lacks? This, too, is ruled out. Firthian IOs are impartial, or in Firth's terms dispassionate and disinterested.

What, then, remains to account for IO disagreement in the Firthian theory? Carson is not clear at this point. His suggestion that moral training might do so seems to be a nonstarter in light of the above considerations. Perhaps we can imagine two IOs having identical nonethical information and so on, and yet disagree because the one has a peculiar brain tumor causing it to approve of that of which it would otherwise disapprove. Every time it is led by its grasp of the data, *et al*, to approve of X, it disapproves of X. Presumably this is sufficient to disqualify the tumor-troubled observer from IOhood, for his approval and disapproval is not in virtue of the conditions specified as constituting the ideal moral point of view. Rather, his attitudes are in virtue of his nonethical knowledge, *et al*, plus a brain tumor inverting his judgments. IOs may be imagined to have any kind of biological makeup you like or even to be nonphysical. The essential feature of IOhood is simply that the conditions identified in the

⁵ At least given standard analyses of omniscience. Cf. Taliaferro, "Divine Cognitive Power," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 18 (1985).

Firthian theory are those which properly ground, warrant, justify, and bring about the moral attitudes. Odd neurological wiring can make for odd, not ideal, observers.

Consider a final defense on Carson's behalf which we may term the motivation argument. The Firthian IOT defended here is rather sparse and abstract in its formulation, so abstract that the Carsonian may charge that the IO would lack positive motivation to make any of the morally relevant judgments. Impartiality is a negative restraint on IOhood; it stipulates that the IO must fail to operate on partial, particularized concerns. Why suppose the knowledge and empathy of an IO would prompt positive judgments of any sort, much less motivate judgments that would be consistent between distinct IOs? Perhaps my Firthian IO would remain idle. The Carsonian may insist that something like Firth's original "otherwise a normal human" condition needs to be built into the IOT to get the IO moving, and once we let that in, we have let in the grounds for relativity. Subsequent normal martian and earthly IOs cease to be idle, but what is to prevent their bickering?

My reply is in two parts; the first being a flat out counterclaim that the Firthian conditions of impartiality, empathy, and knowledge are enough to prompt the relevant approval, disapproval, and withholding of judgment. What does a Carsonian IO have that a Firthian does not? Is it a matter of the Carsonian IO possessing certain sensations, thoughts, beliefs, desires, purposes, or training? Presumably an omniscient being would have all the true thoughts and beliefs and knowledge of all possible traditions enjoyed by Carsonian IOs. We may suppose the Firthian IO either possesses the sensations of Carson's IOs, perhaps enjoyed vicariously, or at least grasps empathetically what it is to have the relevant sensations.⁶ Do the Carsonian human and martian have purposes, training, and desires that get their respective IOs on the job? But what precisely are these desires? I take the function of the IOT to provide an account of the moral character of purposes, training, and desire. If certain purposes, training, and desires are good, the IO would so approve of them. One might well attribute certain desires to the Firthian IOT. Perhaps a being that is omniscient with respect to the nonethical may be supposed to desire correct beliefs. But the IO theorist is not committed to developing such an account, for the principal focus of the IOT is the elucidation and

⁶ Cf. Zeno Vendler, "Vicarious Experience" in *The Matter of Minds* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), Thomas Nagel's *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), and Mary Bittner, "Empathetic Identification," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 (April 1978).

grounding of propositional attitudes and judgments. I believe that there are important differences between judging and desiring.⁷

My first reply to the Carsonian critic is, then, that impartial empathetic knowing, and attention to states of the world is enough to give rise to IO judgments. I know of no reason why they should not. However, let us consider a second reply which concedes that something more needs to be added in the way of psychology or biology to get an IO moving. Call it Q. Maybe Q involves factors which are broadly social in nature, factors which include a normal martian or earthly upbringing; or perhaps Q consists in a range of desires including certain types of hopes and fears. How would this ground relativity and bickering? I believe the only plausible Qs that would give rise to relativity are ruled out or held in check by Firthian conditions.

Imagine we return to earth; Miriam and Erik are IOs, but they have had different backgrounds. Erik's social peers are enamored of risk taking. They would risk an extremely small chance of nuclear winter as a result of warfare or nuclear accident in exchange for a high probability of economic progress and improved human condition. Miriam's social peers are riskphobic; they even entertain a ban on automotive transportation as a way to reduce the probability of death for large numbers. Can we conceive of Miriam and Erik occupying IOhood, and yet one approves of certain risks the other disapproves of? I do not think so. As I pressed the argument earlier, what is it in virtue of that Miriam disapproves of the risk taking? If it stems from knowledge and empathy, why would not Erik also disapprove? Evidently the disagreement between the two would have to be thought of as stemming from the fear or brashness that one has and the other lacks. But as I noted earlier, the IOT concerns propositional judgments and not desires *per se*. I can approve of certain things I do not desire. We have reason to think Miriam loses her IOhood title insofar as her judgment is affected by desires, so that a different judgment would be enjoined were not the particular desire at work. If we alter our example of Miriam and Erik slightly I believe we may bring to light a plausible Firthian account of apparent IO disagreement. We often find ourselves unsure about the ethics of risks. Imagine Erik and Miriam are ostensible IOs and yet Erik would allow a .0001 risk of nuclear winter whereas Miriam would allow only a .00001 risk in identical conditions. Neither can convince the other through appeal to shared imagination, knowledge, empathy, or impartiality. In such circumstance, I believe the plausibility of the

⁷ For an illuminating treatment of the distinction between desires and propositional judgments, see Richard Swinburne, *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986).

case rests upon our thinking that both positions have considerable warrant. A *bona fide* IO would think that either the .00001 or the .0001 risk is permissible and, thus, the IO would allow up to .0001 risk. In cases of apparent moral dilemma where it seems both A and not-A are approvable from an IO point of view, I believe the Firthian may conclude that the selection by agents of either is not morally significant. Unlike Buridan's Ass, which stands starving to death perpetually between two equally appealing bales of hay, if the IO is drawn in two directions of equally attractive states, it can approve of the selection of either.

I conclude that Carson has not successfully shown that Firthian IOs may disagree, and that the argument from motivation does not dislodge an objectivist IO schema. Does it follow that the Firthian IOT is a correct analysis of our fundamental moral concepts? No. While Firth advanced his theory as an analysis of our basic moral concepts, he seems to have left a residual notion of oughtness or demand quality unexplored.⁸ The IO is such that she grasps the proper demand quality of acts. This may give some cheer to those who take the IOT to be an account of an ideal methodology in ethics, but not a philosophical analysis of our moral concepts such as rightness. I have also had to lay aside several other critical problems facing the Firthian IO theorist. One is that the IOT appears consistent with a weighty skepticism as to whether we may know how IOs would judge. These issues must be left for another occasion.⁹ Here I have sought to articulate a Firthian IOT which has considerable intuitive appeal, I believe its fundamental assumptions can withstand current, probing criticism.¹⁰

⁸ Firth, p. 327.

⁹ I have addressed some of these in "The Divine Command Theory of Ethics and the Ideal Observer," *Sophia* (July 1983).

¹⁰ I am very grateful to Thomas Carson, Stephen Evans, Ed Langerak, Susan O'Shaughnessy, and an anonymous referee for *PPR* for comments on an earlier draft. The motivation argument was suggested by the referee.