So far, I have conceded (in Chapter 2) that normative utterances do not describe an independent moral reality. Instead, morality (and epistemology) consists of a set of cooperative strategies for promoting our mutual interests. I have also asserted, though, an aversion to the relativism that is typically associated with pragmatism. But aren’t these two points at odds with each other? If there is no independent normative reality, then can morality and epistemology be non-relative? I want to argue in this chapter that although normative utterances do not describe an independent normative reality, we are not forced into a relativistic picture, or some picture where normative truth consists merely in whatever a particular community practices.

The argument of this chapter will proceed as follows: first, we will argue (initially) that it is plausible to explain moral and epistemic truth in terms of excellence of reasons: a proposition $p$ is true if we can give a vindicatory explanation of it, that is, an explanation that demonstrates that there is nothing else to think but $p$. Next, we will combine this conclusion with the idea that the types of reasons supporting moral and epistemic rules are timeless: their justificatory force does not rely on their time of utterance, but instead can apply ‘retroactively’ to times before their utterance (and can have force even if never uttered at all). From these two conclusions, it will follow that the truth of normative rules is not relative to a particular time. We will then turn briefly to the issue of cross-cultural relativism.

**Moral truth**

We have conceded that moral and epistemic utterances do not describe an independent normative reality. How, then, can a normative claim be objectively true? In other words, what makes a perceived normative
requirement correct? Let us begin by discussing how a normative claim can be true; later, we can discuss how it can be objectively (i.e., non-relatively) true.

In replying to Cheryl Misak’s attempt to rescue truth by blurring the fact–value distinction (a typical pragmatist move, as I noted in Chapter 2), David Wiggins writes:

If someone constantly emphasizes certain features of the empirical and faults other subject matters for lacking them, then either we can try to show that, on a proper understanding, those other subject matters do not lack these features or else we can show that truth-directedness does not in itself require them...Misak’s response to those who fault the judgments of morality for lacking reference to experience conforms to the first of these patterns.¹

But Wiggins suggests that pursuing the second pattern might be more fruitful. And indeed, we have already committed ourselves to the second pattern. In Chapter 2, we conceded a fact–value distinction, and suggested that what it takes for a moral or epistemic sentence to be true is different from what it takes for a purely descriptive sentence to be true. However, we can give an account of what makes normative utterances true, which shows that ‘truth-directedness does not in itself require’ the features that make descriptive discourse truth-apt. As I will argue, Wiggins’s² and McDowell’s³ discussions of moral truth lend themselves well to an account of the truth of moral utterances. Wiggins and McDowell have suggested that we can make sense of moral truth in terms of excellence of reasons. To support this picture, Wiggins draws an analogy with mathematics. He writes that such reasoning could explain the great degree of convergence displayed by people on the claim that $7 + 5 = 12$. This belief (that $7 + 5 = 12$) “resembles an ordinary empirical belief in being uncontroversially true...but resembles a moral belief in not being empirical.”⁴ According to Wiggins, the best explanation for why people believe this is that it can be shown by the calculating rules to be true. “There is nothing else to think but that $7 + 5 = 12$.”⁵ Thus, even if we cannot posit mathematical facts or entities that stand in a causal relation to us (and are thereby capable of satisfying Harman’s explanatory requirement),⁶ we can make sense of mathematical truths in terms of excellence of reasons. The reasons for thinking that $7 + 5 = 12$ are so compelling that there is nothing else to think. The best reasons support the conclusion that $7 + 5 = 12$. 