

Further Reading

- Epicurus's *Letter to Menoeceus* can be found online: www.epicurus.net/en/meneceus.html (retrieved December 23, 2016).
- Many editions of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* are available. The text quoted in this chapter is from the Oxford World's Classics edition (Oxford University, 1980, 2009).
- Susan Moller Okin's book *Women in Western Political Thought* (Princeton University Press, 1979) is an excellent account of how women have been marginalized in the work of some of the greatest philosophers.
- *An Introduction to World Philosophy: A Multicultural Reader* (Oxford University Press, 2009), edited by Daniel Bonevac and Stephen Phillips, contains a wide array of texts, including selections from moral philosophers in the Chinese, Indian, Arabic, and African traditions.
- A good introductory guide to the many methods of arguments mentioned here, as well as numerous others, is *The Philosopher's Toolkit* (2nd ed.) by Julian Baggini and Peter Fosl (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
- William Godwin is quoted from his *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (Oxford University Press, 2013), edited by Mark Philp. (Original work published 1793)
- You can test your intuitions in a variety of "trolley problems" at www.philosophyexperiments.com/fatman/
- The quotation from Philippa Foot is from her collection of essays, *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford University Press, 1978).
- Others who have discussed trolley problems in detail include Judith Jarvis Thompson, "The Trolley Problem" (*Yale Law Journal*, 94, 1985: 1395–1415); Frances M. Kamm, *The Trolley Problem Mysteries* (Oxford University Press, 2016); and David Edmonds, *Would You Kill the Fat Man?* (Princeton University Press, 2013).
- Selections from the works of many of the philosophers mentioned in this chapter are included in Jonathan Wolff (ed.), *Readings in Moral Philosophy* (W. W. Norton, 2018).

CHAPTER 2

Cultural Relativism

If anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations in the world the beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose those of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best; and that being so, it is unlikely that anyone but a madman would mock at such things. There is abundant evidence that this is the universal feeling about the ancient customs of one's country. One might recall, in particular, an account told of Darius. When he was king of Persia, he summoned the Greeks who happened to be present at his court, and asked them what they would take to eat the dead bodies of their fathers. They replied that they would not do it for any money in the world. Later, in the presence of the Greeks, and through an interpreter, so that they could understand what was said, he asked some Indians, of the tribe called Callatiae, who do in fact eat their parents' dead bodies, what they would take to burn them. They uttered a cry of horror and forbade him to mention such a dreadful thing.

HERODOTUS, HISTORIES, BOOK 3

THE VARIETY OF MORAL PRACTICES

One reason that history can be so interesting, and so shocking, is its ability to lead us to compare customs from the past with our current practices. Things taken for granted in one era are considered morally horrendous in another. For example, in the ancient world of Greece and Rome, some forms of slavery were regarded as morally acceptable. The great philosopher Aristotle himself argued that some people were "slaves by nature." Over time slavery became less prominent, without ever disappearing completely, but it was revived again on a mass scale in the plantations of the southern United States, the Caribbean, and Brazil. The American Civil War was fought to cement the abolition of slavery in the United States, although the practice is still with us today, illegally, in many forms throughout the world. Even if slavery still exists, its moral evaluation has changed dramatically over the centuries. Or consider practices of erotic love in the Ancient Greek world, where it was common for wealthy middle-aged men to have sexual relations with boys in their early teenage

years. What was considered normal in Ancient Athens would lead to a person's being denounced as an outcast and serving a long spell behind bars today. Similarly, until the rise of modern medicine, the profession of nursing was sometimes considered morally equivalent to that of prostitution. In the theater of Shakespeare's time, the same was thought of actresses, which is why boy actors took female roles.

Not only do moral evaluations change over time, but different practices exist at the same time. Even in the ancient world, travelers returned home with outrageous tales of cultural difference. At the start of this chapter, I quoted one such account from the ancient historian Herodotus (484–425 BCE) on the difference between funeral practices of the Greeks and the Callatae. Contemporary theorists have documented wide variety in cultural practice. Here is the important American anthropologist, Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), on the issue:

Standards, no matter in what aspect of behavior, range in different cultures from the positive to the negative pole. We might suppose that in the matter of taking life all peoples would agree in condemnation. On the contrary, in a matter of homicide, it may be held that one is blameless if diplomatic relations have been severed between neighboring countries, or that one kills by custom his first two children, or that a husband has right of life and death over his wife, or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old. It may be that those are killed who steal a fowl, or who cut their upper teeth first, or who are born on a Wednesday. Among some peoples a person suffers tortments at having caused an accidental death; among others it is a matter of no consequence. Suicide also may be a light matter, the recourse of anyone who has suffered a slight rebuff, an act that occurs constantly in a tribe. It may be the highest and noblest act a wise man can perform. The very tale of it, on the other hand, may be a matter for incredulous mirth, and the act itself impossible to conceive as a human possibility. Or it may be a crime punishable by law, or regarded as a sin against the gods. (Benedict, 1934, p. 45)

But we don't have to survey exotic works of anthropology to see great variety in what counts as acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Even in recent decades, practices have changed dramatically. I'm old enough to remember a time in the United Kingdom—the late 1960s—when it was common practice for jobs to be advertised with two rates of pay: a higher one for men, a lower one for women. There was no pretense that women were doing a different job, or couldn't do it so well. They were just paid around 15 percent to 20 percent less. (Of course, we have yet to achieve equal pay for equal work, but at least it is illegal to advertise different rates.) Until the last few decades, same-sex relations between men were illegal in much of the world, and many people—including the playwright Oscar Wilde (1854–1900) and

the mathematician, computing pioneer, and Second World War code-breaker Alan Turing (1912–54)—were tried and found guilty.

Furthermore, even now there is a good degree of variation in ordinary social practices. In some countries you drive on the right-hand side of the road, in others the left. In some countries owning a handgun is an ordinary part of life; in others it is a horrifying prospect. You could grow up thinking there is only one correct way of driving or only one correct rule about gun ownership; but as you become more experienced, by watching television programs from other countries or traveling, you realize there are different ways of doing things. And customs of personal conduct differ too. On my first trip to the United States as a graduate student in the 1980s, I was given a leaflet by my sponsor explaining some aspects of expected behavior in the country. My favorite example was the suggestion that North Americans feel uncomfortable if you stand very near to them when you are having a conversation. Some people from Southern Europe and Latin America prefer to come close when talking, and North Americans will tend to back away; this kind of push-pull interaction might repeat itself indefinitely, to comical effect. Obviously the person who wrote this leaflet noticed that conventions of good manners or etiquette differ in different parts of the world.

Norms of personal conduct differ from culture to culture, and it seems oddly dogmatic in the examples just cited to insist that one culture has the right idea and another got it wrong. But if one culture permits every capable adult to drive, and another—as in the case of contemporary Saudi Arabia—refuses to allow women this ordinary privilege, are we really prepared to brush this off as an idiosyncrasy of cultural difference, or is one country making a moral error? Still, some will insist that no culture has the right to judge what happens in another, proposing that just as rules of etiquette vary from culture to culture, so do moral norms.

OBJECTIVISM OR CULTURAL RELATIVISM?

There are, then, at least two attitudes we can take—two types of **moral intuition** we can have—about these facts of moral variation. One is to insist that a certain set of practices is the true or correct moral standpoint, and all others are in error. Or we can say that moral truth is in some way relative to a particular culture or tradition, and there is no basis for saying that one is the superior to others. The first view is often called **objectivism** and the second **cultural relativism**. This is a dispute in meta-ethics, concerning the nature of moral value. Are moral values objective, at least in the sense that the same values are valuable for all people, in all places, at all times, or

do they vary from culture to culture? Which is correct? The facts of variation are impressive, but they are not enough to show that cultural relativism is true, for that would commit the fallacy (discussed in Chapter 1) of deriving an "ought" (a moral conclusion) from an "is" (a statement of how things are) without explaining how the derivation is possible.

Some philosophers have argued that objectivism is the intuitive view built into our ordinary moral thought. Most people naturally find themselves making assumptions about meta-ethics without having much of a sense that this is what they are doing. Just as our language has a grammar that most of us know but couldn't describe without extensive training, our moral thought also makes underlying assumptions that we may not be aware of and that we have to work hard to articulate. Here are some of the commonly made assumptions about meta-ethics that infuse **commonsense morality**, by which I mean the morality we tend to use in everyday life.

- Some things are morally wrong, such as harming an innocent child simply for the pleasure of doing so.
- Statements such as "It is wrong to harm an innocent child simply for the pleasure of doing so" are straightforwardly either true or false, and, in this case, the statement is true.
- It is possible to know that some things are morally right and some things are morally wrong.
- If someone does something he or she knows to be wrong, then it is right to blame or criticize him or her for doing so.
- It generally would have been possible for those who have acted wrongly to have acted in some other way.

Although these assumptions are part of our ordinary moral belief system, some of them are challenged even in ordinary moral life. For example, some people are often reluctant to blame others for morally bad behavior, putting their actions down to a bad start in life or difficult circumstances. Others may doubt whether moral beliefs really are capable of being true, preferring the view that they are, in some sense, subjective judgments. But the idea that there are objective truths of morality—some things are just right or wrong, whatever people think about it—is a powerful one.

Nevertheless, even if it is common to believe that some things are right and some things are wrong, philosophically it can be hard to understand what this really means. Take the statement that "being kind to strangers is good." "Good" is a value, and objectivism in ethics seems to presuppose that values are "real" and therefore in some sense exist in the world. The view that values exist in the world, independently of what human beings

think of them, is also known as **moral realism**, and many philosophers have defended it. But it is easy to be puzzled about what it means for values to exist in any objective sense. Table and chairs exist "objectively." I can see them, or bump into them, and you can see and bump into the same ones if you are in the same room as me. But if values exist, where are they? Can I see them? If not, how do I know about them, or interact with them? Asking these questions tends to lead us away from objectivism to a different, more subjective, view that values are somehow invented by human beings and are dependent on us for their existence. Those philosophers who believe in objective values therefore have the difficult burden of saying what it is that they believe in.

Plato (429?–347 BCE) is probably the first recorded philosopher who attempted to explain in detail what it would be for values to be objective. He believed that we can discover the nature, and even the existence, of objective values by the use of reason. But what, exactly, is it that we will discover if we are successful? Plato uses the idea of the **form of the good**, which needs to be examined carefully. As a first step, we can think of the form of the good as what it is that all good things have in common, just as the form of a circle is what it is that all circles have in common. A circle is the set of points in a two-dimensional plane equidistant from a single point. To a first approximation, then, the "form of the good" seems to be something like a definition of *good*. But Plato pushes the analogy with geometry even further. It is commonly said that it is impossible to draw a perfect circle. Any representation of a circle will have slight bumps or imperfections in the line, even if you need a microscope to see them. Therefore any actually existent circle is only an approximation of a perfect circle, which is the true "form of a circle." Similarly Plato argues that we will never experience pure good on earth, because any good action or person will have some imperfection. But just as there is an ideal form of the circle, there is also an ideal form of the good, which exists although not in the physical world.

There is certainly something very plausible in the idea that good things, just like circles, have something in common that is not to be found in perfect form in anything in the world. But when we reflect on this idea it can seem very hard to make sense of it. What is it to exist, but not to exist in the physical world? Plato concludes that the forms must exist in some otherworldly realm. Plato strives throughout his work to make sense of what this means and how we can come to have knowledge of something we cannot directly experience. He tells a number of myths about human preexistence in something like heaven where we become acquainted with the forms not just of the good, but of other equally difficult philosophical concepts such as

beauty and truth. Whether he intended this literally is hard to know, but it does show that although we can easily be drawn to the view that there must be objective values, that idea is not straightforward.

Other philosophers have taken comfort in an analogy we have already mentioned between values and numbers. Take the simple arithmetical truth $2 + 2 = 4$. The commonsense view, of course, is that this is an objective truth, true in all times and all places, and for all people. Its truth predated human existence, although, of course, our knowledge of the truth could not. Yet, you might wonder, what are the numbers two and four? Where do they exist? How can we understand them? When we start to think about it, they are pretty mysterious things. The mystery does not, though, undercut our belief in the objective truth of mathematics. And so, perhaps, the mystery of what values are need not undercut our belief that they exist in whatever sense is necessary to make the truths of morality objective. For all these philosophical difficulties, the objectivity of morality is for many people the highly intuitive view.

Nevertheless, the social and anthropological evidence of moral difference we looked at in the last section puts objectivism under pressure, and cultural relativism will, for many people, be an attractive alternative to objectivism. Practices elsewhere and in other times sometimes differ from what we are used to, but what basis do we have for saying that we are right and they are wrong? How can people who follow one set of practices criticize those who follow another? The cultural relativist argues that each of us has to see things from the perspective of our own culture. Everyone will naturally think that their own culture has the superior moral code. But in fact, says the relativist, there is no ultimate right or wrong here, and it is exceptionally arrogant to think that you and your culture have the truth, and everyone else who thought and acted in a different way, now living or dead, is wrong. Difference is difference, and that is all. We must respect the fact that we live in a particular point in space and time, and we have no basis for regarding ourselves as superior to those who lived in different times or in different places. Hence there can be great appeal in cultural relativism, and many people find it to be more intuitive than objectivism. But as we discussed in the last chapter, moral intuitions can be questioned. We must dig deeper, especially when our moral intuitions conflict with those of other people, or, indeed, when we find ourselves conflicted.

RELATIVISM AND PSEUDO-RELATIVISM

The central claim of cultural relativism is that the ideas of "right" and "wrong" can be understood only within a particular cultural or social context, and what is right in one context may well be wrong in another.

Consequently we must respect divergence in moral practice. However, philosophers have commented on the strangeness of the argument that because values are relative, societies must keep out of each other's business. Consider how we might formulate the argument with two premises and a conclusion:

Premise 1: *Right and wrong* means "right for a given society" and "wrong for a given society."

Premise 2: What is right and wrong in one society may differ from what is right and wrong in another society.

Therefore

Conclusion: It is wrong for one society to impose its ideas of right and wrong on another.

This may look like a valid argument, in the sense that the conclusion follows from the premises, although strictly speaking some missing steps need to be filled in if the argument is to be formally valid. But the oddity is that if the conclusion is true, then the first premise must be false. After all, the conclusion "It is wrong for one society to impose its idea of right and wrong on another" is a claim with *universal* scope, applying to all societies, not just one. Therefore it is not relative to a particular society, and so it contradicts the claim that all ideas of right and wrong are relative. It says that all people, of all cultures, have the right to act according to their local customs, without the threat of interference from outside. In the terms introduced in the last chapter when discussing fallacies in reasoning, it seems that this argument suffers from *equivocation* because it uses the same word, *wrong*, in more than one sense.

Perhaps what happened is that cultural relativism has been confused with a form of *liberalism*, understood in the sense of calling for the toleration or even encouragement of diverse ways of living. Liberals have some views in common with cultural relativism. They accept that diverse moral views are held in society or between societies. For example, people follow different religions—or none. They also generally acknowledge that unless one person or group threatens another, they should be allowed to live according to their own values. Therefore, liberals will often argue that cultural self-determination has value. But, and here is the important point, acknowledging each society's right to self-determination is a universal value, not a local one. Let's call this liberal, highly tolerant, universalist position *pseudo-relativism*. Rather than denying the existence of universal values, it asserts the existence of at least one universal value: that each culture has the right to moral self-determination.

Again this seems like an enlightened view, but before returning to the discussion of relativism, it is worth considering whether pseudo-relativism really is so attractive. Consider an analogy in international relations. In 1648 the Treaty of Westphalia was signed as a result of discussions between many of the states of Europe. Its purpose was to recognize the principle of state sovereignty: that each state had the right to determine its own affairs, without outside interference. But 300 years later—in the aftermath of the Second World War—it became clear that the Treaty of Westphalia effectively had given too much power to states. If states have sovereignty over their territories, what do we say when they start to turn on their own citizens? Do we have to stand by and watch when states commit genocide as long as it is within their own borders? The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted on December 10, 1948) was a response to the recognition that states can do horrendous things to their own citizens.

In looking closer at examples of apparent moral differences, we can see that in other times and places people often followed practices that appear to oppress disadvantaged or powerless groups: slaves, people of unfavored races, women, and those who engage in same-sex relations. Is the liberal policy to be tolerant of extreme discrimination, or to stand up for the human rights of the vulnerable? As the contemporary Ghanaian American philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah (b. 1954) remarks, the two ideals of respect for difference and concern for all can clash. The tolerant liberal position, then, has somehow to get the balance right between leaving certain things to societies to determine for themselves while at the same time setting down some lines that cannot be crossed in order to protect individuals. So there is a difference between being someone who, like the liberal, is happy to tolerate or encourage many different ways of life and being someone who refuses to criticize any of the practices of another society. A liberal can regard many different ways of life as acceptable, even admirable, but at the same time can judge some to have crossed a line.

In our own time, the practice of what has been called genital cutting in young girls is a good example of something that most people think falls beyond the tolerable. Some societies engage in a practice of removing part of the genitals of young girls, or practice other surgical techniques that are intended to ensure that a girl will remain a virgin until she is married. This practice has, for example, been very common in parts of Africa for centuries and is not associated with any particular religion. Critics point out that because of the surgery, a girl may experience reduced sexual pleasure for the rest of her life, often suffers considerable pain and discomfort, and also

risks infection and even possible death as postsurgical complications. Is the tolerant position to regard genital cutting as a matter of acceptable cultural difference? Or is the correct stance to argue that these young women are being oppressed and dominated by obsolete, sexist practices and that we should campaign for reform or even the criminalization of the practice, not just in our own country but throughout the world?

You may be surprised that I have used the term *genital cutting*, because you are probably much more used to referring to the practice as female genital mutilation (FGM). But it is clear that the moral relativist, or anyone who wished to defend the practice, could not accept that label. Naming it a form of mutilation presupposes that it is harmful and probably morally illegitimate. It would be equivalent, it could be said, to referring to male circumcision as male genital mutilation. Now many will want to argue that there is a key difference, suggesting that for boys and men circumcision is beneficial, but for girls and women genital cutting is harmful. But not all agree that there is such a difference; and in any case it needs to be established by looking at the evidence, not prejudged by the use of names. Interestingly, then, how we name practices can already embody assumptions about their permissibility.

For the opposite extreme, consider the words of Jomo Kenyatta (c. 1891–1978), the first president of Kenya (1964–78). In 1938 Kenyatta wrote an important work of anthropology called *Facing Mount Kenya*. In that book, he describes the Giriya tradition in which he was raised. He defends male and female circumcision by showing their centrality to Giriya ritual and ceremony, especially concerning initiation into adulthood and full membership of the group. At one point he refers to the practice as “trimming the genital organs,” making it sound no more troublesome than having a haircut. Unlike Kenyatta, or the critics, I will continue to use the term *genital cutting* to avoid biasing the discussion in either direction, even though some people will regard my doing so as an appalling example of “political correctness.” But political correctness is really just the awareness that we should not sidestep serious moral debate by using morally “loaded” language to prejudice issues. Prejudgment, of course, is the origin of the term *prejudice*.

The question we have been considering, then, is whether genital cutting crosses a moral line and thereby shows the limits to cultural self-determination. But cultural self-determination, as we saw, is not moral relativism proper, for it imposes a universal value: self-determination of groups. It is actually much harder to understand what pure cultural relativism is as a thesis. It is not the same as universal tolerance for group

practices. It is also not the same as the view known as **individual subjectivism** (see Chapter 3), in which the truth of a moral claim depends on each person's preferences or judgment. Rather, cultural relativism locates the truth of a moral claim in the traditions or judgments of a cultural group.

Consider again some of the examples from anthropologist Ruth Benedict. Let's take suicide. In some countries or groups, especially those strongly influenced by Catholic religion, suicide is a terrible, mortal sin and an offense against God's purposes. In other countries, such as Japan, it is a noble and respected way of responding by, say, a military leader or even the head of a major corporation who has made a disastrous decision. Are we to say that one of these societies is right and the other is wrong, or should we say that they are both simply to be understood within the context of their own societies, and what is right in one place can be wrong in another? But as soon as we add "and therefore we must not intervene or criticize," we have superimposed a universal value and abandoned the relativist position.

The cultural relativist, it seems, has to stop short of making any universal moral claims. Rather, being an explicit cultural relativist seems to require adopting two standpoints on morality. On the one hand, as a member of a culture that has its own morality, the relativist, like everyone, will perceive the world through the values of that society. For example, those of us who live in societies that regard suicide as morally wrong will, at least in the first instance, condemn it as wrong not just in our society but everywhere we see it, for that is what our morality says. It would be rare for a morality to have relativism "built in." Yet at the same time, the relativist must adopt another, more abstract standpoint—that of the anthropologist or philosopher—and say, "But that is just the way we think about it here; others in different cultures may have different moral views." This does seem to be a possible and consistent position, allowing you to have a moral view while also achieving a type of critical distance from it. But it is an interesting question whether you can see that there are alternatives to your own moral view and still hold on to your view as firmly as you did before. Consider again the Greeks who heard about the funeral practices of the Callatae. Their natural reaction was to condemn eating dead bodies as morally horrendous. But Darius, the king, had clearly adopted the abstract standpoint of the philosopher or anthropologist and was able to see that practices differ in different societies. Our question is whether, once he had understood cultural variation, he would be able to continue endorsing the view that the Greek practice of burning dead bodies is morally the right thing to do. Or would his moral faith be weakened? Would he begin to see the issue as a matter of custom that can differ from place to place rather than as moral rules?

Cultural relativism seems to require us to hold fast to our moral beliefs while also recognizing that had we been brought up under different circumstances, we would just as firmly hold different moral beliefs. This view is certainly possible, but at the same time it could be psychologically difficult and might lead some to question the tradition in which they were brought up.

Problems for Relativism

Cultural relativism is often presented as a sophisticated position, but certain arguments may make it less appealing than it seemed at first. Indeed the contemporary African American philosopher Michele Moody-Adams has argued that moral relativism has to make a number of very implausible assumptions. First of all, it assumes that it makes sense to assign each person to his or her particular, hermetically sealed group. But can this be right? Consider yourself. What is your group? You may be of a particular religion that means a lot to you, or a citizen of a particular country with which you strongly identify. Or alternatively, your family may mean more to you than your religion or country. Or perhaps you identify most with people on your sports team. Furthermore you may have left one country and find yourself living in another, or perhaps your parents or your grandparents did (to flee oppression in their country of birth). For many people in the modern world, it is not a straightforward matter to say which group they belong to. And if different groups have different and conflicting practices, and you belong to more than one group, what should you do? Which culture should your moral beliefs be relative to?

Second, Moody-Adams points out that cultural relativism assumes that within each group there is a single agreed-on moral standpoint. But this is absurd. Any culture will include a wide variety of views, some of them the direct opposite of each other. What, for example, is the agreed-on U.S. position on gun control? On legalization of marijuana? On state-funded health care? Those tempted to the view that every society has an agreed-on set of values should spend some time listening to U.S. political debate. And to return to the topic of genital cutting (which we will talk about again shortly), the philosopher Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947) points out that it is illegal in many of the countries where it is practiced. This example, it seems, shows a diversity of views within a single country—although the position is complicated, especially in countries that only recently gained political and legal independence, as is common in Africa. In these countries formal legal frameworks are often based on international standards and sometimes conflict with the customary law of different groups.

Moody-Adams's third point is that cultural relativism seems to assume that any individual's moral beliefs are a direct consequence of the values of their group. But surely it is not always true that individuals simply absorb and reproduce the values of their group, even if this is often the case. Free, critical thinking can lead anywhere. People brought up in the United States sometimes convert to Buddhism or Islam. There are Baptists in Japan. Although cultural relativism is often presented as a refined and enlightened moral theory, it seems, paradoxically, not to reflect the complexities of our moral lives.

MODEST RELATIVISM

For all that has been said so far, nothing rules out the possibility that one approach to morality is correct and all conflicting practices are mistaken. Nevertheless, in the face of the diversity of moral practices throughout the world and human history, it is worth thinking about how far it is possible to acknowledge and accept at least some of this diversity. Another approach to incorporating the possible insights of relativism is to start by distinguishing two levels to morality: a level where there must be unity, and a level that accepts diversity.

One way of developing this approach starts with reflection on the general point of morality. Many philosophers will agree that without morality life would be intolerable, riven with conflict. One point of morality (and there may be many) is to settle conflicts in a peaceful fashion, for the benefit of everyone. On this account, then, morality helps us find ways of avoiding or dealing with disputes, or, more positively, to find ways of regulating cooperation for mutual benefit. Morality is a set of rules of adjudication, by which, to use a phrase from the political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002), we allocate the benefits and burdens of social cooperation.

To say this much is to give an account of part of the nature of morality. But it does not yet tell us what those rules are. This is where differences between different cultures can enter the picture. Although all societies need rules, it may well be that more than one set of rules could serve broadly the same general purpose. Consider again the example of road safety. Every country has rules about whether to drive on the right- or the left-hand side of the road. It doesn't seem to matter which convention is adopted, as long as everyone in the same country drives on the same side of the road. As a result of scientific studies, we may find out that it is safer to drive on one side than the other (perhaps having something to do with the great majority of humans being right-handed). Nevertheless, the correct side to drive on

is the one adopted in your country, even if it turns out that your country has adopted the marginally more dangerous convention. And it would be recklessly immoral for anyone to decide to drive on what is for your country the wrong side, on the basis of scientific studies. Or consider the example of the funeral practices of the Greeks and the Callatae, as described by Herodotus. You probably have observed already that although their practices may differ, at a deeper level both sides agree that the dead must be honored in an appropriate and dignified ceremony that also takes into account the social need to dispose of dead bodies safely. The differences are at the level of details, highly significant though they are.

A relatively modest form of moral relativism argues by analogy to these examples. While the general point of morality is to avoid conflict and harness cooperation, and although sets of rules are needed for this purpose, no single, unique set of rules is always best for these purposes. The moral rules, like the color of mailboxes—or a better example, the rules of language—can vary from society to society, even though they serve the same general purposes. A view of this sort has been defended by David Wong (b. 1949). Wong is a Chinese American philosopher who, through his upbringing, found himself exposed to two rather different value systems. The American system pays a great deal of attention to individual autonomy, privacy, and independence, whereas the Chinese system gives great weight to loyalty to community and family. It is not that in America the community has no value, or that in China the individual is ignored. Both cultures take these values seriously. However, conflicts between these values are sometimes resolved in different ways in the different societies. Jomo Kenyatta detected the same difference between African and European societies, finding that Africans give much more weight to traditional values of community and family. Extending this example, we can see that societies might possibly evolve different moral codes to deal with the different problems they face. And here is a space where cultural relativism can operate.

An interesting feature of Wong's account is that although we can recognize a different society's morality as distinct from our own, we can also, very often, see value in it. Indeed, we might even admire another society's values and wish we had been brought up their way, meanwhile accepting there is no real possibility to change what we do now. Wong's position seems reasonable, although some will challenge it. One opponent will be the philosopher, or perhaps religious thinker, who believes that a single true set of detailed moral rules apply in all times and places. Wong suggests that morality has a type of universality, but this allows for relativism at a societal level, as we

have seen. And this does seem to reflect the anthropological evidence of the sort we quoted above from Herodotus and Ruth Benedict.

Some, however, will question whether this really is a form of cultural relativism as generally understood—or just another form of liberalism, which rejects the meta-ethics of relativism but retains some of its practices. The test, perhaps, is what it says about the more troubling type of example we explored earlier where a group is exploited, oppressed, or harmed. How does modest relativism judge slavery, ancient and modern, or oppressive gender practices such as genital cutting? Are we compelled to say that the difference between those societies that accept genital cutting and those that find it outrageous is just like the difference between those societies that drive on the right and those that drive on the left, or those that speak French and those that speak Portuguese? This would be a troubling result, and it is why so many people worry about moral relativism, thinking it is tantamount to giving up moral standards altogether.

Genital Cutting and Cultural Relativism

Wong does discuss the practice of genital cutting, in the context of how a hospital in Seattle faced the dilemma of knowing that if it refused to offer the procedure, then families would still go ahead with it in a far more radical and dangerous way. Hence without taking a moral stance, a hospital might offer a “safe” and very minor, almost symbolic, version of the procedure drawing a single drop of blood in hygienic conditions. Assuming that the families involved considered this to be an acceptable form of genital cutting, it would protect young girls against the serious harm of the very invasive procedures that would have been pursued otherwise (Wong, 2006, pp. 260–263). This is similar to an argument often given in support of legalizing abortion. In countries where abortion is illegal, the practice of dangerous “backstreet” abortion springs up, along with a significant proportion of deaths or permanent damage to fertility. By this argument legalized abortion is simply the lesser evil, which is why some people who morally oppose abortion nevertheless accept its legality.

Wong’s discussion of genital cutting is not really directed to the question of how people in one society should view practices in another society, for he focuses his discussion on multicultural society that contains a variety of moral practices, some of which are regarded as morally outrageous by the majority culture. However Wong’s “modest relativism” provides a way of discussing the more general questions of how one society should respond to the practices of another, and it will be useful to continue to use genital cutting as our example. We first should recall Wong’s distinction between

the two levels of morality. First is the “moral core” that all moralities share: the value of cooperation, conflict resolution, and providing ideals of a good life. Second are the particular practices of society, which provide detailed rules and may vary from society to society. The question, then, is whether genital cutting violates the moral core. And here different versions of modest relativism may disagree, depending on how the practice is viewed, and how exactly the distinction is drawn between the core and the particular rules.

The standard liberal discussion of genital cutting sees it as an exercise of brutal male power over female freedom and pleasure: Male dominance runs so deep that often women are implicit in, and even strongly approve of, the practice. This is why it is regarded as so objectionable, but so difficult to eradicate. Yet Wong points out that “in some communities the practice is regarded as rendering the body fertile, as a rite of passage, and a test of courage and endurance to pain that binds together the community of women who practice it” (Wong, 2006, p. 263). Jomo Kenyatta makes similar comments about the role of genital cutting in Gikuyu society. If these claims about the practice can be taken at face value, it can be liberating rather than oppressive, though deep anthropological work will be needed to be sure. However, to understand the practice in the context of Wong’s theory, we first have to understand how it may relate to the fundamental moral core shared by all societies.

Generally, genital cutting and other similar practices are undertaken to increase the likelihood that a woman will be a virgin on her wedding day (or if she is not, that it can be detected easily) and will remain faithful during marriage, for if, as a result of the procedure, a woman becomes less capable of sexual pleasure it is thought she will be less likely to be unfaithful. Opposition to sex outside marriage is hardly an eccentric value. It has long been the teaching in the Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions. Of course practices have changed over time, and sex before marriage now has little stigma in many communities, but still infidelity is generally a subject of wide disapproval even though it is common. Consider how the revelation of infidelity, even the suspicion of it, can ruin a politician’s career in many countries. The high-level moral core—that a good life involves sexual fidelity in marriage—is shared across many moral codes. The difference is how it is enforced: in some societies by taboo, moral disapproval, and marriage contract; in other societies by all these means but also through surgical intervention.

The question is whether surgical intervention goes too far. One worry is that it seems so starkly unjust and oppressive that women have to undergo a burden to ensure marital fidelity when men do not—although we should

remember that in many societies, men do have to go through their own painful and difficult rites of passage for other purposes. Nevertheless the extreme sexism of the practice is deeply troubling. And this alone may lead us to conclude that genital cutting violates the moral core, just as other ways of protecting fidelity seem a clear violation. Consider, for example, the practice of stoning to death women who have been unfaithful, whether through choice or, in the most horrendous cases, after having been raped. Most two-level relativists will be extremely uncomfortable and say that although stoning the unfaithful may be in accordance with one important core value (fidelity), nevertheless it violates others of far greater importance, such as individual autonomy and freedom from harm. Hence societies that stone unfaithful women can be condemned, even by the two-level relativist, for ignoring part of the core that all moralities must share if they are to be moralities at all.

A similar argument can be made with respect to genital cutting, arguing that even though it serves the value of marital fidelity, and also, perhaps, helps with group bonding and marking the passage to adulthood, these values fall far short of providing a justification. For it also violates the much more important core moral norms of autonomy and, freedom from harm, as well as violating equality, and must be condemned. We can see, then, that everything depends on two key issues: whether autonomy, freedom from harm, and equality are to be regarded as core values that all moralities must share, and the degree to which genital cutting violates these values. Practices differ, and so the same theorist may accept some minor forms but not others (this seems to be Wong's position). But theorists also differ, and so the same practices may be accepted by some modest relativists but condemned by others. However, we need to bear in mind that the notion of "acceptance" is not itself entirely straightforward. For example, the contemporary African philosopher Godfrey B. Tangwa has argued that while genital cutting below the age of consent for both girls and boys is morally wrong, it should not be made illegal. Although this may seem strange, in fact many things are widely believed to be wrong but are not against the law. Marital infidelity, an example we have already used, falls into this category in many countries. Broadly, however, the two-level theory at least provides a way of conceptualizing the issues, even if, on its own, it does not solve all of them.

And we can supplement Wong's and Tangwa's analyses with a suggestion from another contemporary philosopher, Miranda Fricker (b. 1966). When we do view other cultures and want to criticize the practices, it does not follow that we should blame the people who carry them out. For example,

we saw that although genital cutting surely exists as a consequence of male domination, that domination runs so deep that the practice is carried out and encouraged by women. We can certainly criticize the practice from our point of view, but many argue that it would be wrong to criticize or blame the particular people involved. They are following what seem to them to be the right values. And the same is true of ancient slavery or perhaps even more recent intolerance of same-sex relations. People can act wrongly, in perfectly good faith.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Summary

When we observe the moral diversity we find in the world today, and even more so when we look back through history, it is easy to believe that values must be in some way relative to each particular culture or society. But as we saw, many people have moral intuitions that support objectivism rather than cultural relativism, and so it is not possible to settle the question by appealing to intuition.

Some people who are attracted to relativism wish to argue that one society should not interfere with the values of another society. But to draw this conclusion is to state that there is a universal value of cultural self-determination, which is a form of liberalism, or what I called pseudo-relativism rather than relativism proper. And we must also face up to the question of whether it is true that all moral traditions are deserving of respect—or whether, on the contrary, sometimes a moral system is a way of camouflaging oppression and needs to be challenged from outside. One difficulty, then, in the idea that we should respect the traditions and practices of each group is that the practices of a group may have evolved to favor one subgroup over another, most often men over women or one race over another. This does not mean we should abandon ideas of "self-determination of groups," but it turns out to be a much more subtle and difficult idea than we first thought.

We have also seen that stating a genuine moral relativist position requires you to step outside your own values and adopt a more abstract perspective. I raised the question of whether it is psychologically difficult to believe your moral values while at the same time accepting moral relativism. Yet we also saw that moral relativism has difficulties coping with the complexity of the modern world, in which it is not true that individuals automatically adopt the moral values of their culture.

The more modest two-level view of moral relativism—distinguishing a moral core, held by all societies, and a culturally relativist element that may vary from society to society—is a possible compromise. We can recognize that although some hard moral constraints must be respected by all societies, how those constraints are translated into particular practices varies from society to society, none of which has a unique claim to being correct. But like any compromise, this position can be attacked from both sides: those who favor cultural relativism will say that there is no shared moral core; those who think there is a single moral truth will not be prepared to accept social diversity. To conclude, although moral relativism presents itself as a highly sophisticated and enlightened position that promises to explain away apparent moral disagreement, on examination it draws us into a new range of conceptual and moral puzzles.

Discussion Questions

1. How should the cultural relativist position be formulated?
2. What considerations support cultural relativism?
3. What considerations oppose cultural relativism?
4. What is the distinction between cultural relativism and liberalism?
5. What is two-level cultural relativism?

Key Terms

moral intuition, p. 23	form of the good, p. 25
objectivism, p. 23	equivocation, p. 27
cultural relativism, p. 23	liberalism, p. 27
commonsense morality, p. 24	pseudo-relativism, p. 27
moral realism, p. 25	individual subjectivism, p. 30

Key Thinkers

Herodotus (484–425 BCE), pp. 21–22, 33
Aristotle (384–322 BCE), p. 21
Ruth Benedict (1887–1948), pp. 22, 30
Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), p. 22
Alan Turing (1912–54), p. 23
Plato (429?–347 BCE), pp. 25–26
Jomo Kenyatta (c. 1891–1978), pp. 29, 33, 35
Michele Moody-Adams, pp. 31–32

- John Rawls (1921–2002), p. 32
 David Wong (b. 1949), pp. 33–35
 Godfrey B. Tangwa, p. 36
 Miranda Fricker (b. 1966), pp. 36–37

Further Reading

- Herodotus's *Histories* is available in many editions. I have used the Penguin Classics version, revised edition, published in 2003.
- Aristotle's views on slavery are set out in Book 1 of his *Politics*. A helpful edition, also containing some of his other political writings, is published by Cambridge University Press (1996) edited by Stephen Everson.
- For a detailed discussion of same-sex relations in Ancient Greece, see Kenneth J. Dover *Greek Homosexuality* (Harvard University Press, 1978).
- The quotations from Ruth Benedict are from her *Patterns of Culture*. I have used the 1989 Houghton Mifflin reprint (original work published 1934). A selection is included in Jonathan Wolff (ed.), *Readings in Moral Philosophy* (W. W. Norton, 2018).
- The argument that cultural relativism is self-defeating comes from Bernard Williams in his book *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (Cambridge University Press, 1972, pp. 22–25).
- Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya* was published in an edition by Vintage Books (1962). (Original work published 1938)
- Michele Moody-Adams's arguments are developed in her *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (Harvard University Press, 1997).
- John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* was first published in 1971, with a revised edition in 1999. It is published by Harvard University Press with selections in Jonathan Wolff (ed.), *Readings in Moral Philosophy* (W. W. Norton, 2018).
- The discussion of David Wong is based on his *Natural Moralities* (Oxford University Press, 2006).
- Godfrey B. Tangwa's arguments appear in "Circumcision: An African Point of View." In *Male and Female Circumcision: Medical, Legal, and Ethical Considerations in Pediatric Practice* (Kluwer/Plenum Publishers, 1999, pp. 183–193), edited by George Denniston et al.
- Miranda Fricker's discussion of blame and moral relativism is contained in her book *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

The understanding we need of our own cultural processes can most economically be arrived at by a *détour*. When the historical relations of human beings and their immediate forbears in the animal kingdom were too involved to use in establishing the fact of biological evolution, Darwin made use instead of the structure of beetles, and the process, which in the complex physical organization of the human is confused, in the simpler material was transparent in its cogency. It is the same in the study of cultural mechanisms. We need all the enlightenment we can obtain from the study of thought and behaviour as it is organized in the less complicated groups.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What evidence does Benedict provide to support the claim that moral standards can differ from culture to culture?
2. How can such evidence be used in an argument for cultural relativism?
3. What does Benedict think can be gained through the study of relatively less developed societies?

MARY MIDDLEY

Trying Out One's New Sword

Mary Midgley (b. 1919) is an influential English moral philosopher who has written more than 15 books, the first of which was published when she had reached the age of 59.

All of us are, more or less, in trouble today about trying to understand cultures strange to us. We hear constantly of alien customs. We see changes in our lifetime which would have astonished our parents. I want to discuss here one very short way of dealing with this difficulty, a drastic way which many people now theoretically favour. It consists in simply denying that we can ever understand any culture except our own well enough to make judgements about it. Those who recommend this hold that the world is sharply divided into separate societies, sealed units, each with its own system of thought. They feel that the respect and tolerance due from one system to another forbids us ever to take up a critical position to any other culture. Moral judgement, they suggest, is a kind of coinage valid only in its country of origin.

I shall call this position "moral isolationism." I shall suggest that it is certainly not forced upon us, and indeed that it makes no sense at all.

People usually take it up because they think it is a respectful attitude to other cultures. In fact, however, it is not respectful. Nobody can respect what is entirely unintelligible to them. To respect someone, we have to know enough about him to make a *favourable* judgement, however general and tentative. And we do understand people in other cultures to this extent. Otherwise a great mass of our most valuable thinking would be paralysed.

To show this, I shall take a remote example, because we shall probably find it easier to think calmly about it than we should with a contemporary one, such as female circumcision in Africa or the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The principles involved will still be the same. My example is this. There is, it seems, a verb in classical Japanese which means "to try out one's new sword on a chance wayfarer." (The word is *tsujigiri*, literally "crossroads-cut.") A Samurai sword had to be tried out because, if it was to work properly, it had to slice through someone at a single blow, from the shoulder to the opposite flank. Otherwise, the warrior bungled his stroke. This could injure his honour, offend his ancestors, and even let down his emperor. So tests were needed, and wayfarers had to be expended. Any wayfarer would do provided, of course, that he was not another Samurai. Scientists will recognize a familiar problem about the rights of experimental subjects.

Now when we hear of a custom like this, we may well reflect that we simply do not understand it; and therefore are not qualified to criticize it at all, because we are not members of that culture. But we are not members of any other culture either, except our own. So we extend the principle to cover all extraneous cultures, and we seem therefore to be moral isolationists. But this is, as we shall see, an impossible position. Let us ask what it would involve.

We must ask first: Does the isolating barrier work both ways? Are people in other cultures equally unable to criticize us? This question struck me sharply when I read a remark in *The Guardian* by an anthropologist about a South American Indian who had been taken into a Brazilian town for an operation, which saved his life. When he came back to his village, he made several highly critical remarks about the white Brazilians' way of life. They may very well have been justified. But the interesting point was that the anthropologist called these remarks "a damning indictment of Western civilization." Now the Indian had been in that town about two weeks. Was he in a position to deliver such a damning indictment? Would we ourselves be qualified to deliver such an indictment on the Samurai, provided we could spend two weeks in ancient Japan? What do we really think about this?

My own impression is that we believe that outsiders can, in principle, deliver perfectly good indictments—only, it usually takes more than two weeks to make them damning. Understanding has degrees. It is not a slap-dash yes-or-no matter. Intelligent outsiders can progress in it, and in some ways will be at an advantage over the locals. But if this is so, it must clearly apply to ourselves as much as anybody else.

Our next question is this: Does the isolating barrier between cultures block praise as well as blame? If I want to say that the Samurai culture has many virtues, or to praise the South American Indians, am I prevented from doing *that* by my outside status? Now, we certainly do need to praise other societies in this way. But it is hardly possible that we could praise them effectively if we could not, in principle, criticize them. Our praise would be worthless if it rested on no definite grounds, if it did not flow from some understanding. Certainly we may need to praise things which we do not *fully* understand. We say “there’s something very good here, but I can’t quite make out what it is yet.” This happens when we want to learn from strangers. And we can learn from strangers. But to do this we have to distinguish between those strangers who are worth learning from and those who are not. Can we then judge which is which?

This brings us to our third question: What is involved in judging? Now plainly there is no question here of sitting on a bench in a red robe and sentencing people. Judging simply means forming an opinion, and expressing it if it is called for. Is there anything wrong about this? Naturally, we ought to avoid forming—and expressing—*crude* opinions, like that of a simple-minded missionary, who might dismiss the whole Samurai culture as entirely bad, because non-Christian. But this is a different objection. The trouble with crude opinions is that they are crude, whoever forms them, not that they are formed by the wrong people.

Anthropologists, after all, are outsiders quite as much as missionaries. Moral isolationism forbids us to form *any* opinions on these matters. Its ground for doing so is that we don’t understand them. But there is much that we don’t understand in our own culture too. This brings us to our last question: If we can’t judge other cultures, can we really judge our own? Our efforts to do so will be much damaged if we are really deprived of our opinions about other societies, because these provide the range of comparison, the spectrum of alternatives against which we set what we want to understand. We would have to stop using the mirror which anthropology so helpfully holds up to us.

In short, moral isolationism would lay down a general ban on moral reasoning. Essentially, this is the programme of immoralism, and it carries a distressing logical difficulty. Immoralists like Nietzsche are actually just a rather specialized sect of moralists. They can no more afford to put moralizing out of business than smugglers can afford to abolish customs regulations. The power of moral judgement is, in fact, not a luxury, not a perverse indulgence of the self-righteous. It is a necessity. When we judge something to be bad or good, better or worse than something else, we are taking it as an example to aim at or avoid. Without opinions of this sort, we would have no framework of comparison for our own policy, no chance of profiting by other people’s insights or mistakes. In this vacuum, we could form no judgements on our own actions.

Now it would be odd if *Homo sapiens* had really got himself into a position as bad as this—a position where his main evolutionary asset, his brain, was so little use to him. None of us is going to accept this sceptical diagnosis. We cannot do so, because our involvement in moral isolationism does not flow from apathy, but from a rather acute concern about human hypocrisy and other forms of wickedness. But we polarize that concern around a few selected moral truths. We are rightly angry with those who despise, oppress or steamroll other cultures. We think that doing these things is actually *wrong*. But this is itself a moral judgement. We could not condemn oppression and insolence if we thought that all our condemnations were just a trivial local quirk of our own culture. We could still less do it if we tried to stop judging altogether.

Real moral scepticism, in fact, could lead only to inaction, to our losing all interest in moral questions, most of all in those which concern other societies. When we discuss these things, it becomes instantly clear how far we are from doing this.

Suppose, for instance, that I criticize the bisecting Samurai, that I say his behaviour is brutal. What will usually happen next is that someone will protest, will say that I have no right to make criticisms like that of another culture. But it is most unlikely that he will use this move to end the discussion of the subject. Instead, he will justify the Samurai. He will try to fill in the background, to make me understand the custom, by explaining the exalted ideals of discipline and devotion which produced it. He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally. He may well suggest that this is a healthier attitude than our own obsession with security. He may add, too, that the wayfarers did not

seriously mind being bisected, that in principle they accepted the whole arrangement.

Now an objector who talks like this is implying that it is possible to understand alien customs. That is just what he is trying to make me do. And he implies, too, that if I do succeed in understanding them, I shall do something better than giving up judging them. He expects me to change my present judgement to a truer one—namely, one that is favourable. And the standards I must use to do this cannot just be Samurai standards. They have to be ones current in my own culture. Ideals like discipline and devotion will not move anybody unless he himself accepts them. As it happens, neither discipline nor devotion is very popular in the West at present. Anyone who appeals to them may well have to do some more arguing to make *them* acceptable, before he can use them to explain the Samurai. But if he does succeed here, he will have persuaded us, not just that there was something to be said for them in ancient Japan, but that there would be here as well.

Isolating barriers simply cannot arise here. If we accept something as a serious moral truth about one culture, we can't refuse to apply it—in however different an outward form—to other cultures as well, wherever circumstance admit it. If we refuse to do this, we just are not taking the other culture seriously.

This becomes clear if we look at the last argument used by my objector—that of justification by consent of the victim. It is suggested that sudden bisection is quite in order, *provided* that it takes place between consenting adults. I cannot now discuss how conclusive this justification is. What I am pointing out is simply that it can only work if we believe that *consent* can make such a transaction respectable—and this is a thoroughly modern and Western idea. It would probably never occur to a Samurai: if it did, it would surprise him very much. It is *our* standard.

In applying it, too, we are likely to make another typically Western demand. We shall ask for good factual evidence that the wayfarers actually do have this rather surprising taste—that they are really willing to be bisected. In applying Western standards in this way, we are not being confused or irrelevant. We are asking the questions which arise *from where we stand*, questions which we can see the sense of. We do this because asking questions which you can't see the sense of is humbug. Certainly we can extend our questioning by imaginative effort. We can come to understand other societies better. By doing so, we may make their questions our own,

or we may see that they are really forms of the questions which we are asking already. This is not impossible. It is just very hard work. The obstacles which often prevent it are simply those of ordinary ignorance, laziness and prejudice.

If there were really an isolating barrier, of course, our own culture could never have been formed. It is no sealed box, but a fertile jungle of different influences—Greek, Jewish, Roman, Norse, Celtic and so forth, into which further influences are still pouring—American, Indian, Japanese, Jamaican, you name it. The moral isolationist's picture of separate, unmixable cultures is quite unreal. People who talk about British history usually stress the value of this fertilizing mix, no doubt rightly. But this is not just an odd fact about Britain. Except for the very smallest and most remote, all cultures are formed out of many streams. All have the problem of digesting and assimilating things which, at the start, they do not understand. All have the choice of learning something from this challenge, or, alternatively, of refusing to learn, and fighting it mindlessly instead.

This universal predicament has been obscured by the fact that anthropologists used to concentrate largely on very small and remote cultures, which did not seem to have this problem. These tiny societies, which had often forgotten their own history, made neat, self-contained subjects for study.

No doubt it was valuable to emphasize their remoteness, their extreme strangeness, their independence of our cultural tradition. This emphasis was, I think, the root of moral isolationism. But, as the tribal studies themselves showed, even there the anthropologists were able to interpret what they saw and make judgements—often favourable—about the tribesmen. And the tribesmen, too, were quite equal to making judgements about the anthropologists—and about the tourists and Coca-Cola salesmen who followed them. Both sets of judgements, no doubt, were somewhat hasty, both have been refined in the light of further experience. A similar transaction between us and the Samurai might take even longer. But that is no reason at all for deeming it impossible. Morally as well as physically, there is only one world, and we all have to live in it.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does Midgley mean by "moral isolationism"?
2. Why does Midgley suggest that moral isolationism leaves us in difficulty in forming judgements on our own culture?
3. What is Midgley's example of "trying out one's new sword" intended to show?