distributive justice in that it doesn't require that you know anything either about the individuals who benefit from the procedure or about the quantities of benefits and burdens they receive. Is this advantage offset by any disadvantages?

5. Do you think it is possible for a whole society to embody pure procedural justice as a way of distributing benefits and burdens? Do you think a capitalist economic system succeeds in doing this? If so, are all of the resultant inequalities just? If not, could the capitalist system be improved upon?
6. Do you believe (as section 10.5 suggests) that, in the end, pure procedural justice (as a principle of distributive justice) rests upon a selective principle emphasizing what people deserve?

Society is the school in which we learn to distinguish between right and wrong. The headmaster is Custom, and the lessons are the same for all the members of the Community.[1]

Edward Westermarck

Ethical Relativism

CHAPTER 11

11.1 CULTURAL DIVERSITY

We know from anthropologists and historians that different peoples value different things and in different degrees, and that customs often vary from group to group. Cannibalism and head-hunting are practiced in some societies but frowned upon in others. Having more than one spouse is prohibited by some peoples but permitted by others.

We also know that even within societies customs change. Slavery was once widely accepted in America but is now condemned. Premarital sex was once almost universally condemned but is now widely accepted. And certain groups within societies have their own customs and practices. In our society, Roman Catholic women used to cover their heads before entering church, men did not. Orthodox Jewish men cover their heads at all times, women do not. The Amish ride in horses and buggies, vegetarians eat no meat, and Quakers dress simply. Most people do not.

More specifically still, standards often vary from community to community, even within a society. Obscenity, for example, is understood in the law as what the "average person applying contemporary community standards" would find sexually offensive.[2] But those standards vary from place to place, which means that what is obscene in one community may not be so in another (for example, in 1983 a judge concluded that the community standards in New York were so low that nothing is obscene there,[3] but there might well be many things that by this definition are obscene, say, in Peoria or Salt Lake City).

But does this mean that morality is relative? That what is right for one person or group or culture may not be so for another? This is the problem of ethical relativism. It is one of the most complex and difficult problems in ethics. It is also, arguably, the central problem in ethics, one to which virtually all others eventually lead. Let us begin by trying to understand better what ethical relativism is.

11.2 WHAT IS ETHICAL RELATIVISM?

To understand ethical relativism (or "relativism" for short), it will be helpful to distinguish three theses:

A. Moral beliefs and practices vary from culture to culture.
B. Morality depends on (1) **human nature** (for example, facts about human reason, motivation, emotions, and capacity for pleasure and pain); or (2) the **human condition** (facts about the way human life is constrained by the natural order, such as that all humans are mortal); or (3) specific **social and cultural circumstances** (for example, facts about local traditions and customs); or all three of these.
C. What is morally right or wrong (as opposed to what is merely thought to be right or wrong) may vary fundamentally from person to person or culture to culture.

Thesis A simply affirms cultural diversity, which—as we have seen—is not problematic.[4] It does not mean that every moral belief and practice varies from culture to culture, only that there are such variations, and that in some cases they are pronounced.

Thesis B—what we may call the **dependency thesis**—asserts that morality is determined by, or conditional on, the nature of human beings and/or the world they live in.[5] This is the view of those who believe that morality's function is to guide human conduct and that it has evolved over the centuries in response to practical human needs. As we have seen (section 7.4), it is also the view of many natural law ethicists. If there were no human beings, in this view, there would be no such thing as morality.[6] Any theory that asserts the dependency thesis we may call a form of **ethical conditionalism.**

Thesis C represents **ethical relativism.** It implies both Thesis A and Thesis B but goes beyond them.[7] It is a thesis about what is *actually* right and wrong, not merely about what is thought to be right and wrong. (Even if some relativists believe that what is right reduces in the end to what people, under appropriate conditions, *think* is right.)

Only skeptics seriously question whether some acts are right and others wrong. And only moral nihilists deny such distinctions outright. Most people differ only about *which* acts are right and which are wrong. (Even philosophers rarely question whether these notions apply to conduct; they disagree mainly over how to explain them and how to justify the judgments in which they occur.)

Ethical relativists are neither skeptics nor nihilists. They believe in moral right and wrong. It is just that they contend that what is basically right for one person or culture may be wrong for another.

The qualification "basically" is important here. There are some difference in right and wrong that can be accepted by anyone, relativist or not. No one says for example, that everyone, of whatever size and nutritional needs, should ea exactly the same food and in the same amounts; or that everyone shoul wear exactly the same clothing, regardless of climate. And it is clearly permis sible to put a child out to play in shorts and T-shirt in the tropics but wrong t do so in the arctic; or to dive into a pool when it is full but not when it is empty That is, no one denies that some acts are right under some conditions bu wrong under others. The question is (1) whether *all* actions similarly depend and depend exclusively, on variable personal, social, cultural, or environmen tal conditions; and (2) whether that accounts for variations in what is basicall right and wrong for different peoples and cultures. Relativism says yes to bot questions.

Relativism does not, however, try to tell us which acts and practices ar right and wrong (although to the extent that it characterizes basic cultura diversity, it will in fact be describing what it takes to be right and wrong ir various cultures). It says only that however we answer that question, we mus acknowledge that an act or practice may be both right and wrong at the *same* time—for example, right in one culture, wrong in another. In other words, differing moral judgments about the same conduct may both be correct at the same time.[8]

Relativism takes different forms depending on how radically right and wrong are thought to vary. If they are thought to be the same for people of the same culture but to vary from culture to culture, this represents **cultural** (or **social**) **relativism.** If, however, they are believed to vary from person to person, this represents what we may call **extreme** (or **individual**) **relativism.**

11.3 UNIVERSALISM AND ABSOLUTISM

Ethical universalism, on the other hand, holds that what is fundamentally right and wrong is the same for all people. It does not deny Thesis A; it concedes there is variation in what people *think* is right and wrong. And it can acknowledge some variation in what is actually right and wrong of the sort noted earlier. But it says that if two people differ about what is *basically* right and wrong, at least one of them must be mistaken.

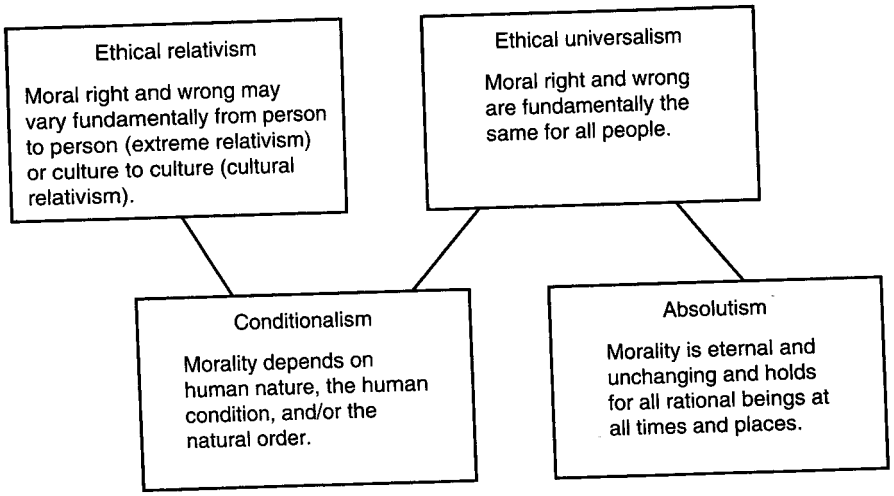
Universalism need not even deny Thesis B, although it *may* do so. It can acknowledge that morality is essentially a human creation that has evolved in response to human needs. It simply maintains that, whatever morality's origins, what is prescribed as right and wrong is basically the same for everyone.

Some have thought, for example, that morality is rooted in sympathy, which is a part of human nature. If so, morality obviously does not, and could not, exist apart from human beings (or any other beings with a psychology like ours). If, moreover, humans are the product of evolution, then the sentiment of sympathy must likewise have evolved over time, and morality with it. But if sympathy leads all people to make essentially the same basic moral judgments—that is, leads them to morally approve and disapprove basically the same things (and, of course, if these judgments represent what is actually right and

wrong)—then morality will be universalistic, even though it is conditional on human nature.

When universalism does deny Thesis B, it represents **ethical absolutism,** the view that there exists an eternal and unchanging moral law that transcends the physical world and is the same for all people at all times and places. It is valid independently of the thoughts, feelings, and even the existence of humans. If there are extraterrestrial forms of intelligent life, they are bound by it, too. Just as the truth that two plus two equals four would not change if all humans died off tomorrow, so the moral law would remain unchanged as well.

We can represent the interrelationships among these various theories as in the diagram below. This diagram suggests that there are two related but distinguishable issues here: (1) between universalists (whether they be absolutists or conditionalists) and relativists concerning whether right and wrong are the same for all people; and (2) between absolutists and conditionalists over whether morality depends on human nature or the world. In other words, relativists and universalists differ over whether Thesis C is correct, and absolutists and conditionalists differ over whether Thesis B is correct.



The issue between relativism and universalism is not about what the correct moral judgments are. They are not competing normative theories. Rather, they are metaethical theories. The issue between them concerns what the relationship is among correct judgments, whatever those judgments are; specifically, it is whether those judgments are all consistent with one another. In saying that different judgments about the same kinds of acts may both be true at the same time, relativism is saying that correct (true or valid) moral judgments are not all consistent with one another. Extreme relativists can allow for the coherence of moral beliefs and attitudes within a single individual, and cultural relativists can allow for it within a whole culture. But neither can allow for it among all people.[9] Universalism, in contrast, in holding that the correct basic standards, virtues, or principles are the same for all people, maintains that morality overall is a coherent whole. It may not appear to be a coherent whole, because not all people may agree on what those basic principles or virtues are, much less about what particular judgments they imply for particular cases. But if they all saw things clearly enough, they would agree.

11.4 WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE WHETHER RELATIVISM IS TRUE?

Multiculturalism and the Abuse of Women

Many people oppose relativism because they feel its acceptance would erode moral standards. They believe that if people became convinced that right and wrong are merely relative, they would lose all inhibitions and simply do whatever they want. Universalism, in contrast,—and particularly absolutism—is thought to provide a firm foundation for morality. It is needed to make people toe the moral line.

This view may or may not be correct, but it cannot simply be assumed. To determine its truth would require studying the correlation between such beliefs and actual conduct. But whether relativism is true does not—unless truth itself is relative—depend on how people would behave if they believed it were true, and even less does it depend on what they may *wish* were true. For that reason, we should try to assess relativism on its merits, not on the basis of a predisposition to approve or disapprove of it.[10]

The importance of the issues it raises goes beyond what to us are bizarre practices of other peoples. Head-hunting, cannibalism, and human sacrifice, for example—the kinds of practices typically mentioned in connection with relativism—are not issues that engage us directly. They are matters of curiosity to most of us, unless we are anthropologists.

Other problems of contemporary concern bear much more directly on our lives. One, for example, concerns multiculturalism; another, the abuse of women.

Some people hold that Western culture is superior to others and deserves priority in educating students in our society. Others contend that Western culture is dominated by the values of racism and white male supremacy and so is detrimental to both our society and others. (Many people, it should be added, do not share either of these views; some, for example, think that all cultures are of equal worth.) Both views, which are here oversimplified, acknowledge there are other cultures: those of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, for example. (Some argue that within a culture may exist many subcultures, such as a black culture, female and male cultures, a rock culture, gun culture, drug culture, and so on.)[11] But they differ about the importance that should be attached to them in school and in university curricula.

If cultural relativism is true, the standards and values of Western culture cannot be shown to be more correct (or true or valid) than any other. Hence they cannot be shown to be either of greater worth or more deserving of being taught than any other (at least from the standpoint of truth.)[12] The same with other cultures. People from one culture can, of course, point out that some customs and practices of other cultures are wrong by the standards of

their own. But there is no objective standpoint from which they can show theirs to be superior.

If relativism is not true, however, there may be universal standards by which some cultures can be shown to be superior to others, and if this could be shown of Western culture, it would be a reason for giving it priority in education (even if other considerations besides truth, such as a desire to improve understanding among peoples, might argue for other cultures also being taught). The point is that the issue of multiculturalism can be thoroughly understood only by taking seriously the question of relativism.

But relativism bears on issues of greater urgency than merely what is to be taught in schools and colleges. One of these is the abuse of women, particularly wives.

Wife abuse is an extensive problem in our society, and is coming to be recognized as one of the ways in which women have long been systematically mistreated.[13] But among the Masai tribe of Tanzania in Africa, wife beating is the custom, and it is generally accepted even by wives themselves. "If I do wrong, my husband can beat me," one such wife says. Her husband explains, "If the roof leaks, the husband beats his wife" (because care of the home is the wife's responsibility). He adds, "I must, because other men will laugh if I don't."[14]

Are we to say, then, that it is permissible for husbands to beat their wives among the Masai but wrong in America? Would it be presumptuous of us to criticize the Masai for wife beating in the same way it would be presumptuous to fault them for dressing differently from us, listening to different music, or eating different food? Or is there a moral standard that is the same for all people by which we can judge wife beating to be wrong—or right—wherever it occurs, regardless of customs?

These are the sorts of issues at stake in the debate over relativism. Many differences in practices are matters of curiosity but of no particular moral concern. But some are matters of the well-being and happiness—even the life and death—of other human beings.

Let's try to assess relativism, beginning with two objections that relate to the point just made about judging other peoples or cultures.

11.5 RELATIVISM AND MORAL DISAGREEMENTS

I should guard against a possible misunderstanding, however: It is sometimes thought that if relativism is true then we cannot judge the conduct of other people or other cultures. But this is not quite correct. If you disapprove of racial slurs, you can judge that I am wrong to make them even if you are an extreme relativist. In so doing, you simply reflect your disapproval of what I do. And if I come from a Moslem society you may judge that I am wrong to have four wives even if you are a cultural relativist. That simply reflects your society's disapproval of polygamy.[15]

Relativism does not say that you cannot judge the behavior of other people or groups, but it must concede that from a moral standpoint there is not much point in doing so, and indeed that it is even presumptuous to do so. It says only that when different individuals or groups make different judgments about the same conduct, both may be correct.

But if that is the case, then you might object that there is no way to resolve moral disagreements. And this would mean that rational moral discourse has no place in human affairs.

This is a serious objection, but it weighs differently against extreme relativism than it does against cultural relativism. Let us see why.

If two people disagree, say, over the morality of abortion, according to extreme relativism they can both be correct. Abortion is right "for one" and wrong "for the other." The same practice is then, in some sense, both right and wrong at the same time.

According to cultural relativism, on the other hand, both persons cannot be correct—at least not if they are from the same society. Suppose, for purposes of illustration, that the cultural relativist holds the following view:

"X is right" means "My (the speaker's) society approves of X."

and

"X is wrong" means "My (the speaker's) society disapproves of X."

If abortion is an approved practice in a particular society, then in this view anyone from that society who says it is wrong is mistaken. By the same token, if abortion is a prohibited practice, then anyone who says it is permissible is mistaken. Which of the two it is requires a close study of the society in question. But unless the society is so deeply divided that a conclusive judgment cannot be reached, a disagreement between two people from the same society will at least in principle be resolvable. But if the two come from different societies, then for a cultural relativist both may be correct. In ancient India, for example, abortion was condemned; in ancient Greece, it was approved. According to cultural relativism, an Indian and a Greek disputing over abortion could both have been correct, for abortion would have been right in one society and wrong in the other.

So within a society or culture (though not among societies and cultures), cultural relativism allows there may be an objective standard by which to resolve moral disputes. In this it differs from extreme relativism.

Notice the term "objective." It is important to note that relativists need not be **subjectivists** (although they may be, and extreme relativists typically are). That is, they need not say that right and wrong are determined solely by the thoughts, feelings, attitudes, or emotions of the person judging. They may, like cultural relativists, be **objectivists** in maintaining that right and wrong are determined by standards external to, and perhaps independent of, the person judging. It is just that they contend that those standards—usually customs, practices, and associated rules—vary from society to society or culture to culture. Therefore we should not confuse the distinction between relativism and universalism with the distinction between subjectivism and objectivism.

But what of moral disagreements in the extreme relativist's view—does the objection hold here? It certainly carries much greater weight. But there may still be ways to resolve moral disagreements even in the case of subjectivistic extreme relativism.

Suppose you say abortion is wrong and I say it is right. Suppose, further, that we are both extreme relativists. Must we simply agree to disagree and be content to acknowledge that what is right for one is wrong for the other?

Not necessarily. If I can get you to change your beliefs or attitudes, I can *make* abortion right for you. And I might succeed in doing so if I know enough about you and why you feel as you do—because then I can call your attention to facts of which you may have been unaware or to which you may have been inattentive. And that might cause you to feel differently. I might, for example, document the effects of unwanted children on people living in poverty, or explain the burden it imposes on women to have the state interfere in their control over their own bodies, or detail the hazards of "back-alley" abortions when abortion is illegal. You, by the same token, might just as easily try to change my outlook. You might try to convince me that the fetus is a person, or show me gruesome pictures of aborted fetuses, or call my attention to interviews with women who considered abortion but are now glad they bore the child. There is no guarantee that either of us will succeed, of course. But then there is also no guarantee that either of us will succeed if there is a standard according to which abortion is universally right or wrong.

What we cannot do, however, if relativism is true (and can do if universalism is true) is profitably try to change one another's beliefs by producing moral reasons for our respective positions. If we are extreme relativists, we both *know* that abortion is wrong for you and right for me. And we both know why. There will be little to discuss on that issue. We can, then, profitably pursue only *non*moral ways of trying to change one another's beliefs or attitudes.

So, in the cultural relativist's view, there may be an objective, rational way to resolve disagreements within a society, but there will be none for disagreements between societies (or members thereof). And there will be no way to solve disagreements in the extreme relativist's view, whether within a society or between societies, though there may still be nonmoral ways.[16]

11.6 CAN THERE EVEN BE GENUINE MORAL DISAGREEMENTS ACCORDING TO RELATIVISM?

To discuss whether it is possible to resolve moral disagreements presupposes that there are moral disagreements to resolve. An even more serious objection is that if relativism is correct there can be no genuine moral disagreements in the first place. There can only be the appearance of such disagreements. Because, according to this objection, there obviously are moral disagreements, the objection concludes that relativism is mistaken. Let's try to understand why a critic might argue this.

Suppose an extreme relativist were to defend the following definitions:

"X is right" means "I (the speaker) approve of X."

and

"X is wrong" means "I (the speaker) disapprove of X."

According to such an account,[17] if Kim and Michelle disagree over the morality of abortion, then when Kim says, "Abortion is right," she is saying only, in effect, "I approve of abortion," and when Michelle says "Abortion is wrong," she is saying only, "I disapprove of abortion."

Now obviously, the statements, "I approve of abortion" and "I disapprove of abortion," when spoken by Kim and Michelle respectively, can both be correct at the same time. People approve and disapprove different things all the time. But if they are both correct, what are Kim and Michelle disagreeing about? How can there be any genuine moral disagreement between them?

There can't, if moral disagreements concern only matters of fact. The only facts relevant to the truth of their respective claims concern their respective approval and disapproval. And each knows she approves (or disapproves) and that the other does the opposite. The same objection, appropriately modified, applies to cultural relativism. If the cultural relativist held the definitions discussed in the previous section, then when two people from different cultures seem to disagree, each is saying only that his or her society approves (or disapproves) of the practice in question. And both can obviously be correct.

But relativists might deny that moral disagreements must be only about matters of fact. They might distinguish, as some philosophers have, between disagreements in belief (over matters of fact) and disagreements in attitude (over how one feels about the facts).[18] If so, they might maintain that moral disagreements are, in the end, basically disagreements in attitude; or at least, that attitudes are the central element in such disagreements, determining when they terminate and by what means.

In this view, Kim and Michelle may agree completely on the facts about abortion. And they may understand perfectly well that when each makes the judgment she does she is describing only her own approval or disapproval. Still, they *feel* differently about abortion. One woman's emotions are engaged for it; the other's, against. And each may want the other to feel as she does. Their disagreement is in feeling and attitude, not belief.

If feelings, attitudes, and emotions are at the heart of moral disagreements, then the relativist may say that there is a genuine disagreement here, and that the objection reflects a misunderstanding of the nature of such disagreement. The two objections just mentioned, then, are not fatal to relativism, although they pose serious problems for it.

11.7 IS THERE CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN BASIC MORAL BELIEFS?

Relativists typically attach considerable importance to cultural diversity, and the existence of such diversity is indisputable. What is not so obvious is that there is also diversity in *basic* moral beliefs. A simple example may help explain why.

The British drive on the left-hand side of the road, Americans on the right. These practices are legally enforced, and British and American laws differ in this regard. But these differing practices do not necessarily establish differences in basic beliefs. Formulators of the laws in the two countries may have been

acting on the same principle, such as that it is for the good of everyone alike that people in the same society abide by the same rules of the road (so as to minimize confusion and accidents). It probably does not matter much whether people drive on the left or on the right. But it matters a great deal whether everyone (at least in the same society) does the *same* as everyone else. So, although U.S. and British practices differ, the same principle may well underlie both practices.

In less legalistic examples, anthropologists report that the peoples of British New Guinea used to practice infanticide. In so doing, they tended to spare girls because of the price they would eventually bring as brides. But in Tahiti, boys were spared because they were considered of more use in war.[19] Despite the fact that their practices differed in this regard, both peoples may well have acted on the same principle: preserve those children of greatest value. They clearly valued boys or girls differently,[20] but they may have held the same belief regarding how those deemed to be of greatest value are to be treated.

Similarly, the Incas are said to have looked after the aged even when they were unfit for work, whereas some Eskimo groups and the people of West Victoria (Australia) killed the elderly. These practices are radically different, but they do not by themselves establish differing underlying values or moral beliefs. The Eskimos killed the elderly in the conviction that only those who died violently were happy in the afterlife, and the West Victorians killed them to spare them the risk of being tortured and killed by enemies. So they, no less than the Incas, may have both been acting out of concern for what is best for the aged. It is just that they differed in their beliefs about what that was.

Thus even if moral practices diverge widely in the world, there might yet be underlying agreement on basic values and principles. This pair of examples, of course, does not show that there *is* such agreement; to show that would require extensive inquiry. But it does show that considerable cultural diversity is compatible with universality in basic values and principles.

11.8 CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN BASIC MORAL BELIEFS WOULD NOT ESTABLISH RELATIVISM

Relativists can concede that *some* values and practices are common to all people; indeed, they could hardly do otherwise. All peoples value food, practice at least some heterosexual relations, and care for at least some of their offspring; otherwise they would not have survived. And some practices, such as truth telling and restraint in taking human life, seem necessary for the very existence of society (if people killed one another as readily as they swat flies or slap mosquitoes, social life would be impossible). It is just that many relativists believe there are differences in moral beliefs and practices among peoples that cannot be explained away as due to different applications of the same principle.

Suppose the belief stated in the preceding sentence is true. Would it be enough to establish relativism? I want to suggest some reasons for thinking it would not.

Shortly before his death Socrates (469–399 B.C.E) emphasized that some people might be in the right even if they went against the opinions of the multitude. As he awaited execution, his friend Crito tried to persuade him to escape, citing, among other things, what people would think if he (Crito) let his friend go to his death. There followed this exchange between them:

> **SOCRATES:** . . . Reflect, then, do you not think it reasonable to say that we should not respect all the opinions of men but only some, nor the opinions of all men but only of some men? What do you think? Is not this true?
>
> **CRITO:** It is.
>
> **SOCRATES:** And we should respect the good opinions, and not the worthless ones?
>
> **CRITO:** Yes.
>
> **SOCRATES:** But the good opinions are those of the wise, and the worthless ones those of the foolish?
>
> **CRITO:** Of course.
>
> **SOCRATES:** . . . And, Crito, to be brief, is it not the same in everything? and, therefore, in questions of justice and injustice, and of the base and the honorable, and of good and evil, which we are now examining, ought we to follow the opinion of the many and fear that, or the opinion of the one man who understands these matters (if we can find him), and feel more shame and fear before him than before all other men?[21]

Socrates' point is that the mere fact that the multitude of people in society hold a certain opinion (and he was thinking of those in Athenian society at the time[22]) does not make the opinion correct; what is just or unjust, or good or evil, is not a function of the views of the majority. In this he was going against the views of the Sophists (professional teachers in ancient Greece), who were ethical relativists. In moral matters, he was saying, we must pay attention only to the opinions of the wise.

This suggests that even if one could establish that a particular society held basic moral beliefs that differed from those of other societies, that fact alone would not show that those beliefs were correct, even for that society.[23] Isn't it possible that a few people—or even just one—could be right on a moral issue even if the rest of society thought otherwise?

Like Socrates, Thoreau thought it *was* possible. We have noted that slavery was once generally accepted by whites in our society. But a small minority of abolitionists like Thoreau argued that it was wrong. And he spoke passionately of the force of example on the issue:

> I know this well, that if one thousand, if one hundred, if ten men whom I could name—if ten *honest* men only—ay, if *one* HONEST man, in this State of Massachusetts, *ceasing to hold slaves,* were actually to withdraw from this copartnership [with the government], and be locked up in the county jail therefor, it would be the abolition of slavery in America. For it matters not how small the beginning may seem to be: what is once well done is done forever.[24]

Throughout history there are examples of people like Socrates—Jesus, Thoreau, Susan B. Anthony, Emma Goldman, Mohandas Gandhi, and Martin

Luther King, Jr.—who set themselves against deeply entrenched beliefs and practices in their societies. Whether or not one agrees with everything they stood for, we should consider whether it is possible that they were right and the majority who opposed them wrong. That possibility alone should make us cautious about unquestioningly assuming that conventional beliefs and practices, however deeply entrenched, are right.[25]

So even if cultural diversity in basic moral beliefs and practices could be conclusively established, that would not by itself establish relativism. It *would* establish some important facts to try to understand and explain. But those facts alone would not show that the beliefs in question were correct or that the accepted practices ought to be engaged in.

Establishing such diversity would not even establish the dependency thesis, because such diversity is compatible with absolutism, which denies the dependency thesis. If, as absolutists believe, there is an absolute moral law, it does not follow that everyone knows what that law is, or even believes that there is one. (The very existence of relativists confirms that some people do not believe there is an absolute moral law, and the existence of missionaries who try to enlighten other peoples about what the missionaries take to be absolute moral truths confirms that some people who believe there is an absolute moral law do not think that everyone knows what it is.) If absolutism is compatible with cultural diversity, then such diversity is not enough to establish the dependency thesis.[26]

So establishing Thesis A does not establish either Thesis B or Thesis C.

11.9 UNIVERSALISM AND THE GROUND OF MORALITY

But if the truth of Thesis A (see section 11.2) would not be enough to establish relativism, the truth of Thesis B would not do so, either. It is possible that morality depends on human beings or the world and yet that basically the same things are right and wrong for all people.

To be a universalist, one need not be an absolutist; one need not say there is an eternal and unchanging moral law. One need say only there is a *ground* of morality that is the same for all people and according to which the same acts are *in general* right or wrong for everyone. This ground may be a sentiment like sympathy (as discussed in section 11.3), a feeling such as compassion, a capacity such as conscience, or a faculty such as intuition. Its salient feature is that, if properly attended to, it reveals certain actions to be right or wrong wherever they occur (it might either identify properties that *make* acts right or identify properties associated with right acts). It is universal because it characterizes everyone alike, whatever the culture to which someone belongs. But it need not be eternal or even unchanging; it may have come into existence with human beings and evolved over time.

But if relativism would not follow from the truth of either Thesis A or Thesis B (or the combination of the two), the burden is on relativists to show what it is about the fact that different cultures have different beliefs and practices

that *makes* those beliefs correct and those practices right. And relativists mus do so in a way that does not presuppose standards that may be tacitly share by other cultures and that explain their different beliefs and practices.

11.10 ARE LOGIC AND TRUTH THEMSELVES RELATIVE?

Perhaps the most ambitious way to try to do this philosophically would be tc argue that logical reasoning and/or truth itself is relative. This would require a sophisticated argument, one that would call into question widely held assumptions about language, knowledge, and even philosophy itself. I cannot do justice to such an argument here, but I can sketch its general outlines.

In this view, the very criteria of what is good and bad or valid and invalid in the way of reasoning—like the notions of right and wrong—grow out of the practices of communities and cannot be extended beyond them. To criticize relativism on the grounds that one cannot go from the fact that there are certain practices in a particular culture to the conclusion that those practices are right is—in effect, to impose one's own conception of good reasoning (which some say is a Western, masculine conception) on the assessment of other cultures. And that conception may have no force in other cultures. Furthermore, it might be claimed that the very notion of truth itself is similarly relative to communal practices as they evolve in particular cultures and has no meaning in the abstract. So the idea of a moral standard that purports to be true for everyone alike makes no sense. There simply is no Olympian standpoint from which to render it intelligible.

Although this argument raises more questions than can be evaluated here, I can give two responses to it. The first is to point out that the same reasoning that shows that cultural diversity in basic moral beliefs would not establish relativism also shows that cultural *uniformity* in such beliefs would not establish universalism.

If a belief's being held by the majority in a society does not make it right, simply multiplying the number of societies in which majorities hold that belief would not make it right either. The same with established practices. Again, men have dominated women in nearly all cultures, but it does not follow that they ought to do so. War has traditionally been used to settle disputes by nearly all cultures, but it does not follow that it ought to be. If someone supports war or the domination of women, he or she must find other reasons than these for doing so. Pointing out their near-universal acceptance is not enough.

So even if the question of whether there is cultural diversity in basic moral beliefs could be conclusively settled one way or the other, that would not resolve the issue between relativism and universalism. And that means, in turn, that the reasoning by which that is shown to be the case is neutral between relativism and universalism. This conclusion does not rebut the claim that the validity of such reasoning is itself relative; that would take extensive argument. But it does show that this application of the reasoning, and the use of the conception of logic it embodies, does not bias the case against relativism.

Second, to argue for the relativity of truth does not actually support relativism; in fact, it scuttles relativism along with universalism. To be important, relativism must account for the nature of morality wherever it is found, not just in this or that culture. If one cannot make sense of the possible truth of such an account—which would mean that we can use the concept of truth cross-culturally—then relativism as well as universalism is not a viable theory. Rather than salvaging relativism, then, if such an argument were successful it would undermine the whole dispute between relativism and universalism.

11.11 RELATIVISM AND MORAL TOLERANCE

We should consider one further defense of relativism: the idea that if people think relativism is true, they will be more tolerant of moral differences than they would otherwise be.[27] If you believe the moral opinions of your culture have no greater authority than those of any other, perhaps you will be more accepting of people from other cultures who disagree with you. And if you are an extreme relativist and believe that the moral opinions of other individuals are equally as valid as your own, perhaps you will better tolerate behavior of which you disapprove. (Relativists who are offended by polygamy and homosexuality, for example, might become more tolerant of those practices.)

But just as the alleged bad consequences of accepting relativism (see section 11.4) would be hard to establish, this good consequence would also be hard to establish. One would have to study relativists and see whether they are in fact more tolerant than universalists.

On the face of it, there is about as much reason to think people would *not* be more tolerant if they were relativists than if they were not relativists. It is clear, for example, that many cultures are intolerant in religious, racial, or sexual matters. Many practice discrimination rooted in centuries of custom and tradition. So it is hard to avoid concluding that, according to relativism, intolerance is permissible in those cultures, and thus that anyone living in those cultures who wants to do right will have to cooperate with the intolerance.[28]

In any event, even if there might be more tolerance if relativism is true and everyone knows it is true, there might well be less tolerance if relativism is true but most people think it is false. If people think relativism is false—and, moreover, mistakenly think there *is* a standard of right and wrong for everyone alike[29]—they are likely to argue for the correctness of their own views against their adversaries' views in cross-cultural disagreements. But if relativism is true, no such arguments will succeed. They will not succeed because there won't be any objective standard by which the correctness of either side's position can be demonstrated. This will make it easy for each to dismiss the other's arguments—indeed, they will have good grounds for doing so—and can readily lead each side to conclude that the other is not only wrong, but culpably so. When that happens, particularly among nations, the temptation is to try to

11.12 CONCLUSION

If the preceding is correct, formidable problems confront relativism. This does not mean that it has been refuted; but it suggests that unless relativists can find ways around these problems—or unless alternative theories prove to have even greater difficulties—the theory cannot claim our assent.[31]

In any event, most of Western moral philosophy has been nonrelativistic, sometimes absolutistic, but at least generally universalistic. Whether or not it has been right to adopt that orientation depends in part on the plausibility of the theories it has produced. Most of the theories considered in the preceding chapters are normative. In this they differ from relativism and universalism, which, once again, are metaethical theories—they are *about* morality but do not, as such, seek to provide us with the content of morality—the rules, principles, values, or virtues of which it is composed. For this content, we need normative ethics.

Notes

1. Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1960), p. 50.
2. The definition is more complex than this, and depends on whether such a person would find that the material, as a whole, appealed "to the prurient interest in sex," portrayed sexual conduct "in a patently offensive way," and lacked "serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value." This material, including the quotation from the judge in the text, is quoted from *The New York Times,* 19 January 1992.
3. Ibid.
4. Cultural diversity, it should be noted, is sometimes—and somewhat misleadingly—called *cultural relativism.* It is also sometimes called *descriptive relativism.* See, for example, W. K. Frankena, *Ethics,* 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 109.
5. I borrow the term "dependency thesis" from John Ladd. See John Ladd, ed., *Ethical Relativism* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), p. 3. The thesis affirms that morality is relative to human beings; hence it represents ethical *relativity.* But it does not of itself establish ethical *relativism* in the sense I define. To avoid confusion, I speak of "ethical conditionalism" rather than "ethical relativity," and distinguish it from "ethical relativism." As I am using it, the dependency thesis holds that what *makes* some acts right and others wrong are certain facts about human nature, and so forth—not merely that such facts are presupposed by calling specific acts right or wrong, which can be granted even by absolutism. (If there should be an eternal law that says, "Eat no junk food," the wrongness of my eating junk food presupposes certain facts about me and the world, even though, given those facts, what makes my act wrong is that it violates the eternal law.)
6. I should note that B1 and B2 could be understood broadly enough to include the possibility that human nature or the human condition is defined partly in religious terms. Thus (as we saw in section 7.7) St. Thomas Aquinas holds that the natural law, which is an important part of the moral law, is impressed on human nature in the form of

some people think that original sin as understood by Christianity is a defining feature of the human condition. If B1 and B2 are understood this broadly, then it would not necessarily be true that—but for human beings—there would be no morality, because there might be thought to be a moral law that is applicable to nonhumans, like angels.

7. By saying that Thesis C implies both Thesis A and B, I mean that those who hold C normally hold A and B as well, not that those who hold C *must* hold A and B.
8. Just as cultural diversity is sometimes called "cultural relativism," ethical relativism is also sometimes called "cultural relativism."
9. Unless by some strange coincidence it just happened that all peoples arrived at the same judgments.
10. A relativist *might* concede that this assessment is true for people or groups judging that relativism is bad. It is just that for the relativist the judgment that relativism is good might also be true.
11. It might be argued that right and wrong vary among these more loosely defined cultures as well, but that is a controversial claim I cannot go into here, except to say that most of what I say about relativism can also, with appropriate qualifications, be applied to this claim.
12. There are actually two issues here: first, whether the moral standards and values of Western culture are superior to others (presumably in the sense of being more nearly correct or valid); and second, whether Western culture is superior in the sense of being more valuable than others. To maintain the superiority of Western culture in the first sense might be grounds for maintaining it in the second as well; but one might maintain superiority in the second sense (say, on grounds of artistic and scientific achievement) without maintaining it in the first. Even then, however, one would be saying that there are some standards of value that are cross-cultural, and according to which Western culture stands out.
13. Estimates are that as many as two million women each year may suffer such abuse. This figure, a federal estimate, includes domestic violence against women by male companions as well as by husbands, according to a *Washington Post* report ("Exposing the War at Home—A Photographer Takes a Close-Up Look at the Face of Domestic Violence," by Marjorie Williams) carried in the Rochester, New York, *Times-Union,* 23 January 1992, p. C1.
14. *The New York Times,* 2 December 1991.
15. I am assuming for the purposes of these examples that the approval of individuals or societies is the relevant right-making characteristic for the relativist.
16. The view that there is no objectively valid, rational way of conclusively resolving disagreements over basic moral judgments is sometimes called "metaethical relativism." See W. K. Frankena, *Ethics,* 2d ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), p. 109.
17. It might be thought that a theory such as this would not actually be relativistic because it would imply that whatever the speaker approves is right (and so on), and this would be a universal standard. But while it is true that this theory would have that implication, it is not clear that the implied statement would represent a universal moral principle. The statement, "Whatever any speaker approves is right" would then be true by definition, hence analytic; and it is arguable that no analytic statement can function as a normative moral principle. Any relativistic account of what constitutes the right-making characteristics of acts or practices (such as tha they are approved by the appropriate people or societies) will be committed to some general statements affirming that all acts having these characteristics are right. I being committed to such a general statement were considered incompatible with relativism, it is doubtful that there could be any relativistic account of morality in general.

18. See Charles L. Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1944).
19. William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (New York: Dover, 1959), p. 317.
20. At least, they differed over the value of the ends of profitability in marriage and effectiveness in war—ends that girls and boys respectively served.
21. Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito,* tr. F. J. Church (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp. 55–56.
22. More specifically, he was most likely thinking of males who were not slaves.
23. Although there are differences between a society and a culture, I am using the two terms interchangeably here.
24. Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," Carl Bode, ed., *The Portable Thoreau* (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 121. Originally published 1849.
25. Not that the belief in slavery was necessarily a basic moral belief; for many it was derivative from other beliefs, some moral, some religious. We should note also that the views of a majority on a given issue do not necessarily reflect established customs and practices, and hence are not necessarily right on all relativistic theories. It is one thing to take current majority opinion as a right-making characteristic, another to take established customs and practices and traditions as right-making. Both positions are relativistic but they represent different theories.
26. Not that all missionaries are necessarily absolutists, but most of them are almost certainly universalists.
27. See for example, Edward Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (Paterson, N.J.: Littlefield, Adams, 1960), p. 59.
28. On this subject, see Paul F. Schmidt, "Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy* 52, No. 25 (December 1955): 780–791.
29. I am assuming, for the sake of argument, that to reject relativism is to endorse universalism. Strictly speaking, that assumption is not necessarily true because one might reject relativism and still be a skeptic about whether there even *is* a right and a wrong, or be a nihilist and deny outright that there is.
30. This issue is considerably more complex than we have space for. If relativism is true but most people think it is not, they will be unable to resolve their differences by rational moral argument. So when they resort to moral argument and find it of no avail (because none of the arguments on either side—intended to show that the position of the other is mistaken—will ultimately be good ones), intolerance may very well be the result.
31. An admirable attempt to deal with many of these issues is found in Alan Goldman, *Moral Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1988). See also Michael Krausz and Jack W. Meiland (eds.), *Relativism: Cognitive and Moral* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); and David Copp, *Morality, Normativity, and Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Ch. 11.

Discussion Questions

1. What is ethical relativism? How is it distinguished from both universalism and absolutism? What is the difference between cultural ethical relativism and extreme ethical relativism?
2. So-called "honor killings" of women are practiced in some societies (killing a woman believed to have dishonored the family, say, through adultery). While based partly on religious grounds, the practice is often deeply rooted in the customs of a particular village or tribe. Are such practices justified because they are so rooted? Or are they wrong, whenever and wherever they occur?
3. If relativism is true, does it follow that moral disagreements cannot be resolved? Is there a difference between cultural relativism and extreme relativism in this regard?
4. Need an ethical relativist be a subjectivist?
5. Why does cultural diversity—a documentable fact—not suffice to establish ethical relativism?
6. Do you believe that ethical relativism, if generally accepted, would lead to greater tolerance among peoples? If so, why? If not, why not?

The idea that the basic principles of morality are known, and that the problems all come in their interpretation and application, is one of the most fantastic conceits to which our conceited species has been drawn.[1]

Thomas Nagel

Can Moral Principles Be Justified?

CHAP

12.1 DIVERSITY AT THE LEVEL OF PRINCIPI

We saw in Chapter 11 that the diversity of moral beliefs and] prompts people to think ethical relativism is true. We have seen common approach to conduct is to appeal to moral principles. B is a plurality of beliefs and practices at the level of conduct, so rality of principles at the level of theory. If the former points i of relativism, does not the latter as well?

Notice that if any of the principles we have examined—such : cal imperative or the principle of utility—could be shown to b valid), that would refute relativism because it would show that th for everyone. We could then say that whatever people *think* al wrong, this principle is what in fact determines right and wrong. Tl lism, in the forms we have considered it, provides an alternative to

But for it to be convincing as an alternative, we must have choosing among the various proposed principles. Otherwise w avoided the problem of relativism at the level of practice by tra the level of theory. Is there a way to make such a choice, and principles we have considered be justified?

I will examine three attempts to justify principles. They are tively, intuitionism, ethical naturalism, and contractarianism. Th only approaches to justifying principles, but they are three of the tial ones