

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, and 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.

REVIEW EXERCISES

1. Explain the definition of ethical relativism given in the text, "the view that ethical values and beliefs are relative to the various individuals or societies that hold them."
2. What is the difference between individual and social or cultural relativism?
3. What is the difference between the theory that people do differ in their moral beliefs and what the theory of ethical relativism holds?
4. What are the differences between the three reasons for supporting ethical relativism given in this chapter? In particular, what is the basic difference between the first and second? Between the first and third?
5. How would you know whether a moral disagreement was based on a basic difference in moral values or facts? As an example, use differences about the moral justifiability of capital punishment.
6. What is moral realism, and how does it differ from scientific realism? Is it similar in any way to scientific realism?

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angry with those who despise, oppress or steam-roll 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 circumstances 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

yes

ye

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 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 slapdash 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.

② 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?

③ 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.

④ 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

Reading

Trying Out One's New Sword

MARY MIDGLEY

Study Questions

1. What is "moral isolationism"?
2. Would "moral isolationism" make it impossible to praise or blame practices in other cultures, according to Midgley?
3. Does Midgley think that we could praise a culture if we could not criticize it? Why?
4. Why does she think that "moral isolationism" would make it impossible to judge even our own culture?
5. How does she believe the conversation over the Samurai practice of "trying out one's new sword" would go? Would it involve evaluations?
6. What are Midgley's views about distinct unmixed cultures?

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

For example, because of innate human sensibilities, some say, we just would not be able to approve of torturing the innocent. The problems here are complex. However, the question is an important one. Are moral rights and wrongs, goods and bads, something independent of particular people or cultures and their beliefs about what is right and wrong or good and bad? Or are they, as relativism holds, essentially a reflection or expression of individuals or cultures?

MORAL PLURALISM

Another problem nonrelativists or objectivists face is whether the good is one or many. According to some theories, there is one primary moral principle by which we can judge all actions. However, suppose this were not the case, that there were instead a variety of equally valid moral principles or equal moral values. For example, suppose that autonomy, justice, well-being, authenticity, and peace were all equally valuable. This would present a problem if we were ever forced to choose between the more just resolution of a conflict and that which promoted the well-being of more people. For example, we may be able to do more good overall with our health care resources if we spend them on diseases that affect more people. However, there is some element of unfairness in this proposal because people who have rare diseases did not choose to have them. In cases of such a conflict of values, we may be forced simply to choose one or the other for no reason or on the basis of something other than reason. Whether some rational and nonarbitrary way exists to make such decisions is an open question. Whether ultimate choices are thus subjective or can be grounded in an assessment of what is objectively best is a question not only about how we do behave but also about what is possible in matters of moral judgment.

The issue of moral relativism is not easily digested or decided. The belief that guides this text, however, is that better and worse choices can be made, and that morality is not simply a matter of what we believe to be morally right or wrong. If this were not the case, then there would not seem much point in studying ethics. The purpose of

studying ethics, as noted in Chapter 1, is to improve one's ability to make good ethical judgments. If ethical relativism were true, then this purpose could not be achieved.

The two major ethical theories that we will examine, utilitarianism and Kant's moral theory, are both objectivist or nonrelativist moral theories. Naturalist theories also tend to be objective because they have as their basis human nature and what perfects it. As you learn more about these views, consider what their reasons are for holding that the objective good that they specify really exists.

In this chapter's reading selection, Mary Midgley describes her problems with a version of ethical relativism that she calls "moral isolationism."

NOTES

1. Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal," *Journal of General Psychology*, 10 (1934): 60-70.
2. We could also think of many forms of ethical relativism from the most individual or personal to the universal. Thus, we could think of individual relativism, or that based on family values, or local community or state or cultural values. The most universal, however, in which moral values are the same for all human beings, would probably no longer be a form of relativism.
3. According to some versions of individual ethical relativism, moral judgments are similar to expressions of taste. We each have our own individual tastes. I like certain styles or foods, and you like others. Just as no taste can be said to be correct or incorrect, so also no ethical view can be valued as better than any other. My saying that this war or all wars are unjust is, in effect, my expression of my dislike of or aversion toward war. An entire tradition in ethics, sometimes called "emotivism," holds this view. For an example, see Charles Stevenson, *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1944).
4. These are not necessarily complete and coherent arguments for relativism. Rather, they are more popular versions of why people generally are inclined toward what they believe is relativism.
5. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903).
6. Bruce W. Brower, "Dispositional Ethical Realism," *Ethics*, 103, no. 2 (Jan. 1993): 221-249.

however, for when I look within I find conflicting feelings. I want to know not how I *do* feel but how I *ought* to feel and what I *ought* to believe. But the view that there is something I possibly ought to believe would not be relativism.

A problem for both types of relativist lies in the implied belief that relativism is a more tolerant position than objectivism. However, the cultural relativist can hold that people in a society should be tolerant only if tolerance is one of the dominant values of their society. He or she cannot hold that all people should be tolerant, because tolerance cannot be an objective or transcultural value, according to relativism. We can also question whether there is any reason for an individual relativist to be tolerant, especially if being tolerant means not just putting up with others who disagree with us, but also listening to their positions and arguments. Why should I listen to another who disagrees with me? If ethical relativism is true, then it cannot be because the other person's moral views may be better than mine in an objective sense, for there is no objectively better position. Objectivists might insist that their position provides a better basis for both believing that tolerance is an objective and transcultural good and that we ought to be open to others' views because they may be closer to the truth than ours are.

Relativism, or expressions that seem to be relativistic, may sometimes manifest a kind of intellectual laziness or a lack of moral courage. Rather than attempt to give reasons or arguments for my own position, I may hide behind some statement like, "What is good for some is not necessarily good for others." I may say this simply to excuse myself from having to think or be critical of various ethical positions. Those who hold that there is an objective right and wrong may also do so uncritically. They may simply adopt the views of their parents or peers without evaluating them themselves. However, the major difficulty with an objectivist position is the problem it has in providing an alternative to the relativist position. The objectivist should give us reason to believe that there is an objective good. To pursue this problem in a

little more detail, we will examine briefly two issues discussed by contemporary moral philosophers. One is the issue of the reality of moral value—*moral realism*; and the other concerns the problem of deciding between plural goods—*moral pluralism*.

MORAL REALISM

If there is an objective morality beyond the morality of cultures or individuals, then what is it like? Earlier in this chapter, you were asked to compare science and ethics. I suggested that natural science is generally regarded as the study of a reality independent of scientists, namely, nature. This view of the relation of science and nature can be called *realism*. Realism is the view that there exists a reality independent of those who know it. Most people are probably realists in this sense.

Now compare this to the situation regarding ethics. If I say that John's act of saving the drowning child was good, then what is the object of my moral judgment? Is there some real existing fact of goodness that I can somehow sense in this action? I can observe the actions of John to save the child, the characteristics of the child, John, the lake, and so forth. But in what sense, if any, do I observe the goodness itself? The British philosopher G. E. Moore held that goodness is a specific quality that attaches to people or acts.⁵ Although we cannot observe it (we cannot hear, touch, taste, or see it), we intuit its presence. Philosophers such as Moore have had difficulty explaining both the nature of the quality and the particular intuitive or moral sense by which we are supposed to perceive it.

Some moral philosophers who want to hold something of a realist view of morality try to argue that moral properties such as goodness are supervenient, or based on or flow from other qualities such as courage or generosity or honesty. Obviously, the exact relation between the moral and other qualities would need further explanation. Others attempt to explain moral reality as a relational matter: perhaps as a certain fit between actions and situations or actions and our innate sensibilities.⁶

Objective Value	Situational Differences	Different Moral Conclusions
Health	Diabetic	Insulin injections are good.
Health	Nondiabetic	Insulin injections are not good.
Justice	Works hard.	Deserves reward.
Justice	Does not work hard.	Does not deserve reward.

One reason situational differences may lead us to think that no objective moral value is possible is that we may be equating objectivism with what is sometimes called absolutism. *Absolutism* may be described as the view that moral rules or principles have no exceptions and are context-independent. One example of such a rule is "Stealing is always wrong." According to absolutism, situational differences such as whether or not a person is starving would make no difference to moral conclusions about whether they are justified in stealing food—if stealing is wrong. (See the table below.)

However, an objectivist who is not an absolutist holds that while there is some objective good—for example, health or justice—what is good in a concrete case may vary from person to person and circumstance to circumstance. She or he could hold that stealing might be justified in some circumstances because it is necessary for life, an objective good, and a greater good than property. Opposing absolutism does not necessarily commit one to a similar opposition to objectivism.

One result of this clarification should be the realization that what is often taken as an expression of relativism is not necessarily so. Consider this statement: "What is right for one person is not necessarily right for another." If the term *for* means "in the view of," then the statement simply states the fact that people do disagree. It states that "What is right in the view of one person is not what is right in the view of the other." However, this is not yet relativism. Relativism goes beyond

this in its belief that this is all there is. If *for* is used in the sense "Insulin injections are good for some people but not for others," then the original statement is also not necessarily relativistic. It could, in fact, imply that health is a true or objective good and that what leads to it is good and what diminishes it is bad. For ethical relativism, on the other hand, there is no such objective good.

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The preceding should provide a basis for understanding and critically evaluating ethical relativism. Each type of relativism and its opposite, nonrelativism, however, must overcome more problems.

One problem for the social or *cultural relativist* ^① who holds that moral values are simply a reflection of society's views is to identify that society. With which group should my moral views coincide—my country, my state, my family, or myself and my peers? Different groups to which I belong have different moral views. *Moreover*, if a society changes its views, does this mean that morality changes? If 52 percent of its people once supported some war but later only 48 percent, does this mean that earlier the war was just but became unjust when the people changed their minds about it?

One problem that the *individual relativist* faces is whether that view accords with personal experience. According to individual relativism, it seems that I should turn within and consult my moral feelings in order to solve a personal moral problem. This is often just the source of the difficulty,

Absolute Value	Situational Differences	Same Moral Conclusions
Stealing is always wrong.	Person is starving.	Do not steal.
Stealing is always wrong.	Person is not starving.	Do not steal.

My pt.
about "for"
"True for"
means
belonging

under-emphasized by relativism

Basic Moral Agreement	Factual Disagreement	Different Moral Conclusions
We ought not to harm. We ought not to harm.	CO ₂ emissions harm. CO ₂ emissions do not harm.	We ought to reduce emissions. We need not reduce emissions.

this type of disagreement that the moral relativist would need to make his or her point.

What Would Disagreement About Basic Moral Matters Prove? I have asked students in my ethics class to tell me in what year George Washington died. A few brave souls venture a guess: 1801, or at least after 1790? No one is sure. Does this disagreement or lack of certitude prove that he did not die or that he died on no particular date? Belief that he did die and on a particular date is consistent with differences of opinion and with uncertainty. So also in ethics: People can disagree about what constitutes the right thing to do and yet believe that there is a right thing to do. "Is it not because of this belief that we try to decide what is right and worry that we might miss it?" the nonrelativist would ask.

Or consider the supposed contrast between ethics and science. Although a body of knowledge exists on which those working in the physical sciences agree, those at the forefront of these sciences often profoundly disagree. Does such disagreement prove that no objectivity exists in such matters? If people disagree about whether the universe began with a "big bang" or about what happened in the first millisecond, then does this prove that no answer is to be found, even in principle, about the universe's beginning? Not necessarily.

B Moral Uncertainty

Let us examine the point that moral matters are complex and difficult to determine. Because of this, we are often uncertain about what is the morally best thing to do. For example, those who "blow the whistle" on companies for which they work must find it difficult to know whether they are doing the right thing when they consider the possible cost of doing so to themselves and others around them. However, what is described here is not strictly

relativism but *skepticism*. Skepticism is the view that it is difficult, if not impossible, to know something. However, does the fact that we are uncertain about the answer to some question, even a moral question, prove that it lacks an answer? One reason for skepticism might be the belief that we can only see things from our own perspective and thus can never know things, even in ethics, as they are. This is a form of *subjectivism*. The nonrelativist could argue that in our very dissatisfaction with not knowing and in our seeking to know what we ought to do, we behave as though we believe that a better choice can be made.

In contrast, matters of science and history often eventually get clarified and settled. We can now look up the date of George Washington's death, and scientists gradually improve our knowledge in various fields. "Why is there no similar progress in ethical matters?" relativists might respond. Or have we actually made some progress in resolving some moral matters?

Situational Differences

Do dramatic differences in people's life situations make it unlikely or impossible for them to have any common morality? A nonrelativist might suggest the following. Suppose that health is taken as an objective value. Is it not the case that what contributes to the health of some is different than what contributes to the health of others? Insulin injections are sometimes good for the diabetic but not for the nondiabetic. Even though the good in these specific cases differs, there is still a general value—health—that is the goal. Or is not justice an objective moral value? It involves "giving to each his or her due." Yet what is due people in justice is not the same? Those who work might well deserve something different from those who do not, and the guilty deserve punishment that the innocent do not. See the table on the following page.

investigation tends to result in general agreement despite the diversity among scientists. But we have not come to such agreement in ethics. Philosophers have been investigating questions about the basis of morality since ancient times. With sincere and capable thinkers pursuing a topic over centuries, one would think that some agreement would have been reached. But this seems not to be the case. It is not only on particular issues such as abortion that sincere people disagree, but also on basic moral values or principles.

Premise B. **Moral Uncertainty**

A second reason to believe that what relativism holds is true is the great difficulty we often have in knowing what is the morally right thing to believe or do. We don't know what is morally most important. For example, we do not know whether it is better to help one's friend or do the honest thing in a case in which we cannot do both. Perhaps helping the friend is best in some circumstances, but being honest is the best in others. We are not sure which is best in a particular case. Furthermore, we cannot know for sure what will happen down the line if we choose one course over another. Each of us is also aware of our personal limitations and the subjective glance that we bring to moral judging. Thus, we distrust our own judgments. We then generalize and conclude that all moral judgments are simply personal and subjective viewpoints.

Premise C. **Situational Differences**

Finally, people and situations, cultures and times, differ in significant ways. The situations and life world of different people vary so much that it is difficult to believe that the same things that would be right for one would be right for another. In some places, overpopulation or drought is a problem; other places have too few people or too much water. In some places, people barely have access to the basic necessities of life; in other places, food is plentiful and the standard of living is high. Some individuals are more outgoing, and others are more reserved. How can the same things be right and wrong under such different circumstances and for such different individuals? It seems unlikely,

then, that any moral theory or judgment can apply in a general or universal manner. We thus tend to conclude that they must be relative to the particular situation and circumstance and that no objective or universally valid moral good exists.

ARE THESE REASONS CONVINCING?

Let us consider possible responses by a nonrelativist or objectivist to the preceding three points. Re: A

The Diversity of Moral Views

We can consider the matter of diversity of moral views from two different perspectives. First, we can ask, how widespread and deep is the disagreement? Second, we may ask, what does the fact of disagreement prove? i ii

How Widespread and Deep Is the Disagreement?

If two people disagree about a moral matter, does this always amount to a moral disagreement? For example, Bill says that we ought to cut down dramatically on carbon dioxide emissions, while Jane says that we do not have a moral obligation to do this. This looks like a basic moral disagreement, but it actually may result from differences in their factual beliefs. Bill may believe that the current rate of such emissions will result in dramatic and serious harmful global climate effects in the next decades, the so-called greenhouse effect. Jane may believe no such harmful consequences are likely, because she believes that the assessments and predictions are in error. If they did agree on the factual issues, Bill and Jane would agree on the moral conclusion. They both agree on the basic moral obligation to do what we can to improve the current human condition and prevent serious harm to existing and future generations. The table on the facing page illustrates this.

It is an open question how many of our seeming moral disagreements are not basic moral disagreements at all but disagreements about factual or other beliefs. But suppose that at least some of them are about moral matters. Suppose that we do disagree about the relative value, for example, of health and peace, honesty and generosity, or about what rights people do and do not have. It is

what those individuals or societies do, in fact, believe. According to *ethical relativism*, there is no objective right and wrong. The opposite point of view, that there is an objective right and wrong, is often called *objectivism*, or sometimes *nonrelativism*.

We can understand more about ethical relativism by comparing our views of the status of ethics and ethical matters with our ordinary beliefs about science. Most people believe that the natural sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, geology, and their modern variants) tell us things about the natural world. Throughout the centuries, and modern times in particular, science seems to have made great progress in uncovering the nature and structure of our world. Moreover, science seems to have a universal validity. No matter what a person's individual temperament, background, or culture, the same natural world seems accessible to all who sincerely and openly investigate it. Modern science is thought to be governed by a generally accepted method and seems to produce a gradually evolving common body of knowledge. Although this is the popular view of science, philosophers hold that the situation regarding science is much more complex and problematic. Nevertheless, it is useful to compare this ordinary view of science with common understandings of morality.

Morality, in contrast to science, does not seem so objective. The few examples of diversity of moral beliefs noted earlier could be multiplied many times over. Not only is there no general agreement about what is right and wrong, but also we often doubt that this is the kind of matter about which we can agree. We tend, then, to think of morality as a matter of subjective opinion. This is basically the conclusion of ethical relativism. According to ethical relativism, morality is simply a function of the moral beliefs that people have. There is nothing beyond this. Specifically, no realm of objective moral truth or reality exists that is comparable to that which we seem to find in the world of nature investigated by science.

TWO FORMS OF ETHICAL RELATIVISM

In further exploring the nature of ethical relativism, we should note that it has two basic and different forms.² According to one version, called

personal or individual ethical relativism, ethical judgments and beliefs are the expressions of the moral outlook and attitudes of individual persons. I have my ethical views, and you have yours; neither my views nor yours are better or more correct. I may believe that a particular war was unjust, and you may believe it was just. Someone else may believe that all war is wrong. According to this form of relativism, because no objective right or wrong exists, no particular war can be said to be really just or unjust, right or wrong, nor can all wars. We each have our individual histories that explain how we have come to hold our particular views or attitudes. But they are just that: our own individual views and attitudes. We cannot say that they are correct or incorrect, because to do so would assume some objective standard of right and wrong against which we could judge their correctness. Such a standard does not exist, according to ethical relativism.³

The second version of ethical relativism, called *social or cultural ethical relativism*, holds that ethical values vary from society to society and that the basis for moral judgments lies in these social or cultural views. For an individual to decide and do what is right, he or she must look to the norms of the society. People in a society may, in fact, believe that their views are the correct moral views. However, a cultural ethical relativist holds that no society's views are better than any other in a trans-cultural sense. Some may be different from others, and some may not be the views generally accepted by a wider group of societies, but that does not make these views worse, more backward, or incorrect in any objective sense.

REASONS SUPPORTING ETHICAL RELATIVISM

There are many reasons for believing that what ethical relativism holds is true. We will first summarize three of the most commonly given, and then we will evaluate their related arguments.⁴

A. The Diversity of Moral Views

One reason most often given to support relativism is the existence of moral diversity among people and cultures. In fields such as science and history,

go to town here

premises

Ethical Relativism

For decades, anthropologists and sociologists have collected information on the diverse mores of different cultures. Some societies hold bribery to be morally acceptable, but other societies condemn it. Views on appropriate sexual behavior and practices vary widely. Some societies believe that cannibalism, the eating of human flesh, is good because it ensures tribal fertility or increases manliness. Some Inuit groups, the native peoples of northern Canada and Alaska, believed that it was appropriate to abandon their elderly when they could no longer travel with the group, while other groups once practiced ritual strangulation of the old by their children. Ruth Benedict has documented the case of a Northwest Indian group that believed it was justified in killing an innocent person for each member of the group who had died. This was not a matter of revenge but a way of fighting death. In place of bereavement, the group felt relieved by the second killing.¹

Some societies believe in female circumcision; in other societies, it not only is regarded as wrong but also is illegal. In some countries it is acceptable for women to wear short skirts, while in others women are expected to cover their legs and hair. You should be able to think of many other examples of such differences.

Before we begin to examine some ethical theories, we ought to consider whether the very idea of applying ethical theories is misguided, because it assumes that we can use these to determine what is morally right and wrong. We commonly

hear people say, "What is right for one person is not necessarily right for another," and "What is right in some circumstances is not right in other circumstances." If this were true, then it would seem that we cannot make any general or objective moral assessments. "When in Rome," should we not then "do as the Romans do"? In other words, would not morality be either entirely a personal matter or a function of cultural values? These are questions about ethical relativism. In this chapter, we will examine ethical relativism and its two basic forms and then present reasons for and against it. The last sections on "Moral Realism" and "Moral Pluralism" are more technical and not necessary for a basic understanding of ethical relativism, but they do introduce two key related issues addressed by philosophers today.

WHAT IS ETHICAL RELATIVISM?

There are various views of how best to understand *ethical relativism* or what the term essentially means. According to some philosophers, ethical relativism is a theory that holds that there are no universally accepted ethical standards. This is surely true as one only needs to have a minimal understanding of various cultures to see this. But ethical relativism holds more than this. It is the view that there is no objective standard of right and wrong, even in principle. All there is are different views of what is right and wrong. In saying they are "relative" to individuals or societies, we mean that they are a function of, or dependent on,