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Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong
Chapter 2.

**Subjective Ethical Relativism
(Subjectivism)**

Some people think that even this conclusion is too tame, and maintain that morality does not depend on the society but on the individual him- or herself. As students sometimes maintain, "Morality is in the eye of the beholder." Ernest Hemingway wrote, "So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine."⁵

This form of moral subjectivism has the sorry consequence that it makes morality a useless concept, for on its premises little or no interpersonal criticism or judgment is logically possible. Hemingway may feel good about killing bulls in a bullfight, while Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa may feel the opposite. No argument about the matter is possible. The only basis for judging Hemingway or anyone else wrong would be if he failed to live up to his own principles, but, of course, one of Hemingway's principles could be that hypocrisy is morally permissible (he feels good about it), so that it would be impossible for him to do wrong. For Hemingway, both hypocrisy and nonhypocrisy are morally permissible. On the basis of subjectivism, Adolf Hitler is as moral as Gandhi, so long as each believes he is living by his chosen principles. Notions of moral good and bad, right or wrong, cease to have interpersonal evaluative meaning.

Columbia University professor Sidney Morgenbesser once taught a class of philosophy students who argued vehemently for subjectivism. When a test was taken, Morgenbesser returned all the tests marked "F"—even though his comments showed that most of the tests were of a very high quality. When the students expressed outrage at this injustice, Morgenbesser answered that he had accepted the notion of subjectivism for purposes of marking the exams, in which case the principle of justice had no objective validity.

Absurd consequences follow from subjective ethical relativism. If it is correct, then morality reduces to esthetic tastes over which there can be no argument nor interpersonal judgment. Although many people say that they hold this

position, it seems to conflict with other of their moral views (for example, that Hitler is really morally bad, or capital punishment is always wrong). There seems to be a contradiction between subjectivism and the very concept of morality it is supposed to characterize, for morality concerns "proper" resolution of interpersonal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament. Whatever else it does, morality has a minimal aim of preventing a state of chaos where life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." But subjectivism is no help at all in doing this, for it doesn't rest on social *agreement* of principle (as the conventionalist maintains) or on an objectively independent set of norms that bind all people for the common good.

Subjectivism treats individuals as billiard balls on a societal pool table where they meet only in radical collisions, each aiming for its own goal and striving to do in the other fellow first. This atomistic view of personality contrasts with the fact that we develop in families and mutually dependent communities, in which we share a common language, common institutions, and habits, and that we often share each other's joys and sorrows. As John Donne said, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent."

Radical individualistic relativism seems incoherent. So the only plausible form of ethical relativism must be one that grounds morality in the group or culture. This form of relativism is called "conventionalism," at which we looked earlier and to which we now return.

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The Case for Moral Objectivism

The discussion heretofore has been largely negative, against relativism. Now I want to make a positive case for a core set of moral principles that are necessary to the good society and the good life.

First, I must make it clear that I am distinguishing moral *absolutism* from moral *objectivism*. The absolutist believes that there are nonoverridable moral principles that ought never to be violated. Kant's system is a good example: one ought *never* break a promise or tell a lie, no matter what. An objectivist, however, need not posit any nonoverridable principles, at least not in unqualified general form, and so need not be an absolutist. As Renford Bambrough put it,

To suggest that there is a *right* answer to a moral problem is at once to be accused of or credited with a belief in moral absolutes. But it is no more necessary to believe in moral absolutes in order to believe in moral objectivity than it is to believe in the existence of absolute space or absolute time in order to believe in the objectivity of temporal and spatial relations and of judgments about them.⁹

In the objectivist's account, moral principles are what Oxford University philosopher William Ross (1877-1971) refers to as *prima facie* principles, valid rules of action that should generally be adhered to, but that may be overridden by another moral principle in cases of moral conflict.¹⁰ For example, while a principle of justice generally outweighs a principle of benevolence, at times enormous good could be done by sacrificing a small amount of justice, so that an objectivist

would be inclined to act according to the principle of benevolence. There may be some absolute or nonoverridable principles (indeed, the next principle I mention is probably one), but there need not be any or many for objectivism to be true.

If I can establish or show that it is reasonable to believe that at least one objective moral principle is binding on all people everywhere in some ideal sense, I shall have shown that relativism is probably false and that a limited objectivism is true. Actually, I believe that many qualified general ethical principles are binding on all rational beings, but one will suffice to refute relativism. The principle I've chosen is the following:

1. It is morally wrong to torture people for the fun of it.

I claim that this principle is binding on all rational agents. If some agent, S, rejects Principle 1, we should not let that affect our intuition that Principle 1 is a true principle but rather try to explain S's behavior as perverse, ignorant, or irrational instead. For example, suppose Adolf Hitler doesn't accept Principle 1. Should that affect our confidence in its truth? Isn't it more reasonable to infer that Hitler is morally deficient, morally blind, ignorant, or irrational than to suppose that his noncompliance is evidence against the truth of Principle 1?

Suppose, further, that a tribe of Hitlerites enjoys torturing people. The whole culture accepts torturing others for the fun of it. Suppose that Mother Teresa and Gandhi try unsuccessfully to convince them that they should stop torturing people altogether, and they respond by torturing Teresa and Gandhi. Should this affect our confidence in 1? Would it not be more reasonable to look for some explanation of Hitlerite behavior? For example, we might hypothesize that this tribe lacked a developed sense of sympathetic imagination that is necessary for the moral life. Or we might theorize that this tribe was on a lower evolutionary level than most *Homo sapiens*. Or we might simply conclude that the tribe was closer to a Hobbesian state of nature than most societies, and as such probably would not survive. But we need not know the correct answer as to why the tribe was in such bad shape, in order to maintain our confidence in Principle 1 as a moral principle. If Principle 1 is a basic or core belief for us, we will be more likely to doubt the Hitlerites' sanity or ability to think morally than to doubt the validity of Principle 1.

We can perhaps produce other candidates for membership in our minimally basic objective moral set. For example,

2. Do not kill innocent people.
3. Do not cause pain or suffering except when a higher duty prescribes it.
4. Do not commit rape.
5. Keep your promises and contracts.
6. Do not deprive another person of his or her freedom.
7. Do justice, treating equals equally and unequals unequally.
8. Tell the truth.

9. Help other people.
10. Obey just laws.

Principles 1 through 10 are examples of the core morality, principles necessary for the good life. Fortunately, it isn't as though 1 to 10 were arbitrary principles, for we can give reasons why we believe that these rules will be necessary to any satisfactory social order. Principles such as the Golden Rule, not killing innocent people, treating equals equally, truth telling, promise keeping, and the like are central to the fluid progression of social interaction and the resolution of conflicts of which ethics are about (at least minimal morality is, even though there may be more to morality than simply these kinds of concerns). For example, language itself depends on a general and implicit commitment to the principle of truth telling. Accuracy of expression is a primitive form of truthfulness. Hence, every time we use words correctly we are telling the truth. Without this behavior, language wouldn't be possible. Likewise, without the recognition of a rule of promise keeping, contracts are of no avail and cooperation is less likely to occur. And without the protection of life and liberty, we could not secure our other goals.

A morality would be adequate if it contained the principles of the core morality, but there could be more than one adequate morality that *applied* these principles differently. That is, there may be a certain relativity to secondary principles (whether to opt for monogamy rather than polygamy, whether to include high altruism in the set of moral duties, whether to allocate more resources to medical care than to environmental concerns, whether to require driving on the left side of the road or on the right side, and so forth). But in every morality a certain core will remain, applied somewhat differently because of differences in environment, belief, tradition, and the like.

The core moral rules are analogous to the core vitamins necessary for a healthy diet. We need an adequate amount of each vitamin—some humans need more of one than another—but in prescribing a nutritious diet we don't have to set forth recipes, specific foods, place settings, or culinary habits. Gourmets, ascetics, and vegetarians may meet the requirements differently, but the basic nutrients may be had by all without rigid regimentation or an absolute set of recipes.

Imagine that you have been miraculously transported to the dark kingdom of hell, and there you get a glimpse of the sufferings of the damned. What is their punishment? Well, they have eternal back itches that ebb and flow constantly. But they cannot scratch their backs, for their arms are paralyzed in a frontal position. And so they writhe with itchiness through eternity. But just as you are beginning to feel the itch in your own back, you are suddenly transported to heaven. What do you see in the kingdom of the blessed? Well, you see people with eternal back itches, who cannot scratch their own backs. But they are all smiling instead of writhing. Why? Because everyone has his or her arms stretched out to scratch someone else's back, and, so arranged in one big circle, a hell is turned into a heaven of ecstasy.

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If we can imagine some states of affairs or cultures that are better than others in a way that depends on human action, we can ask what character traits make them so. In our story, people in heaven, but not those in hell, cooperate to ameliorate suffering and produce pleasure. These goods are very primitive, not sufficient for a full-blown morality, but they give us a hint as to the objectivity of morality. Moral goodness has something to do with the amelioration of suffering, the resolution of conflict, and the promotion of human flourishing. If our heaven is really better than the eternal itchiness of hell, then whatever makes it so is constitutively related to moral rightness.

An Explanation of the Attraction of Ethical Relativism

Why, then, is there such a strong inclination toward ethical relativism? I think that there are three reasons, which haven't been emphasized. One is the fact that the options are usually presented as though absolutism and relativism were the only alternatives, so conventionalism wins out against an implausible competitor. The questionnaire I give my students reads as follows: "Are there any ethical absolutes, moral duties binding on all persons at all times, or are moral duties relative to culture? Is there any alternative to these two positions?" Only 3 percent of students suggest a third position, and very few of them identify objectivism. Granted, it takes a little philosophical sophistication to make the crucial distinctions (and it is precisely for lack of this sophistication or reflection that relativism has procured its enormous prestige). But, as Ross and others have shown, and as I have argued in this chapter, one can have an objective morality without being absolutist.

The second reason is that our recent sensitivity to cultural relativism and the evils of ethnocentrism, which have plagued European and American relations with other cultures, has made us conscious of how frail many aspects of our moral repertoire are, so that we tend to wonder "Who's to judge what's really right or wrong?" However, the move from a reasonable cultural relativism, which rightly causes us to rethink our moral systems, to an ethical relativism, which causes us to give up the heart of morality altogether, is an instance of the fallacy of confusing factual or descriptive statements with normative ones. Cultural relativism doesn't entail ethical relativism. The very reason why we are against ethnocentrism is the same reason why we are for an objective moral system: impartial reason draws us to it.

We may well agree that cultures differ and that we ought to be cautious in condemning what we don't understand. But this agreement in no way needs to imply that there are not better and worse ways of living. We can understand and excuse, to some degree at least, people who differ from our best notions of morality, without abdicating the notion that cultures without principles of justice, promise keeping, or protection of the innocent are morally poorer for these omissions.

A third factor, which has driven some to moral nihilism and others to relativism, is the decline of religion in Western society. As one of Dostoevsky's characters said, "If God is dead, all things are permitted." The person who has lost religious faith feels a deep vacuum and understandably confuses it with a moral vacuum, or may finally resign him- or herself to a form of secular conventionalism. Such people reason that if there is no God to guarantee the validity of the moral order, there must not be a universal moral order. There is just radical cultural diversity and death at the end.

But even if there turns out to be no God and no immortality, we still will want to live happy, meaningful lives during our four-score years on earth. If this is true, then it matters by which principles we live, and those which win out in the test of time will be objectively valid principles.

To sum up: there are moral truths, principles belonging to the core morality, without which society will not long survive and individuals will not flourish. Reason can discover these principles, and it is in our interest to promote them.

So "Who's to judge what's right or wrong?" We are. We are to do so on the basis of the best reasoning we can bring forth, and with sympathy and understanding.

Notes

1. *History of Herodotus*, trans. George Rawlinson (New York: Appleton, 1859), Book 3, Chapter 38.
2. *Ethical Relativism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1973), p. 1.
3. *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. 219.
4. *Folkways* (New York: 1906), Section 80. Ruth Benedict indicates the depth of our cultural conditioning this way: "The very eyes with which we see the problem are conditioned by the long traditional habits of our own society" ("Anthropology and the Abnormal," *Journal of General Psychology*, 1934), pp. 59–82.
5. *Death in the Afternoon* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), p. 4.
6. *Patterns of Culture*, p. 257.
7. *Cultural Relativism* (New York: Random House, 1972).
8. "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," *Journal of Philosophy* 52, 1955.
9. *Moral Skepticism and Moral Knowledge* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 33.
10. *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931).

For Further Reflection

1. How do cultural relativism and ethical relativism differ?
2. Are there moral absolutes or is morality completely relative? Are there independent criteria by which we can say that some cultures are better than others?
3. Is Pojman's attempt to ground morality in a common human nature a form of ethical relativism? Might there be different human natures?