

Chapter 3

Who's to Judge? Ethical Relativism

We see neither justice nor injustice which does not change its nature with change in climate. Three degrees of latitude reverse all jurisprudence; a meridian decides the truth. Fundamental laws change after a few years of possession; right has its epoch; the entry of Saturn into the lion marks to us the origin of such and such a crime. A strange justice that is bounded by a river! Truth on this side of the Pyrenees, error on the other side . . . theft, incest, infanticide, parricide have all had a place among virtuous actions. Can anything be more ridiculous than that a man should have the right to kill me because he lives on the other side of the water, and because his ruler has a quarrel with mine, though I have none with him?

—Pascal, *Pensees*, no. 294, 17

The Diversity of Morals

Cultural practices vary over time and clime. Infanticide was practiced in ancient Greece. Traditionally, Eskimos allowed their elderly to die by starvation, whereas we believe that this is morally wrong. The Spartans of ancient Greece and the Dogu of New Guinea believe that stealing is morally right; but we believe it is wrong. In Sparta, it was a ritual rite of passage for young boys to kill a member of a neighboring tribe and bring back the head as a proof. In ancient Rome, the father (under the rule of *patria familia*) was permitted to slay his children without being punished. Many cultures, past and present, have practiced or still practice infanticide. A tribe in East Africa once threw

deformed infants to the hippopotamus, but our society condemns such acts. Sexual practices also vary over time and clime. In ancient Clymne, the relatives of the prosecutor determined whether an accused was guilty of a crime, regardless of whether they were witnesses to it. Certain African tribes practice cannibalism, eating the bodies of their slain enemies. Some cultures permit homosexual behavior, whereas others condemn it. Some cultures, including Muslim societies, practice polygamy, but Christian cultures view it as immoral. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict describes a tribe in Melanesia that views cooperation and kindness as vices, and anthropologist Colin Turnbull has documented that the Ik in northern Uganda have no sense of duty toward their children or parents. Some societies make it a duty for children to kill their aging parents (sometimes by strangling).

King Darius of Persia once performed an experiment to illustrate the widespread radical diversity of moral customs: He brought together some Callatians (Asian tribal people) and some Greeks. He asked the Callatians how they disposed of their deceased parents. They explained that they ate the bodies. The Greeks, who cremated their parents, were horrified at such barbarous behavior and begged Darius to cease from such irreverent discourse. Then he asked the Greeks how they disposed of their dead relatives. They replied that they burned them, to which answer the Callatians were scandalized and cried out that such sacrilege should not even be mentioned. The ancient historian, Herodotus, who reports this story, concluded that "Custom is the king o'er all."¹

In Iraq, the culture holds that girls who are raped are so shamed that their brothers may kill them.² In many parts of northern Africa and southern Arabia, millions of girls undergo genital mutilation (clitoridectomies), but our culture condemns all of these practices. In precolonial India, *suttee* was practiced in which a widow was obliged to throw herself upon her husband's funeral pyre to demonstrate her loyalty and devotion as a wife. While officially outlawed, the ritual persists in some rural parts of India.

But for cultural difference we need not look to other countries. Slavery was once deemed morally permissible in the United States, whereas now it is forbidden. Racial discrimination was also once widely approved, but now it is widely condemned. When I was a child, abortion was generally considered a grave sin and was illegal, but now the majority accepts it as a woman's right. Similarly, 50 years ago, premarital sex was considered immoral, but now a sizable portion of society accepts even casual sex as acceptable behavior. Adulterers

were stoned in Puritan New England, but now they are tolerated (some are even placed in the White House).

It is then an indisputable fact that cultural differences regarding moral norms exist both from nation to nation and in the same nation over time. We may call this phenomenon **cultural relativism**. Many people believe that cultural relativism establishes a more radical thesis, **ethical relativism**. Whereas cultural relativism is a descriptive thesis, announcing observational facts, that there is moral diversity in the world, ethical relativism is a normative or philosophical thesis, stating a theory about morality—namely, there are no universal objective moral principles binding on all people everywhere and at all times. The opposite thesis is **ethical objectivism**: At least some universal principles hold, regardless of whether people recognize them or not. In this chapter, we examine ethical relativism and in the next chapter, ethical objectivism. There is a third possibility, **ethical nihilism**, which we briefly mention. It holds that there are no moral truths at all, that morality is a myth, an illusion, at best, a mere power struggle in which *might makes right*.

An Analysis of Relativism

Ethical relativism holds that there are no universally valid moral principles, but rather that all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. A leading relativist, John Ladd, put it this way:

Ethical relativism is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions varies from society and that there are no absolute universal moral standards binding on all men at all times. Accordingly, it holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he belongs.³

If we analyze this passage, we derive the following argument:

1. What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.
2. Whether it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs.
3. Therefore, there are no **absolute**, or objective, moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.

The Diversity Thesis

The first thesis, the *diversity thesis*, is identified with cultural relativism. It is simply an anthropological thesis acknowledging that moral rules differ from society to society. As we have already shown, there is enormous variety in what may count as a moral principle in a given society. The human condition is malleable in the extreme, allowing any number of folkways or moral codes. As Ruth Benedict has written,

The cultural pattern of any civilization makes use of a certain segment of the great arc of potential human purposes and motivations, just as we have seen . . . that any culture makes use of certain selected material techniques or cultural traits. The great arc along which all the possible human behaviors are distributed is far too immense and too full of contradictions for any one culture to utilize even any considerable portion of it. Selection is the first requirement.⁴

It may or may not be the case that not a single moral principle is held in common by every society, but if there are any, they seem to be few, at best. Certainly, it would be very hard to derive one single "true" morality on the basis of observation of various societies' moral standards.

The Dependency Thesis

The second thesis, the *dependency thesis*, asserts that individual acts are right or wrong depending on the nature of the society in which they occur. Morality does not exist in a vacuum; rather, what is considered morally right or wrong must be seen in a context, depending on the goals, wants, beliefs, history, and environment of the society in question. As William Graham Sumner says,

We learn the [morals] as unconsciously as we learn to walk and hear and breathe, and [we] never know any reason why the [morals] are what they are. The justification of them is that when we wake to consciousness of life we find them facts, which already hold us in the bonds of tradition, custom, and habit.⁵

We imbibe our morality from the mores, rituals, and folkways of our community, which we internalize. They are not taught to us as rationally defended norms but as part of the atmosphere we breathe. Trying to see things from an independent, noncultural point of view would be like taking out our eyes to examine their contours and qualities. We are simply culturally determined beings.

We could of course distinguish both a *weak* and a *strong* thesis of dependency. The nonrelativist can accept certain relativity in the way moral principles are *applied* in various cultures, depending on beliefs, history, and environment. For example, Asians show respect by covering the head and uncovering the feet, whereas Occidentals do the opposite. Though both adhere to a principle of respect for deserving people, they apply the principle differently. But the ethical relativist must maintain a stronger thesis, one that insists that the very validity of the principles is a product of the culture and that different cultures will invent different valid principles. The ethical relativist maintains that even beyond the environmental factors and differences in beliefs, fundamental disagreements exist among societies.

In a sense, we all live in radically different worlds. Each person has a different set of beliefs and experiences, a particular perspective that colors all of his or her perceptions. Do the farmer, the real estate dealer, and the artist looking at the same spatiotemporal field actually see the same thing? Not likely. Their different orientations, values, and expectations govern their perceptions, so different aspects of the field are highlighted and some features are missed. Even as our individual values arise from personal experience, so social values are grounded in the particular history of the community. Morality, then, is just the set of common rules, habits, and customs that have won social approval over time so that they seem part of the nature of things, like facts. There is nothing mysterious or transcendent about these codes of behavior. They are the outcomes of our social history.

There is something conventional about *any* morality so that every morality really depends on a level of social acceptance. Not only do various societies adhere to different moral systems, but also the very same society could (and often does) change its moral views over time and place. As already noted, in the southern United States, slavery and racial discrimination are now widely viewed as immoral, whereas just over 100 years ago, it was not. We have greatly altered our views on abortion, divorce, and sexuality as well.

The conclusion—that there are no absolute or objective moral standards binding on all people—follows from the first two propositions. Cultural relativism (the diversity thesis) plus the dependency thesis yields ethical relativism in its classic form. If there are different moral principles from culture to culture and if all morality is rooted in culture, then it follows that no universal moral principles are valid for all cultures and all people at all times.

Subjective Ethical Relativism (Subjectivism)

Some people think that this conclusion is still too tame, and they maintain that morality depends not on the society but rather on the individual. As my students sometimes maintain, "Morality is in the eye of the beholder." They treat morality like taste or aesthetic judgments, which are person relative. They say things like, "Abortion is true for me, though it may not be true for you," meaning, I think, that they *believe* that abortion is permissible, while their fellow students may differ. "Who are you to judge?" In this regard, 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.⁶

This form of moral subjectivism has the sorry consequence that it makes morality a very 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, whereas Saint Francis or Mother Teresa would no doubt feel the opposite. No argument about the matter is possible. Suppose you are repulsed by observing John torturing a child. You cannot condemn him if one of his principles is "torture little children for the fun of it." The only basis for judging him wrong might be that he was a *hypocrite* who condemned others for torturing. However, one of his or Hemingway's principles could be that hypocrisy is morally permissible (he "feels very fine" about it) so that it would be impossible for him to do wrong. For Hemingway, hypocrisy and nonhypocrisy are both morally permissible (except, perhaps, when he doesn't feel very fine about it).

On the basis of subjectivism, Adolf Hitler and the serial murderer Ted Bundy could be considered as moral as Mohandas Gandhi, so long as each lived by his own standards, whatever those might be. An illustration of subjective relativism is that of Eric Harris, one of the murderers of twelve students and a teacher at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado, in 1999. Eric expressed his moral theory in his Web site prior to the massacre: "My belief is that if I say something, it goes. I am the law, and if you don't like it, you die. If I don't like you or I don't like what you want me to do, you die."⁷

Notions of good and bad, or right and wrong, cease to have interpersonal evaluative meaning. We might be repulsed by Eric Harris or Ted Bundy's views, but that is just a matter of taste.

In the opening days of my philosophy classes, I often find students vehemently defending subjective relativism—"Who are you to judge?" they ask. I then give them their first test. In the next class period, I return all the tests, marked "F," even though my comments show that most of them are a very high caliber. When the students express outrage at this (some have never before seen that letter on their papers and inquire about its meaning), I answer that I have accepted subjectivism for marking the exams. "But that's unjust!" they typically insist—and then they realize that they are no longer being merely subjectivists about ethics.

Absurd consequences follow from subjectivism. If it is correct, then morality reduces to aesthetic tastes about which there can be neither argument nor interpersonal judgment. Differing on your preference for vanilla ice cream over chocolate is a quite different matter than differing over whether it is permissible to kill people whose faces or skin color displeases you. Although many students say they espouse subjectivism, evidence shows that it conflicts with some of their other moral views. They typically condemn Hitler as an evil man for his genocidal racist policies. A contradiction seems to exist between subjectivism and the very concept of morality, which it is supposed to characterize, for morality has to do with *proper* resolution of interpersonal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament (both deontological and consequentialist systems do this, but in different ways—see Chapters 6 and 7). Whatever else it does, morality has a minimal aim of preventing a Hobbesian state of nature (see Chapter 1), wherein life is "solitary, nasty, poor, brutish and short." But if so, then subjectivism is no help at all, for it rests neither on social agreement of principle (as the conventionalist maintains) nor on an objectively independent set of norms that bind all people for the common good. If there were only one person on Earth, then there would be no occasion for morality because there wouldn't be any interpersonal conflicts to resolve or others whose suffering he or she would have a duty to ameliorate. Subjectivism implicitly assumes something of this **solipsism**, an atomism in which isolated individuals make up separate universes.

Frederich Nietzsche (1844–1900) held to a form of subjective ethical relativism, maintaining that morality was simply a will to power in which each of us strove to dominate others. Conventional morality

was simply the institutions of the masses (the *herd*) whose purpose is to hold down the supermen (*Übermenschen*), whose superior ability is resented by the masses. Although Nietzsche's charge against mediocrity may be a warning that some forms of morality tend toward anti-meritocracy, his reasoning is flawed. The moral point of view advocates a principle of justice in order to reconcile the claims of the talented and the average people.

Subjectivism treats individuals as billiard balls on a societal pool table where they meet only in radical collisions, each aimed at his or her own goal and striving to do the others in before they do him or her in. This atomistic view of personality is belied by the facts that we develop in families and mutually dependent communities where we share a common language, common institutions, and similar rituals and habits and that we often feel one another's joys and sorrows. As the poet John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent." We are all interdependent.

Radical individualistic ethical relativism is incoherent. At best, it entails ethical nihilism, the view that morality is an illusion, so that nothing is forbidden. Unless we are prepared to embrace nihilism, the only plausible view of ethical relativism must be one that grounds morality in the group or culture. This form is called conventionalism, which we noted earlier and to which we now return.

Conventional Ethical Relativism (Conventionalism)

Conventional ethical relativism, the view that there are no objective moral principles but that all valid moral principles are justified (or are made true) by virtue of their cultural acceptance, recognizes the social nature of morality. That is precisely its power and virtue. It does not seem subject to the same absurd consequences that plague subjectivism. Recognizing the importance of our social environment in generating customs and beliefs, many people suppose that ethical relativism is the correct metaethical theory. Furthermore, they are drawn to it for its liberal philosophical stance. It seems to be an enlightened response to the sin of ethnocentricity, and it seems to entail or strongly imply an attitude of tolerance toward other cultures. As anthropologist Ruth Benedict says, in recognizing ethical relativity, "We shall arrive at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid

patterns of life which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence."⁸

As noted previously, in parts of northern Africa, many girls still undergo female circumcision, cutting out external genitalia. It has been estimated that 80 million living women have had this surgery and that 4 or 5 million girls suffer it each year. The mutilating surgery often leads to death or sickness and prevents her as a woman from experiencing sexual orgasm. Some African women accept such mutilation as a just sacrifice for marital stability, but many women and ethicists have condemned it as a cruel practice, causing women unjustified pain and mutilation and robbing them of pleasure and autonomy. Some anthropologists such as Nancy Scheper-Hughes accept relativism and argue that we Westerners have no basis for condemning genital mutilation.⁹ Scheper-Hughes advocates tolerance for other cultural values. She writes, "I don't like the idea of Clitoridectomies any better than any other woman I know. But I like even less the western 'voices of reason' [imposing their judgments]." She argues that judging other cultures irrationally supposes that we know better than the people of that culture do what is right or wrong. We ought to be tolerant of such cultural practices because we have no independent basis for judgment. "Who's to judge?"

Scheper-Hughes seems to think that ethical relativism promotes tolerance. The most famous proponent of this position is anthropologist Melville Herskovitz, who argues even more explicitly than Benedict and Scheper-Hughes that ethical relativism entails intercultural tolerance. The argument goes like this:

1. If morality is relative to its culture, then there is no independent basis for criticizing the morality of any other culture but one's own.
2. If there is no independent way of criticizing any other culture, then we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.
3. Morality is relative to its culture.
4. Therefore, we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.

Tolerance is certainly a virtue, and relativism may encourage it, but is this a good argument for it? No. If morality simply is relative to each culture, then if the culture in question has no principle of tolerance, its members have no obligation to be tolerant. Herskovitz and Scheper-Hughes, as well, seem to be treating the *principle of tolerance* as

the one exception to this relativism. They seem to be treating it as an absolute moral principle. But from a relativistic point of view, there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other. If Westerners condemn clitoridectomies on the basis of their cultural values, they are no more to be condemned than those people are who due to their cultural values perform clitoridectomies. One cannot consistently assert that *all* morality is relative and then treat the principle of tolerance as an exception, as an absolute principle.

Not only do relativists offer no basis for criticizing those who are intolerant, but also they cannot rationally criticize anyone who espouses what they might regard as a heinous principle. If, as seems to be the case, valid criticism supposes an objective or impartial standard, then relativists cannot morally criticize anyone outside their own culture. Adolf Hitler's genocidal actions, so long as they are culturally accepted, are as morally legitimate as Mother Teresa's works of mercy. If conventional relativism is accepted, then racism, genocide of unpopular minorities, oppression of women and the poor, slavery, and even the advocacy of war for its own sake are as moral as their opposites. And if a subculture decided that starting a nuclear war was somehow morally acceptable, we could not morally criticize these people. Any actual morality, whatever its content, is as valid as every other and more valid than ideal moralities—since no culture adheres to the latter. If one believes that we may criticize cultures that oppress minorities or women or engage in genocide on the basis of human rights, then one is unlikely to find ethical relativism persuasive.

There are other disturbing consequences of ethical relativism. It seems to entail that *reformers* are always (morally) wrong, since they go against the tide of cultural standards. Consider the following examples. William Wilberforce was wrong in the 18th century to oppose slavery. The British were immoral in opposing *suttee* in India (the burning of widows, which is now illegal there). The early Christians were wrong in refusing to serve in the Roman army or bow down to Caesar, since the majority in the Roman Empire believed that these two acts were moral duties. In fact, Jesus himself was immoral in breaking the law of his day by healing on the Sabbath and by advocating the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, since it is clear that few in his time (or in ours) accepted them.

Yet we sometimes feel just the opposite, that the reformer is a courageous innovator who is right, who has the truth, who stands against the mindless majority. Sometimes the individual must stand alone with the truth, risking social censure and persecution. In Ibsen's

Enemy of the People, after Dr. Stockman loses the battle to declare his town's profitable but polluted tourist spa unsanitary, he says, "The most dangerous enemy of the truth and freedom among us—is the compact majority. Yes, the damned, compact and liberal majority. The majority has *might*—unfortunately—but *right* it is not. Right—are I and a few others." Yet if relativism is correct, the opposite is necessarily the case. Truth is with the crowd and error with the individual.

Similarly, conventional ethical relativism entails disturbing judgments about the law. Our normal view is that we have a **prima facie** duty to obey the law, because law in general promotes the human good. According to most objective systems, this obligation is not absolute but relative to the particular law's relation to a wider moral order. Civil disobedience is warranted in some cases wherein the law seems to seriously conflict with morality. However, if moral relativism is true, then neither law nor civil disobedience has a firm foundation. On the one hand, from the side of the society at large, civil disobedience will be morally wrong, so long as the majority culture agrees with the law in question. On the other hand, if you belong to the relevant subculture that doesn't recognize the particular law in question (because it is unjust from your point of view), then disobedience will be morally mandated. On relativist logic, the Ku Klux Klan, which believes that Jews, Catholics, and blacks are undeserving of high regard, is morally required to break the laws that protect these threatened groups. Why should I obey a law that my group doesn't recognize as valid?

To sum up our discussion to this point, unless we have an independent moral basis for law, it is hard to see why we have any general duty to obey it; and unless we recognize the priority of a universal moral law, we have no firm basis for justifying our acts of civil disobedience against "unjust laws." Both the validity of law and morally motivated disobedience of unjust laws are annulled in favor of a power struggle.

We are yet not finished with our critique of conventional ethical relativism. There is an even more basic problem with the notion that morality depends on cultural acceptance for its validity. The problem is that the notion of a *culture* is notoriously difficult to define,¹⁰ especially in a pluralistic society like our own where the notion seems to be vague, with unclear boundary lines. One person may belong to several societies (subcultures) with different value emphases and arrangements of principles. A person may belong to the nation as a single society with certain values of patriotism, honor, courage, and laws (including some that are controversial but have majority acceptance,

such as the current law on abortion). But he or she may also belong to a church that opposes some of the laws of the state. He or she may also be an integral member of a socially mixed community where different principles hold sway and may belong to clubs and a family in which still other rules prevail. Relativism would seem to tell us that, if a person belongs to societies with conflicting moralities, then that person must be judged both wrong and not wrong whatever he or she does. For example, if Mary is a U.S. citizen and a member of the Roman Catholic Church, then she is wrong (qua Catholic) if she has an abortion and not wrong (qua U.S. citizen) if she acts against the church's teaching on abortion. As a member of a racist university fraternity, KKK, John has no obligation to treat his fellow black students as equals, but as a member of the university community (which accepts the principle of equal rights), he does have the obligation; but as a member of the surrounding community (which may reject the principle of equal rights), he again has no such obligation; but then again, as a member of the nation at large (which accepts the principle), he is obligated to treat his fellow students with respect. What is the morally right thing for John to do? The question no longer makes much sense in this moral Babel. It has lost its action-guiding function.

Perhaps the relativist would adhere to a principle that says that, in such cases, the individual may choose which group to belong to—as his or her primary group. If Mary has an abortion, she is choosing to belong to the general society relative to that principle. John must likewise choose among groups. The trouble with this option is that it seems to lead back to counterintuitive results. If Murder Mike of Murder, Incorporated feels like killing bank president Ortcutt and wants to feel good about it, he identifies with the Murder, Incorporated society rather than the general-public morality. Does this justify the killing? In fact, couldn't one justify anything simply by forming a small subculture that approved of it? Ted Bundy would be morally pure in raping and killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie. How large must the group be in order to be a legitimate subculture or society? Does it need ten or fifteen people? How about just three? Come to think of it, why can't my burglary partner and I found our own society with a morality of its own? Of course, if my partner dies, I could still claim that I was acting with an originally social set of norms. But why can't I dispense with the interpersonal agreements altogether and invent my own morality—since morality, in this view, is only an invention anyway? Conventionalist-relativism

seems to reduce to subjectivism. And subjectivism leads, as we have seen, to moral solipsism; to the demise of morality altogether.

If one objects that this is an instance of the **slippery slope fallacy**, then let that person give an alternative analysis of what constitutes a viable social basis for generating valid (or true) moral principles. Perhaps we might agree (for the sake of argument, at least) that the very nature of morality entails two people who are making an agreement. This move saves the conventionalist from moral solipsism, but it still permits almost any principle at all to count as moral. And what's more, one can throw out those principles and substitute their contraries for them as the need arises. If two or three people decide to make cheating on exams morally acceptable for themselves, via forming a fraternity, Cheaters Anonymous, at their university, then cheating becomes moral. Why not? Why not rape, as well?

However, I don't think you can stop the move from conventional relativism to subjectivism. The essential force of the validity of the chosen moral principle is that it depends on *choice*. The conventionalist holds that it is the group's choice, but why should I accept the group's "silly choices," when my own is better (for me)? If this is all that morality comes to, then why not reject it altogether—even though, to escape sanctions, one might want to adhere to its directives when others are looking? Why should anyone give such august authority to a culture of society? I see no reason to recognize a culture's authority, unless that culture recognizes the authority of something that *legitimizes* the culture. It seems that we need some higher standard than culture by which to assess a culture. Conventionalism seems perilously close to ethical nihilism.

An Assessment of Ethical Relativism

However, though we may fear the demise of morality, as we have known it, this in itself may not be a good reason for rejecting relativism—that is, for judging it false. Alas, truth may not always be edifying. But the consequences of this position are sufficiently alarming to prompt us to look carefully for some weakness in the relativist's argument. So let's examine the premises and conclusion that we derived earlier from Ladd's statement and consider them the three theses of relativism:

1. *The diversity thesis.* What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so there are no moral principles that all societies accept.

2. *The dependency thesis.* All moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance.
3. *Ethical relativism.* Therefore, there are no universally valid moral principles, objective standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.

Does any one of these statements seem problematic? Let's consider the diversity thesis, which we have also called cultural relativism. Perhaps there is not as much diversity as anthropologists like Sumner and Benedict suppose. One can also see great similarities among the moral codes of various cultures. E. O. Wilson has identified over a score of common features,¹¹ and before him Clyde Kluckhohn noted some significant common ground:

Every culture has a concept of murder, distinguishing this from execution, killing in war, and other "justifiable homicides." The notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behavior, the prohibitions upon untruth under defined circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity, of mutual obligations between parents and children—these and many other moral concepts are altogether universal.¹²

Colin Turnbull's description of the sadistic, semidisplaced, disintegrating Ik culture in northern Uganda supports the view that a people without principles of kindness, loyalty, and cooperation will degenerate into a Hobbesian state of nature. But he has also produced evidence that, underneath the surface of this dying society, there is a deeper moral code from a time when the tribe flourished, which occasionally surfaces and shows its nobler face.¹³

On the one hand, there is enormous cultural diversity, and many societies have radically different moral codes. Cultural relativism seems to be a fact, but, even if it is, it does not by itself establish the truth of ethical relativism. Cultural diversity in itself is neutral with respect to theories. The objectivist could concede complete cultural relativism but still defend a form of ethical objectivism; for he or she could argue that some cultures simply lack correct moral principles.

On the other hand, a denial of complete cultural relativism (that is, an admission of some universal principles) does not disprove ethical relativism. For even if we did find one or more universal principles, this would not prove that they had any objective status. We could still imagine a culture that was an exception to the rule and be unable to criticize it. So the first premise doesn't by itself imply ethical relativism, and its denial doesn't disprove ethical relativism.

We turn to the crucial dependency thesis. Morality does not occur in a vacuum, but rather what a society considers morally right or wrong must be seen in a context, depending on the goals, wants, beliefs, history, and environment of that society. We can distinguish a *weak* and a *strong* thesis of dependency. The weak thesis says that the application of principles depends on the particular cultural predicament, whereas the strong thesis affirms that the principles themselves depend on that predicament. The nonrelativist can accept a certain relativity in the way moral principles are applied in various cultures, depending on beliefs, history, and environment. For example, a raw environment with scarce natural resources may justify the Eskimos' brand of euthanasia to the objectivist, who would consistently reject that practice if it occurred in another environment. The Sudanese tribe, mentioned earlier, which throws its deformed infants into the river does so because the tribe believes that such infants belong to the hippopotamus, the god of the river. We believe that these groups' belief in euthanasia and infanticide is false, but the point is that the same principles of respect for property and respect for human life operate in such contrary practices. The tribe differs with us only in belief, not in substantive moral principle. This is an illustration of how nonmoral beliefs (for example, deformed infants belong to the hippopotamus), when applied to common moral principles (for example, give to each his or her due), generate different actions in different cultures. In our own culture, the difference in the nonmoral belief about the status of a fetus generates opposite moral prescriptions. The major difference between pro-choicers and pro-lifers is not whether we should kill persons but whether fetuses are really persons. It is a debate about the facts of the matter, not the principle of killing innocent persons.

So the fact that moral principles are *weakly* dependent doesn't show that ethical relativism is valid. Despite this weak dependency on nonmoral factors, a set of general moral norms could still be applicable to all cultures and even recognized in most, which a culture could disregard only at its own expense.

What the relativist needs is a *strong* thesis of dependency, that somehow all principles are essentially cultural inventions. But why should we choose to view morality this way? Is there anything to recommend the strong thesis of dependency over the weak thesis of dependency? The relativist may argue that we in fact lack an obvious impartial standard to judge from. "Who's to say which culture is right and which is wrong?" But this seems dubious. We can reason and perform thought experiments in order to make a case for one system

over another. We may not be able to *know* with certainty that our moral beliefs are closer to the truth than those of another culture or those of others within our own culture, but we may be *justified* in believing this about our moral beliefs. If we can be closer to the truth about factual or scientific matters, why can't we be closer to the truth on moral matters? Why can't a culture simply be confused or wrong about its moral perceptions? Why can't we say that a culture like the Ik, which enjoys watching its own children fall into fires, is less moral in that regard than a culture that cherishes children and grants them protection and equal rights? To take such a stand is not ethnocentrism, for we are seeking to derive principles through critical reason, not simply uncritical acceptance of our own mores.

Conclusion

Ethical relativism—the thesis that moral principles derive their validity from dependence on society or individual choice—seems plausible at first glance, but on close scrutiny it presents some severe problems. Subjectivism seems to boil down to anarchistic individualism, an essential denial of the interpersonal feature of the moral point of view, and conventionalism, which does contain an interpersonal perspective, fails to deal adequately with the problem of the reformer: the question of defining a culture, and the whole enterprise of moral criticism. It comes perilously close to moral nihilism. Nevertheless, unless we can offer a better alternative, relativism may survive these criticisms. We turn in the next chapter to that alternative, ethical objectivism.

For Further Reflection

1. Examine the question "Who's to judge?" with regard to moral actions. Why do people think that we should not judge what is right and wrong?
2. Discuss the difference between *cultural relativism* and *ethical relativism*.
3. Discuss subjectivism, the idea that "morality, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder." What are its strengths and weaknesses? Does subjectivism lead to moral nihilism? Why or why not?
4. Discuss the claims of conventional moral relativism. What are its strengths and weaknesses?
5. Ruth Benedict has written that our culture is "but one entry in a long series of possible adjustments" and that "the very eyes with which we see the problem are conditioned by the long traditional habits of our own society." What are the implications of these statements? Is she correct? How would an objectivist respond to these claims?

6. Does ethical relativism entail tolerance of other cultures? Explain.
7. Can a relativist believe in moral progress? Explain.
8. Can a relativist believe in universal human rights? Explain.
9. Evaluate Heinrich Himmler's famous justification of the holocaust in the light of relativism (www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/index/html):

It is absolutely wrong to project our own harmless soul with its deep feelings, our kindheartedness, our idealism, upon alien peoples. This is true, beginning with Herder, who must have been drunk when he wrote the *Voices of the Peoples*, thereby bringing such immeasurable suffering and misery upon us who came after him. This is true, beginning with the Czechs and Slovenes, to whom we brought their sense of nationhood. They themselves were incapable of it, but we invented it for them.

One principle must be absolute for the SS man: we must be honest, decent, loyal and friendly to members of our blood and to no one else. What happens to the Russians, what happens to the Czechs, is a matter of utter indifference to me. Such good blood of our own kind as there may be among the nations we shall acquire for ourselves, if necessary by taking away the children and bringing them up among us.

Whether the other races live in comfort or perish of hunger interests me only in so far as we need them as slaves for our culture; apart from that it does not interest me. Whether or not 10,000 Russian women collapse from exhaustion while digging a tank ditch interests me only in so far as the tank ditch is completed for Germany.

We shall never be rough or heartless where it is not necessary; that is clear. We Germans, who are the only people in the world who have a decent attitude to animals, will also adopt a decent attitude to these human animals, but it is a crime against our own blood to worry about them and to bring them ideals.

I shall speak to you here with all frankness of a very serious subject. We shall now discuss it absolutely openly among ourselves, nevertheless we shall never speak of it in public. I mean the evacuation of the Jews, the extermination of the Jewish race.

It is one of those things, which is easy to say. "The Jewish race is to be exterminated," says every party member. "That's clear, it's part of our program, elimination of the Jews, extermination, right, we'll do it."

And then they all come along, the eighty million good Germans, and each one has his decent Jew. Of course the others are swine, but this one is a first-class Jew. Of all those who talk like this, not one has watched, not one has stood up to it.

Most of you know what it means to see a hundred corpses lying together, five hundred, or a thousand. To have gone through this and yet—apart from a few exceptions, examples of human weakness—to have remained decent fellows, this is what has made us hard. This is a glorious page in our history that has never been written and shall never be written.

For Further Reading

Brink, David. *Moral Realism and the Foundation of Ethics*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.

Fishkin, James. *Beyond Subjective Morality*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984.