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## THE CASE FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

### FEMALE GENITAL EXCISION OR MUTILATION?

Egyptian author Nawal El Saadawi was six years old when she was circumcised. "Strangers" seized her at night. She well remembers the sound of that knife, her pain, and her startling discovery.

*I strained my ears trying to catch the rasp of the metallic sound. The moment it ceased, it was as though my heart stopped beating with it. I was unable to see, and somehow my breathing seemed also to have stopped. Yet I imagined the thing that was making the rasping sound coming closer and closer to me. Somehow it was not approaching my neck as I had expected but another part of my body. Somewhere below my belly, as though seeking something buried between my thighs. At that very moment I realized that my thighs had been pulled wide apart, and that each of my lower limbs was being held as far away from the other as possible, gripped by steel fingers that never relinquished their pressure. I felt that the rasping knife or blade was heading straight down towards my throat. Then suddenly the sharp metallic edge seemed to drop between my thighs and there cut off a piece of flesh from my body.*

*I screamed with pain despite the tight hand held over my mouth, for the pain was not just a pain, it was like a searing flame that went*

*through my whole body. After a few moments, I saw a red pool of blood around my hips.*

*I did not know what they had cut off from my body, and I did not try to find out. I just wept, and called out to my mother for help. But the worst shock of all was when I looked around and found her standing by my side. Yes, it was her, I could not be mistaken, in flesh and blood, right in the midst of these strangers, talking to them and smiling at them, as though they had not participated in slaughtering her daughter just a few moments ago.<sup>1</sup>*

At least two million young women and girls in Africa, the Mideast, and Southeast Asia are circumcised each year. Here, we come face-to-face with one of the most heated cross-cultural ethical issues. Female genital circumcision, or what we will refer to as female genital excision, lays bare the unrelenting tension between, on the one hand, the need to tolerate various cultural customs out of respect and, on the other hand, the urge to criticize these customs on the basis of some alleged universal standards of right and wrong. Critics, especially in the West, usually label the practice with the more inflammatory term "female genital mutilation" and demand its outright prohibition, placing it on a par with child and woman abuse. At the same time, supporters invoke reasons like the tradition of maintaining family honor. These supporters have, in turn, accused Western critics of being preoccupied with an exaggerated notion of individual rights. Yet numerous grassroots movements in African, Arab, and Asian countries are staunchly opposed to the practice. Not all those in cultures that practice female genital excision necessarily support it.

Have we in the West inflated the issue? Quite a few African and Arab feminists seem to think so. They also point out that in doing so we have lost sight of more pressing issues like women's education, legal rights, and inheritance laws.<sup>2</sup> Are we at a moral impasse? Should we permit female genital excision on the grounds of its long-standing tradition in certain cultures even if we ourselves are seriously opposed to it? If we do so, would we be taking a giant step toward discrediting the possibility of any universal moral standard? If we concede that prevailing practice dictates morality, have we not eliminated dependable standards for morality? Or should we take active measures to intervene in certain cultures and thereby outlaw what we may believe is a barbaric and unjustifiable practice?

## ■ DOES THE FACT LEAD TO ETHICAL

Overwhelming evidence different cultures exhibit. This is indisputable. One polygamy, or female infidelity, we reasonably infer from society necessarily lead to two notions are not the same. It is a well-known fact that cultures differ goes further. In its broadest sense, they differ not only according to their moral rules. It is strictly dependent upon

Note that we use the term distinct. Moral rules are core values. Moral rules are therefore second order. Moral principles, whether cultures truly differ

Cultural relativism is a concept introduced by anthropologist Melford Spiro. It is descriptive, normative, and acknowledges what we have. It states that diverse cultures have different moral codes that are self-evident. The normative aspect of cultural relativism is that it maintains within cultures a form of cultural relativism. It asks questions the likelihood of engaging in cross-cultural dialogue, for if cross-cultural dialogue is about others' behaviors

We face this question: What impact upon ethics? The choices do we have? Cultural relativism, moral nihilism, moral nihilism, that means we believe that moral codes that apply to all cultures and beliefs constitute a moral relativism. Thus when culture

### ■ DOES THE FACT OF DIVERSITY LEAD TO ETHICAL RELATIVISM?

Overwhelming evidence from anthropology and ethnography shows that different cultures exhibit different behaviors and hold different beliefs. This is indisputable. One culture approves behavior, such as cannibalism, polygamy, or female infanticide, that another culture condemns. What can we reasonably infer from this? First of all, does the fact of cultural diversity necessarily lead to what is known as cultural relativism? Note that the two notions are not the same. Cultural diversity underscores the prominent fact that cultures differ in practices and in beliefs. Cultural relativism goes further. In its broadest form, cultural relativism claims that cultures differ not only according to their practices and beliefs, but also with respect to their moral rules. It then goes on to state that these moral rules are strictly dependent upon a culture's own beliefs, customs, and practices.

Note that we use the term "rules" and not "principles." The two are distinct. Moral rules are concrete expressions of underlying moral principles. Moral rules are therefore derived from moral principles and are of the second order. Moral principles are of the first order. It remains to be seen whether cultures truly differ in their moral principles.

Cultural relativism can be defined even further. For instance, the anthropologist Melford Spiro distinguishes three types of cultural relativism: descriptive, normative, and epistemological.<sup>3</sup> The descriptive type basically acknowledges what we have referred to above as cultural diversity, namely, that diverse cultures have different practices and beliefs. As we said, this is self-evident. The normative type maintains that the moral positions maintained within cultures are legitimate for that culture. The epistemological form of cultural relativism is more radical. It runs deeper in that it even questions the likelihood of different cultures to understand each other and to engage in cross-cultural discourse. The ramifications of this are far-reaching, for if cross-cultural discourse is not possible, then judgments about others' behaviors and customs lack sufficient grounds.

We face this question. How does the fact of diversity among cultures impact upon ethics? That is, in light of cultural pluralism, what ethical choices do we have? Consider some options: moral absolutism, moral relativism, moral nihilism, and moral skepticism. If we adopt moral absolutism, that means we believe that there are definitive, true moral rules and codes that apply to all peoples at all times. These immutable moral rules and beliefs constitute objective moral standards and they are exceptionless. Thus when cultures disagree about these standards, it is because their



Amena's own moral framework, that is, her values, rules, and principles, which Harman also refers to as "moral coordinates." If Frances disagrees with Amena, her disagreement is valid only within Frances's own moral framework. This being the case—that moral validity only works within one's own moral circle—the second feature logically follows: There are no privileged moral circles.

*There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others.<sup>7</sup>*

Therefore, even though female genital excision may be morally wrong for Frances but not for Amena, neither Frances nor Amena is objectively right or wrong. In this way, relativism rejects the absolutist posture along with its implied attitude of moral elitism. In other words, the relativist refutes the notion that any one individual, group, or culture can know what is right and wrong for all other peoples and cultures.

Harman's two features of moral relativism are expressed in a succinct way by another philosopher, John Cook. Cook, however, rejects relativism. Nevertheless, he goes on to describe the relativists' "fully developed argument" in this way:

*If we had acquired our moral views in the way we acquire scientific views, namely, by means of a rational fact-finding procedure, then we could criticize other cultures wherever their morality differs from ours, just as we criticize, for example, the idea that illness is caused by witchcraft. But we do not acquire our moral views by discovering objective moral facts. (This becomes obvious when we realize that moral principles differ from culture to culture, for this state of affairs would not exist if there were a realm of objective moral facts everyone can discern — as everyone can discern that the sky is blue.) Moral principles are acquired, not by any rational process, but by the causal process of "enculturative conditioning," that is, they are impressed upon us in subtle ways by the culture in which we are raised. We do not, therefore, have any grounds — any good reasons — for holding the moral views that we do hold. And that being so, it is a mistake to think that our moral views are both (a) known by us to be true and (b) apply to people of other cultures who don't share our moral views.<sup>8</sup>*

Ethical relativism therefore maintains that (1) any moral judgment we make is purely dependent upon our own specific moral framework and



cultures speak radically different languages. For example, in my attempt to understand a translation from its original Pali text of the *Nasadaya*, the celebrated hymn that deals with the creation of the universe, how can I adequately comprehend the ancient Hindu worldview that the text espouses? How can I impartially translate any Pali text? My point of departure will always be my own language and culture with its accompanying ideas and concepts. Will I not impose these?

Any answer bodes ill if moral judgments are analogous to this linguistic predicament. Just as we are inherently faced with difficulties in translating and interpreting a text in another language, how are we to make moral assessments of behaviors outside our own cultural circle? Are such differences irreconcilable? We seem stuck in our various cultural circles that encompass the spatial (social) and the temporal (historical).

Yet, as difficult as proper translation may be, that does not preclude the possibility of genuine communication. After all, there is an objective reality, a world, a given, just as there is a *Nasadaya* hymn that we all seek to make sense of. Moreover, linguists themselves will point to the interaction among languages, what Henry Rosemont Jr. calls the "linguistic web."<sup>10</sup> No language is an island. Indeed, when it comes to moral rules and principles, cross-cultural communication is possible. This means that there may well be a universal understanding of ideas concerning things like respect for others, justice and equity, truth-telling, and altruism, as well as prohibitions against cruelty, theft, and unnecessary harm.

DO CULTURES REALLY DISAGREE WITH EACH OTHER MORALLY?

This issue of cross-cultural discourse relates directly to the meaning behind disagreement. That is, genuine disagreement can occur only if we share a common discourse. If you ask me whether I believe in God, and I answer "No," you then claim that you disagree because you yourself believe in God. Do we truly disagree with each other? It would have behooved me to reply to your question with another and ask you what you mean by "God." If you mean an ancient man in the heavens staring down on earth below, I can then confidently reply "No." Furthermore, I can only interpret your definition of God if I already share some ideas with you, so that I know what you mean by "ancient man," "heavens," and "earth below." In which case, now that I understand your idea of God, we can begin to disagree. (We will further examine the components of disagreement in our next chapter where we discuss the role of critical thinking in moral reasoning.)

What does it mean to disagree?  
Can we even disagree?

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Suppose you and I come from radically different cultures with very different worldviews. According to Quine's thesis, if our worldviews are completely different, then we can share no language. Even if we use similar terms, what these terms mean for each of us would be different. We could not assume any affinity between our terms and their concepts. In which case we cannot be in real disagreement because we lack a basis upon which to disagree. We would each dwell in our own solipsistic, linguistic, and moral Babel.

Yet this view makes little sense, for intercultural communication does occur in varying degrees. The fact that we can translate Pali texts into English, and so on, testifies to this. In which case, there are no solid grounds nor logical basis for claiming that some cultures' worldviews are *completely* alien to others. The act of making the claim is inconsistent with the claim itself. How could I make this claim unless I knew enough about the culture that is allegedly so different? And if the culture is so radically different, how could I know anything about it?

### ■ WEAKNESSES IN ETHICAL RELATIVISM

#### ARE CULTURES ALL THAT DIFFERENT?

Let's return to our question. Does cultural diversity necessarily lead to ethical relativism? Consider the strength of evidence: Ethical relativism has the support of evidence in that different cultures have different and often conflicting moral rules. What does that really mean? So-called "honor killings" continue to be practiced in some Arab cultures. (Keep in mind that although some Arabs perform these "honor killings" and feel justified in doing so, the majority of Arabs do not.) In Arab cultures, it is of the utmost importance for family honor that a daughter remain a virgin until marriage. If it is discovered that her virginity has been violated, this incurs terrible dishonor upon her family and spouse. In fact, if she became pregnant as a result, in some instances the daughter's own male relatives have killed her in order to restore the family's honor. Most Americans would without hesitation condemn the practice. On the other hand, many Arabs in some countries would consider this morally acceptable. On the basis of this, can we assert that there is a clear *moral difference* between Americans and Arabs?

According to relativists, convention and custom determines the scope of morality, and the full scope of morality encompasses principles, rules, and

practices. If this is correct. But that is the case. The nature of morality is pure. It begs the question, since

Let us pursue this further to an *epoche*, that is, a matter with less subjective a *moral epoche*. This reflects beliefs and dispositions: moral teachings. This asks: Why do some hold standing reasons for their press? Furthermore, why moral rules do not deny that the underlying ethics, are radically different means that the nature of matter of conventional principles. And contexts. Practices are rules.

Note the quandary question and assume a matter of socially condoned should we accept the and moral principles: where we start from, we may attempt to bridge do we arrive at a total

Another consideration. In many instances, it begs the question. For among Eskimos of Alaska, may call it "murder." and the Eskimo culture among the Eskimos "culture. Nevertheless, mos' practice in order is regarded as an act of



practices. If this is correct, then the two cultures are indeed morally different. But that is the case only if we accept the relativist premise that the nature of morality is purely culture-bound. *But accepting this from the start begs the question, since we need to somehow prove that this is the case.*

Let us pursue this further using what phenomenological analysis refers to as *epoche*, that is, a bracketing of presuppositions in order to view the matter with less subjectivity. In this case, let us apply what we can call a *moral epoche*. This means putting aside or "bracketing" our own moral beliefs and dispositions, including the relativist premise as well as religious moral teachings. This also means that we now need to dig deeper and ask: Why do some condone this practice? This of course requires understanding reasons for the practice. What *moral rules* does the practice express? Furthermore, what *moral principles* underlie the rules? Clashing moral rules do not denote a genuine moral disagreement. Yet if it turns out that the underlying moral principles, the foundational component in ethics, are radically different, then we do have a moral difference. All this means that the nature of morality is much more complex than simply a matter of convention and socially accepted practices. It consists of fundamental principles. And these principles generate moral rules within specific contexts. Practices are then those types of actions that conform to these rules.

Note the quandary we now find ourselves in. It is illogical to beg the question and assume the relativist premise that morality is merely a matter of socially condoned or prohibited conduct. By the same token, why should we accept the need for distinctions among practices, moral rules, and moral principles as done above? The quandary lies in this. No matter where we start from, we still start from some vantage point. As much as we may attempt to bracket moral presuppositions, we never start from nor do we arrive at a totally objective perspective.

Another consideration concerns the way we depict other cultures' practices. In many instances, we will describe a practice in a way that already begs the question. For example, when we refer to the traditional custom among Eskimos of abandoning their elderly so that they freeze to death, we may call it "murder." And on this basis we may conclude that our culture and the Eskimo culture have different moralities. But is such a practice among the Eskimos "murder"? It is construed as such if done in our own culture. Nevertheless, one must understand the rationale behind the Eskimos' practice in order to more properly assess it. Among the Eskimos, it is regarded as an act of "sacrifice" in order to help conserve already-scarce

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resources within the community. Unless we make a concerted effort to understand an apparently disparate practice, we may slip into what Cook calls the "Projection Error":

*It [the Projection Error] occurs when, having witnessed (or perhaps read about) certain actions of an alien people, one misconstrues their actions because of the following circumstances: (a) one is ignorant of the actual motivation of those people, and (b) their actions appear similar in some way to actions of a sort that might occur in — or that one is familiar with from — one's own culture. . . . The error itself consists of thinking, on account of their similarity, that the actions of an alien people are actions of the same sort as actions that might occur in — or that one is familiar with from — one's own culture.<sup>11</sup>*

In this same vein, Cook refers to the Dyaks of Borneo who are head-hunters. The Dyaks collect the skulls of enemy villagers, whether men, women, or children, steered by the belief that these skulls possess magic that will protect them against their enemies. Is this Dyak practice "murderous"? No doubt, if this occurred in the United States, it would be called that. Moreover, would this cause us to conclude that the morality of the Dyaks is different from the morality of Americans? Do the Dyaks have *completely different moral values* than we do?

Why would we assume that the fact of cultural diversity necessarily leads to moral diversity? We would do so if we equated moral rules with moral principles. Different cultures and societies do have different and often conflicting moral rules: "Humans should not eat meat" versus "It is permissible, even good, for humans to eat meat." Due to this diversity regarding moral rules, cultural relativism makes sense. However, we need to recall the crucial distinction between rules and principles. *Moral principles* are general axioms of the first order such as the Buddhist principle of "respect for all sentient creatures." Moral rules are codes that seek to apply these axioms to concrete situations. They are therefore of the second order. An example would be the moral rule "Humans ought to refrain from eating meat." This rule is an application of the general first order principle "Humans ought to respect all sentient creatures."

This means that diverse moral rules do not necessarily translate to diverse moral principles, or genuine moral difference. Moral rules may vary, but that does not necessarily mean that first order moral principles vary as well. Moral rules and codes reflect the culture's application of more general

moral principles. Disagreeing to conclude that there is no objective standard before wonders whether our knowledge of fundamental principles can still reflect the same or to not eat meat, the beings.

WHY CONCLUDE THAT THERE IS NO OBJECTIVE STANDARD?

Suppose different cultures have different moral principles. In other words, suppose there is genuine moral diversity. It is important to respect all such differences. If we have a clear moral principle, we can conclude from this diversity that there is no objective standard.

Logically, it makes no sense to conclude that there are objective standards what different cultures' principles. Give up and thereby conclude that there is no objective standard. Deducing such a conclusion from the diversity of moral principles is a fallacy. See in the next chapter for the conclusion to relativism.

Ethical relativism is the view that there is no objective standard, and we cannot judge beyond our own culture's moral diversity in and out of our culture. In other words, the fact that different cultures have different moral principles does not at all mean that there is no objective standard. We can logically conclude that there could be mistakes in our moral principles.

*Matters of Belief* is the ever-present tension, between what is true and what we believe. If we believe that women are justifiable, then we can agree that we are wrong. The agreement says nothing about the truth.

moral principles. Disagreement among moral codes in no way compels us to conclude that there is disagreement among moral principles. One therefore wonders whether cultures are all that different when it comes to acknowledging fundamental moral principles since conflicting moral rules can still reflect the same moral principle. Whether one is urged to eat meat or to not eat meat, the rules still reflect an elemental respect for sentient beings.

#### WHY CONCLUDE THAT THERE ARE NO OBJECTIVE STANDARDS?

Suppose different cultures do, in fact, exhibit different first-order principles. In other words, for the sake of argument, suppose that among cultures there is genuine moral diversity. What if one culture believes it is important to respect all sentient beings while another culture does not. Here we have a clear moral disagreement between two cultures. What can we conclude from this disagreement?

Logically, it makes no sense to infer from this that there must be no objective standards whatsoever to evaluate the moral legitimacy of each culture's principles. Give the fact of moral disagreement, why would we thereby conclude that neither position is objectively correct or incorrect? Deducing such a conclusion from the premises does not follow. (As we will see in the next chapter, a valid argument must pass certain tests in order for the conclusion to necessarily follow from the premises.)

Ethical relativism claims that there are no objective, universal standards and that there is no objective "truth" in ethics. Morality is purely culture-bound, and we cannot make any objective claims or pass any legitimate judgment beyond our own culture. Yet, what we are now stipulating is that moral diversity in and of itself does not logically lead to the above claim. In other words, the fact that two cultures disagree concerning moral principles does not at all mean that there are no universal moral principles. All we can logically conclude is that they disagree, pure and simple. One culture could be mistaken. They could both be mistaken.

*Matters of Belief and Matters of Fact* What lies at the core of all this is the ever-present tension between what is subjective and what is objective, between what is *believed* to be the case and what *is* the case. Many Sudanese believe that the practice of genitally excising young girls and women is justifiable, while most Americans believe that it is not. This disagreement says nothing about whether female genital excision is morally

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justifiable or not. It simply points to a disagreement in beliefs. Just because we believe something to be true does not mean that, in reality, it is true. If so, this becomes an insidious form of moral subjectivism, so that moral positions are merely matters of taste. Morality is reducible to what each person believes it to be, an absurd conclusion with dangerous consequences.

In turn, believing that something is the case may help to *explain* why it is practiced. But it does not *justify* the practice. Here indeed is the critical distinction between explanation and justification. (We will examine this distinction more closely in the next chapter.) Unfortunately, we often confuse the two. One thing is certain. The content of a belief is not the same as facticity, or what is. And the fact that two cultures have opposing beliefs about the morality of female genital excision does not at all mean that one position is not wrong. To confuse *belief* with what *is* leads to the pernicious notion that opinion is all that matters, a common error we can easily make because we tend to pursue the path of least resistance, particularly in matters of morality where close scrutiny and critical self-examination are especially important.

WHAT WOULD BE THE CONSEQUENCES?

*Cross-Cultural Judgments as Meaningless* For the sake of argument, suppose we accept ethical relativism. What would be the consequences?<sup>12</sup> One serious consequence is that we would have no grounds whatsoever for making objective, moral evaluations of other cultures and societies and their practices. We would not be able to offer any transcultural moral critique. We would be precluded from making valid moral judgments of practices, beliefs, and rules of other cultures. We would not be able to either condemn or praise practices alien to our own culture. Our circle of moral judgment would be limited to those acts, beliefs, and rules within our own culture. We could certainly pass judgments on other practices, but our judgments would be objectively meaningless.

This meaninglessness of cross-cultural moral judgments makes sense when we consider the numerous instances of ethnocentrism throughout human history, such as those Roman Catholic missionaries in the New World who viewed the native inhabitants as barbaric and pagan. But what about the practice of female genital excision, which seems to be deplored by the majority of cultures? Nonetheless, according to relativism, Americans and numerous human rights groups can condemn the practice of female genital excision, but their condemnation would essentially carry no weight because it would lack any reference to any objective standard.

The same goes for justifying America as the wealthiest and most powerful nation. America is the wealthiest and most powerful nation, but it is also being enslaved to consumerism by the Thai Buddhist monk, Buddhists throughout Sivaraksa's critique lacks implications of relativism, and had intended, shield ours

*Internal Reform as* Givenativism follows from the given culture would be the anthropologist Ruth socially approved habits. eradicably confined to each standards within each culture and wrong *only* for that moral monads, self-enclaves rules and beliefs. This is tion and judgment goes,

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Equally plaguing is a substitutes the "norm" in a Of those in power? If a culture's norms, beliefs, and grounds. Moreover, in setting up a state of affairs to be changed. Yet, rest no adequate grounds for

The same goes for judgments made by other cultures about our own. America is the wealthiest country in the world, yet recent statistics have cited America as also being the stingiest, giving away the least percentage of its wealth to poor countries. Other cultures have criticized our own as being enslaved to consumerism. For instance, there is the scathing critique by the Thai Buddhist monk, Sulak Sivaraksa, which represents that of millions of Buddhists throughout Southeast Asia. If we take relativism seriously, Sivaraksa's critique lacks any merit and is essentially meaningless. The implications of relativism, most likely not at all what well-wishing relativists had intended, shield ourselves and others from vital external critique.

*Internal Reform as Groundless* Another consequence of ethical relativism follows from the above. The sole arbiter of morality within any given culture would be that culture's beliefs and practices. In the words of the anthropologist Ruth Benedict, "Morality . . . is a convenient term for socially approved habits."<sup>13</sup> The circle of moral evaluation is simply and ineradicably confined to each individual culture. The only standards are the standards within each culture. And these standards determine what is right and wrong *only* for that culture. In this respect, individual cultures are like moral monads, self-enclosed and self-standing with respect to their moral rules and beliefs. This is a spatial relativism in that, as far as moral evaluation and judgment goes, only the local is real and worthy of evaluation.

Yet this imparts some profound difficulties. If each culture is its own sole determinative standard for right and wrong conduct, then what justifies measures for internal reform? Upon what grounds can we challenge the norms of our own culture? According to the implications of relativism, we should not swim against the tide of our own cultural norms, since our culture sets the norms of right and wrong. The moral standards are strictly culture-bound. This, in theory, squelches any attempt to reform the prevailing perspectives within one's culture. If the prevailing practice accepts donning white sheets and seizing and whipping African Americans, it is considered wrong to challenge this.

Equally plaguing is another puzzle: How do we even establish what constitutes the "norm" in a culture? Must this be the opinion of the majority? Of those in power? If so, the efforts of reformers who critique their culture's norms, beliefs, and values are spurious and without any meaningful grounds. Moreover, in such a climate the law rests upon no solid basis, thus setting up a state of affairs where laws that are perceived to be unjust need to be changed. Yet, resting upon how laws are established, there may be no adequate grounds for challenging these laws. Thus, according to ethical

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relativism, not only would we lack grounds for criticizing other cultures, but we would not be able to criticize our own as well.

Another problem lies in the notion of "culture." Given the claim that each culture establishes for itself its own moral rules and principles, what do we mean by "culture"? What constitutes a culture? And what about subcultures within a culture, such as minority groups within the American culture? We can extend this further. Subcultures can exist within subcultures. When we think of American Hispanics, do we mean those from South America, Spain, Cuba, or elsewhere? Irish Americans belong to various organizations and clubs, each with their own sorts of rules and rituals. These are types of subcultures. And an Irish American can be opposed to abortion, as a Catholic, yet be tolerant of the law that permits it, as an American citizen. How do we draw parameters as to what constitutes a culture? If we define culture with the broadest stroke, we can each consider ourselves to be, in a sense, independent cultures. Given this, moral relativism essentially can lead to a sort of moral anarchy, in that each individual, in a sense construed as a unique "culture unto him- or herself," sets the standard for his and her own morality. Norman Mailer calls this "absolute relativity," wherein each one of us is the arbiter of our own morality. If moral standards are basically arbitrary, then the possibility of any moral constraint becomes nebulous. Our moral circle becomes more confined.

*A Matter of Tolerance?* What about the idea that ethical relativism nurtures the value of tolerance? This strength can turn into its weakness. According to ethical relativism, there is no objective basis for passing moral judgments on other cultures' practices. We therefore need to be tolerant of these practices. But suppose a particular culture does not value tolerance at all.

In this case, the consequences of ethical relativism logically conflict each other. Consequence A is that a culture's practices are morally right for that specific culture. Consequence B is that we must be tolerant of and therefore not intervene in any other culture's practices. Here's the problem: Cultivating tolerance can clearly clash with cultures that do not see the need to cultivate tolerance. To be tolerant of intolerance can only lead to disaster. The two consequences are inconsistent with each other. Furthermore, tolerance can make sense for the relativist only if the relativist already assumes it as a universal value to cultivate. Yet ethical relativism precludes the notion of viable universal values because it denies universal principles.

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John Cook adds an interesting qualifier to this, by arguing that we need to be careful to avoid a blanket assertion that moral relativism necessarily leads to this logical contradiction. For him, relativism does not promote the *principle* of tolerance. Nor does it militate against the *principle* of intolerance. Rather, it works to combat ethnocentrism. Doing so would definitely place relativism in an illogical box since it would then mean that relativism does hold a certain *principle* to be absolute, namely tolerance.<sup>14</sup> Relativism does not advocate that we must "tolerate" other cultures' behaviors if by "tolerance" we mean "overcoming one's moral objection to something in a quite particular way: by finding a morally acceptable excuse or justification for the conduct in question."<sup>15</sup>

Yet this qualifier only makes sense depending upon how we view and interpret what it means to be tolerant. If tolerance simply means refraining from moral judgment altogether, then the above argument of logical inconsistency seems valid. In any case, this inconsistency does exist as a possible consequence.

*Temporal Relativism* This means that any claims regarding moral improvement or moral regression are meaningless. We cannot make valid moral judgments across time-lines. During the Medieval period, prisoners in parts of Europe, were often tortured as a way of testing their guilt or innocence. Today, European countries have outlawed this practice. Yet, according to ethical relativism, these countries cannot legitimately claim their current policies represent any advance over past practices. Such a claim would only make sense according to some objective standard that transcends temporal and historical parameters.

In America's history, African Americans were viewed in many southern states as having inferior status to persons. Many believed that they were "nonpersons" and therefore without any legal or moral rights. Today, even though this perspective is no longer the norm in the South, does this mean that we have "advanced" in moral sensitivity? When we apply this to the ideology of the Nazi regime just slightly four generations ago, such a posture is evidently embarrassing because most reasonable persons would admit that Germany's Third Reich had diminished in moral sensitivity. Yet, according to relativism, can we say that the Nazi perspective was morally "regressive"? Can we say anything? Accepting ethical relativism would mean that judgments passed at international tribunals such as at Nuremberg and Tokyo have no legitimate basis in morality. Temporal relativism means that we cannot pass any judgment historically regarding

## PART ONE: DIVERSITY AND ETHICS

either moral improvement or moral regress. Simply put, without an objective, universal moral standard, such claims are meaningless.

### ■ STRENGTHS IN ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Let us now consider the strengths of ethical relativism — what appears to be the most popular option in the face of cultural diversity. Ethical relativism is indeed appealing to many of us. It is perhaps the most prevalent moral position among contemporary adults in the West. It is certainly the most popular posture of my students. What accounts for its appeal? Why do we often resort to relativist axioms like “Each to his or her own” and “It’s all relative”? One reason has to do with our resistance against any form of moral absolutism such as ethnocentrism. We are all too familiar with efforts past and present at ethnic cleansing. Another reason seems to be the decline of the authority of religion in the modern era, particularly in Western cultures. This decline of meaningful religious authority represents for many of us the erosion of order. Relativism is also appealing because we ourselves tend to pursue the path of least resistance, and when it comes to our personal moralities, relativism requires the least amount of critical self-examination. It suggests a convenient leap from acknowledging the realm of what “is,” facticity, to the realm of what “ought to be,” morality. For instance, since it *is* the case that many students cheat on their exams, then we can more easily rationalize to ourselves that we *ought* to cheat on exams. Indeed, the human mind has the capacity to rationalize just about anything, so belonging to the relativist camp offers us an uncritical comfort zone. Along with these factors, there are certain strengths in the relativist position that further explain our attraction.

### EVIDENCE

Relativism seems to have the backing of solid evidence. It is plainly true that different cultures exhibit different practices. Social behavior and practices are no doubt culture-bound, and cultures also seem to differ in their moral rules. Note again the distinction we are making between moral rules and moral principles. By moral rules, we mean the specific application in concrete circumstances of more basic and underlying moral principles. In Japan, it is morally acceptable to cremate the dead. This has been the common practice for centuries, not only because of the purificatory power in fire, but also because cremation conserves ground space, a scarce resource in a small, overpopulated country. When Christian missionaries first jour-

neyed to Japan, they were shocked to find that the Christian practice of cremating the dead violated the Christian moral rules between the living and the dead, though the moral principle was the same in each case. In

### CORRECTIVE

Ethical relativism is a corrective to moral absolutism. Moral absolutism is the view that moral rules, and principles must be inflexible in the application. It is a less moral principles and a more moral tone. A moral absolutist believes in moral truth, and goes on to impose

The relativist position is a corrective to moral hubris to assume that we are right and that all others who disagree are wrong. It is an accompanying belief that is grounded on some set of moral principles. It has little sense, because it is culturally derived.

### TOLERANCE

Ethical relativism, because it is a stance that reflects moral relativism. In doing so, it is a corrective of having an open-mindedness to different perspectives. This is particularly true of ethnocentrism and cultural elitism that accompany moral relativism throughout human history. Cultural superiority over other cultures is a common theme.

There is no more fundamental question than how we deal with moral diversity. (Tolerance is valuable because it respects different beliefs and values.) Tolerance is valuable because it reminds us that our moral principles are as well as those of our c



## 1: THE CASE FOR CULTURAL DIVERSITY

neyed to Japan, they were no doubt shocked by this practice because it violated the Christian practice of burial. Here we had an obvious clash in moral rules between the Christians and Japanese as to how to treat the dead, though the moral principle of showing respect for the dead may be the same in each case. In any case, cultural diversity is a fact.

### CORRECTIVE

Ethical relativism is a corrective against moral absolutism. As stated above, moral absolutism is the position that states that certain moral standards, rules, and principles must be adhered to without exception. It is thereby inflexible in the application of these principles. By setting forth exceptionless moral principles and rules, absolutism imparts an imperialistic moral tone. A moral absolutist presumes to have some monopoly on the moral truth, and goes on to impose that "truth" on all others.

The relativist position opposes this moral imperialism. It is moral hubris to assume that we are necessarily in touch with moral certitude and that all others who disagree with us are thereby mistaken. This implies the accompanying belief that all of our practices are therefore justifiably grounded on some set of absolute principles. But this implication makes little sense, because it is abundantly clear that many of our practices are culturally derived.

### TOLERANCE

Ethical relativism, because it rejects moral absolutism, thereby rejects any stance that reflects moral elitism or moral superiority, such as ethnocentrism. In doing so, it appears to uphold the value of tolerance, in the sense of having an open-mindedness and a willingness to entertain diverse perspectives. This is particularly so in the face of past and present expressions of ethnocentrism and cultural chauvinism. Witness the cultural and spiritual elitism that accompanied periods of colonization and missionary zeal throughout human history. Witness the continued sentiments of Western cultural superiority over less "civilized" societies.

There is no more fundamental fact than that of disagreement. What is crucial is how we deal with it. (We will address this again in our next chapter.) Tolerance is valuable in that it enables us to live with others who hold different beliefs and values. In advocating tolerance, ethical relativism reminds us that our moral positions may well reflect our own personal biases as well as those of our culture.

## ■ ARE THERE BETTER OPTIONS?

The weaknesses in ethical relativism clearly outweigh its strengths. Even though this does not necessarily mean that the theory is false, it still compels us to inquire into whether there may be more reasonable moral alternatives than ethical relativism or moral absolutism. In our philosophical quest for what is true, we stand in need of options that make more sense and that can better withstand critical inquiry. That is what this book is all about.

A more viable and sensible option must be one that avoids the two extremes of relativism and absolutism. It would assert that there *are* universal moral principles, yet these principles need to be flexible in terms of how they are applied in varying circumstances. This idea of flexible universal principles is similar to William Ross's notion of *prima facie* principles, principles that are to be usually heeded, although in certain situations some principles may give way to other principles. That is, these principles are not annulled nor abandoned. They are instead overridden by other principles.

Moral absolutism and moral relativism are not the only options. On the one hand, moral absolutism is clearly inflexible. It contends that there are universal principles that can only be applied in one correct way in every culture. Therefore, moral rules that flow from these principles are rigidly applied regardless of different cultural contexts. For instance, when we apply the moral rule of informed consent in the United States, we stipulate that the consent needs to be signed. Must this be an absolute rule? What about Chile or the Philippines, where the signing of forms is resisted because of fears of invasion of privacy and confidentiality with negative consequences for family members as well?

On the other hand, the weakest link in moral relativism lies in its purported attempt to describe the nature of morality. For the relativist, morality turns out to be based upon whatever are the accepted practices, customs, beliefs, and values of a culture. Thus, morality is equated with the customary. But is that all there is to morality? Both intuition and real experience have shown that prevailing practices are not necessarily the litmus test of what we ought to do. What we *do* (the realm of facticity) and what we *ought to do* (the realm of morality) are not the same. Granted, there is some power in the force of custom. What we have been taught and the ways we have been taught certainly influence our personal morality. But is not our own morality more than the result of cultural conditioning? What are the sources of morality? Herein lies our quest, the search for universal moral standards that we can rely upon.

## ■ NOTES

1. Nawal El Saadawi, *Th* trans. and ed. Dr. Sheriff
2. Sandra D. Lane and R to Traditional Female G (1996): 36.
3. Melford Spiro, "Cultural Anthropology 1 (19
4. Keep in mind that the *prove* moral absolutism. the "rejection of moral a plausible explanation of Gilbert Harman and Judithivity (Cambridge, M.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
8. John W. Cook, *Moral* versity Press, 1999), p. 1
9. See Willard Quine, *V and Ontological Relativ* sity Press, 1969).
10. Henry Rosemont Jr "Against Relativism," in *preting Across Boundar* ton, NJ: Princeton Univ
11. Cook, p. 93.
12. James Rachels *succir Philosophy*, 4th ed. (Ne
13. Ruth Benedict, "Ar *Psychology* 10 (1934), c
14. Cook, pp. 24-28.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.

## ■ NOTES

1. Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. and ed. Dr. Sherif Hetata (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), pp. 7–8.
2. Sandra D. Lane and Robert A. Rubinstein, "Judging the Other: Responding to Traditional Female Genital Surgeries," *Hastings Center Report* 26, no. 3 (1996): 36.
3. Melford Spiro, "Cultural Relativism and the Future of Anthropology," *Cultural Anthropology* 1 (1986): 259–86.
4. Keep in mind that the theory of cultural relativism does not necessarily *disprove* moral absolutism. However, as the philosopher Gilbert Harman tells us, the "rejection of moral absolutism . . . is a reasonable inference from the most *plausible explanation* of the range of moral diversity that actually exists." Gilbert Harman and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1996), p. 10.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
8. John W. Cook, *Morality and Cultural Differences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 11.
9. See Willard Quine, *Word and Object* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), and *Ontological Relativity, and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969).
10. Henry Rosemont Jr. discusses this need for a "universal grammar" in "Against Relativism," in Gerald James Larson and Eliot Deutsch, eds., *Interpreting Across Boundaries: New Essays in Comparative Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), p. 46–47.
11. Cook, p. 93.
12. James Rachels succinctly discusses consequences in his *Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003), pp. 21–23.
13. Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal," *Journal of General Psychology* 10 (1934), cited in Cook, note 3, p. 180.
14. Cook, pp. 24–28.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.