4. *Our Global Neighborhood*, the report of the Commission on Global Governance

My final example of a statement of common values is that of the Commission on Global Governance, chaired by Sir Shridath Rampal, former foreign minister of Guyana and head of the British Commonwealth, and Ingvar Carlsson, prime minister of Sweden. In *Our Global Neighborhood*, the commission goes beyond previous reports and declarations, including the three discussed above, in providing factual documentation and careful discussion of the human realities that underlie the need for unprecedented levels of transnational cooperation.[55] It posits an unavoidable challenge for societies: they must learn to work together before it is too late, by transforming the present unruly, conflicted world neighborhood of peoples into a cooperating network of communities. To this purpose, some set of common values is indispensable. Rather than listing a large number of rights and pronouncing them indivisible, in the manner of the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, the commission suggests a threefold approach: a basis of core values, a limited set of rights and responsibilities constituting a "civic code" that build upon these, and changes in international norms embodying these values.

The three parts, thus ordered, might be thought to correspond with a movement from the most common, minimalist values to ones more recently seen as needed; but this is not the case. The list of core values that "all humanity could uphold" turns out to consist of abstract moral principles such as respect for life, liberty, justice, and equity, mutual respect, caring, and integrity. Whether or not all humanity ever could uphold all of these principles together, it assuredly has not done so up to now. Take liberty, or freedom: as Orlando Patterson points out, "For most of human history, and for nearly all the non-Western world prior to Western contact, freedom was, and for many still remains, anything but an obvious or desirable goal."[56] Nor can "mutual respect," which the commission claims is "the more active attribute" of tolerance, be thought a fundamental value in communities or families from earliest times, any more than can "respect for life and its corollary, non-violence," "integrity," or "justice and equity." Only minimalist forms of these values, such as the constraints on violence and deceit, and basic norms of procedural justice or fairness, are capable of being acknowledged by most people, at least with respect to their own community.

The commission vacillates, with respect to its list of core values, between unsupported empirical claims that peoples everywhere uphold one or another value, such as "the sanctity of life," and prescriptive claims that they must do so if we are to achieve peace and progress. Even if we disregard the empirical claims, the prescriptive ones give pause. Either we take the commission's core values as abstractions so vast and so toothless as to be capable of encompassing almost any practices, in which case they will be useless for the purposes of providing a ground for moving toward the goals set forth, of peace and

progress; or else, if we try to give them more substance, more bite, then we can no longer see them as likely to be shared by "all humanity." In neither can they serve as indispensable preconditions to the achievement of peace and progress. They turn out to ask either too little or too much for such a purpose.

What if we ask, not about present acceptance of the commission's core values, but rather about making stronger efforts to uphold them? Even so, it would be important to offer justifications for why we ought to strive to uphold and extend the reach of these values. These justifications would have to refer to some more fundamental moral grounds that could be broadly accepted. In addition, the core values themselves are so vague that it would be difficult to know just how one might apply them, above all in cases of moral conflict. What does it mean to uphold or extend integrity? And how do we resolve disagreement among persons with differing views about what counts as integrity?

Most of the "rights and responsibilities" that the commission goes on to list as expressing the core values are equally general. This time, however, there is never any doubt as to their aspirational nature. True, the list is held to be "the minimum basis for progress in building a more civil global society."[57] But the rights and responsibilities in question are explicitly uniformly prescriptive. The global ethic of common rights and shared responsibilities . . .

> *should* [emphasis added] encompass the rights of all people to: the rights to a secure life, equitable treatment, an opportunity to earn a fair living and provide for their own welfare, the definition and specification of their differences through peaceful means, participation in governance at all levels, free and fair petition for redress of gross injustices, equal access to information, and equal access to the global commons.
>
> At the same time, all people share a responsibility to: contribute to the common good; consider the impact of their actions on the security and welfare of others; promote equity, including gender equity; protect the interests of future generations by pursuing sustainable development and safeguarding the global commons; preserve humanity's cultural and intellectual heritage; be active in governance; and work to eliminate corruption.[58]

In this list of rights and responsibilities, as in that of the core values on which it is held to draw, the language is abstract and extremely general. The intention may have been to seek the broadest possible support. Who can quarrel, after all, with injunctions to contribute to the common good or to work to eliminate corruption? But anyone asking what, exactly, is meant by the various rights and responsibilities and how they relate to one another may wish to have some answers before subscribing to the entire list. What is

meant, for instance, by the right of all people to provide for their own welfare? Or by the right of access to the global commons? And how do these rights relate to everyone's responsibility to protect the interests of future generations? The question, in general, of who should be held responsible for the provision of all these rights is perplexing. Do we have greater responsibilities toward our own children, family members, fellow citizens, than to others, in disposing of scarce resources? What sacrifices do our responsibilities to future generations call for? And how should the vast costs of implementing rights such as that of equal access to information be distributed?

Such questions about the substance and extent of rights and responsibilities underlie controversies between liberals and conservative, between North and South, between ethnic and religious adversaries. For growing numbers of people, they are questions bearing on the survival of their ways of life, their communities, their descendants. The commission has itself pointed to the unprecedented levels of human needs that necessitate seeking out a basis of common values on which debate and cooperation can be built.[59] But merely listing rights and responsibilities that are so general and so far from being commonly acknowledged cannot offer such a basis.

The commission's stress on the need for common values, like that of the other three documents discussed above, provides a partial answer to Herbert Schneider's question, quoted above, about how we might "formulate an ethics or a method of moral science which would serve the cause of morals for all mankind." All four efforts seek to formulate such an ethics to serve such a cause. In so doing, they take their departure from different perspectives and arrive at sometimes sharply different conclusions. But they also overlap when it comes to fundamental values. Among these are the three categories of values that I have suggested are minimalist values most easily recognized across societal and other boundaries: the most basic forms of the positive duties of care and reciprocity; of constraints on violence, deceit, and betrayal; and of norms for procedures and standards of justice.

The four approaches differ when it comes to aspirations, ideals, and principles of what I have called a maximalist nature. Looking at the four together helps to demonstrate how the maximalist and minimalist perspectives can challenge and enrich one another, how both are needed to push the debate still further, how such a debate can affirm both common values and respect for diversity, yet how distant the goal remains of a fully worked out and widely acknowledged common morality. The four texts, taken together, exemplify the importance increasingly attached to stressing common values, but also the questions of line-drawing and the theoretical and practical objections that any search for such values is bound to elicit. I turn to these issues in the chapters to come, beginning with strong contemporary challenges to the very premises on which such a search is based.

NOTES

1. Schneider, *Morals for Mankind* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1960), 55; Warnock, *The Uses of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 85.

2. "Living Together: For a Humanism That Cares to Speak Its Mind," *New York Times*, March 24, 1994.

3. *The Color Line: Legacy for the Twenty-First Century* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 74.

4. *Civil Wars* (New York: New Press, 1994), 66–71. To be sure, Enzenberger affirms that most people everywhere would wish to be free from persecution, torture, threats to life, and lawlessness—freedoms that constitute "the minimum prerequisites of civilization"—but as he looks back at the history of humanity, he takes this minimum to have been achieved "only exceptionally and temporarily" (138). He views as the true "common denominators" at present, rather, the characteristics of all who take part in the spreading of civil wars: the autistic nature of the perpetrators, their inability to distinguish between destruction and self-destruction, and their seeing no need to legitimize violence (20).

5. Cicero, *De Officiis (Of Duties)* (44 B.C.), Book 1.

6. Emperor Asoka's Second Minor Rock Edict continues: "likewise a respect for all life must be an established principle; truth must be spoken." Radhakumud Mookerji, *Asoka* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1962), 116.

7. "The Origin of Ethics," in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 3–13, at 10–11. See also George Silberbauer, "Ethics in Small-Scale Societies," ibid., 14–28.

8. "The Origin of Ethics," 10. Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (1859; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 106. See also the discussion of Darwin's and Midgley's views, and of the origins of ethics, in Peter Singer, *The Expanding Circle* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1981).

9. See my entry on the Golden Rule in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

10. See *A Strategy for Peace: Human Values and the Threat of War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989), chaps. 2 and 4.

11. *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 215–18.

12. See Richard H. Underwood, "False Witness: A Lawyer's History of the Law of Perjury," *Arizona Journal of International and Comparative Law* 10 (1993), 215–52.

13. Arnold Brecht, Political Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), 389, 396. For a discussion of the development of concepts of fairness and morality in childhood, see Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1932).

14. P. F. Strawson, "Social Morality and Individual Ideal," in G. Wallace and A. D. M. Walker, eds., *The Definition of Morality* (London: Methuen and Co., 1970), 101–3, 111.

15. Swami Vivekananda, *Raja-Yoga or Conquering the Internal Nature* (Mayavati, Almora, Himalayas: Advaita Ashrama, 1937), 21.

16. Walpola Sri Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), 48.

17. I draw on a number of contemporary thinkers in referring to minimalist values. See discussion and references in Chapter 2.

18. Sissela Bok, *Secrets: On the Ethics of Concealment and Revelation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); *A Strategy for Peace*, chaps. 2 and 4.

19. *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 4.

20. See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), for a view of the need to stretch perspectives on values in the light of contemporary circumstances.

21. See Strawson, "Social Morality," 113–18, for a discussion of how the minimal values characteristically form the basis for moral development, and can then "assume more refined and generous shapes."

22. I have discussed the maximalist and minimalist approaches with respect to moral issues concerning population policy in "Population and Ethics: Expanding the Moral Space," in Gita Sen, Adrienne Germain, and Lincoln Chen, eds., *Population Policies Reconsidered: Health, Empowerment, and Rights* (Cambridge: Harvard Series on Population and International Health, 1994), 15–26.

23. Arrow, *The Limits of Organization* (New York: Norton, 1974), Chap. 4; Dasgupta, "Trust as a Commodity," in D. Gambetta, ed., *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 49–72. See also Bok, A Strategy for Peace, Chap. 2, and "Can Lawyers Be Trusted?" *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 138 (January 1990): 913–33.

24. *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 26.

25. See Bok, *A Strategy for Peace*, Introduction, and "Can Lawyers Be Trusted?," 919–20.

26. See Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, "The Advantages of Moral Diversity," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 9:2 (1992): 38–62.

27. Benard Williams, "Left-Wing Wittgenstein, Right-Wing Marx," *Common Knowledge* 1 (spring 1992): 37.

28. See Bok, *Lying*, for a discussion of lying in medicine and in other professional and personal contexts.

29. *Structural Anthropology* (1958; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 2:362. See also Adam Kuper, *The Chosen Primate: Human Nature and Cultural Diversity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

30. For a discussion of the role and context of abstract values, see Martha Nussbaum, "Valuing Values: A Case of Reasoned Commitment," *Yale Journal of Law and the Humanities* 6:2 (summer 1994): 197–217.

31. *The Rambler* (1750; New York: Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1957), 31.

32. Ibid.

33. See, for discussions of these issues, Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Tom L. Beauchamp and James F. Childress, *Principles of Medical Ethics*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); William J. Bennett, *The Book of Virtues* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1959); Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977); Richard Garner, *Beyond Morality* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994); Bernard Gert, *Morality: A New Justification of the Moral Rules* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988); Alan Gewirth, *Reason and Morality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Frances V. Harbour, "Basic Moral Values: A Shared Core," *Ethics and International Affairs* 9 (1995): 155–70; Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge

University Press, 1986); Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Warnock, *Uses of Philosophy*; James Q. Wilson, *The Moral Sense* (New York: Free Press, 1993).

34. See Kim Dae Jung, "Is Culture Destiny? The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values," *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 1994): 189–94; "Freedom and Needs," *New Republic*, January 10 and 17, 1994, pp. 31–38.

35. "Vienna Declaration of Human Rights," I.10, *Population and Development Review* 19:4 (December 1993): 878.

36. "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations, 1948, reaffirmed at Vienna in 1993, article 24.

37. "Vienna Declaration on Human Rights," I.5.

38. "A Critical Examination of the Declaration of Rights," in Bhiku Parekh, ed., *Bentham's Political Thought* (London: Croom, Helm, 1973).

39. See John Rawls, "The Law of Peoples," in Stephen Shute and Susan Hurley, eds., *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures* 1993 (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 41–82, for such a distinction.

40. "Towards a Global Ethic," Council for a Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993, title page.

41. *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1991). For a discussion of Küng's views in the context of other views on common values, see Rushworth M. Kidder, *How Good People Make Tough Choices* (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1995).

42. "Towards a Global Ethic," 1.

43. Ibid., 5.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid., 5–9.

46. Ibid., 7, 9.

47. "If our world were a village of 1,000 people, there would be 329 Christians, 174 Muslims, 131 Hindus, 61 Buddhists, 52 Animists, 3 Jews, 34 members of other religions, 216 without any religion" (World Development Forum, 1992, *Encyclopedia Britannica Book of the Year*).

48. Had secular representatives taken part in preparing the declaration, they might also have challenged as incomplete the claim that the common set of core values capable of providing a basis for a global ethic is to be found in the teachings of the world's religions; why not add that these values are also to be found in secular texts and have been expressed before the world's religions were even formulated? In the age-old debate as to whether something is right before God declares it right or whether God declares it to be right because it can be shown to be right on other grounds, it matters not to come down squarely on one side without at least acknowledging the existence of the other.

49. Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor, Origins*, 23, October 14, 1993, p. 299.

50. Ibid., 313; see also 329–30.

51. Ibid., 300. Jesus adds, "also, you shall love your neighbor as yourself": a statement which, depending on how "love" and "neighbor" are interpreted, can be given either a minimalist or a maximalist meaning.

52. Ibid., 325.

53. Ibid., 302.

54. Ibid., 321.

55. The Commission on Global Governance, *Our Global Neighborhood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), Chap. 1.

56. *Freedom*, Vol. 1: *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 1991), x.

57. *Global Neighborhood*, 57.

58. Ibid.

59. See, for critiques of the most general claims about human rights and corresponding responsibilities, O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason*, 187–205; Rawls, "The Law of Peoples," in Shute and Hurley, eds,. *On Human Rights*, and other chapters in this volume; Amartya Sen, "Freedom and Needs."

ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Excerpted from Exploring Ethics *by Donald M. Borchert and David Stewart. (Macmillan Publishing Company. New York. 1986).*

INTRODUCTION

The moral question, What ought I to do?, presupposes that we are free in the sense that we have the capacity to identify and pursue genuine alternative futures. Without such freedom the significance of this question would be eroded. Psychological egoism would modify the question to, Which selfish act should I do? Determinism would transform the question into, What will I be compelled to do by the forces acting on me? Ethical relativism, the viewpoint to be examined here, would change the question to, Within the context of my social group, what ought I to do?

For the ethical relativist, the fundamental ethical question cannot legitimately be raised in general; ethical issues must always be considered relative to a specific social group. The reason the ethical relativist insists on this revision of the fundamental ethical question is that the relativist believes there are no universal cross-cultural ethical norms. Instead, the relativist holds that there are only the norms that a particular society sets up, and these norms vary greatly from one society to another.

The relativist thinks there is little sense to the general question, What ought I to do?, because that question, by not being limited to a specific social group, is addressed to all persons and, therefore, assumes universal cross-cultural moral norms that are applicable to everyone. Asking the question, What ought I to do?, as we have done, commits us to belief in universal cross-cultural norms. That is the position of *ethical objectivism*, sometimes called *ethical absolutism*. The objectivist in ethics defends the view that when different cultures, or different individuals, hold opposing moral values, both of them cannot be right. The ethical relativist would say, in contrast, that right and wrong are defined by each culture for that culture, and that what a given culture defines as right really is right *for that culture* even though it may be the only culture in the world with such a view. It is easy to see how relativism is the opposite of objectivism in ethics, with its view that there are objective moral principles that are true regardless of how many people agree, or disagree, with them. Although the terms *objectivism* and *absolutism* are interchangeable, we will throughout this chapter use the term *absolutism*, as it is the term used consistently by one of the readings below.

THE CASE FOR RELATIVISM: ANTHROPOLOGICAL FACTS

The case for ethical relativism rests chiefly on two sets of considerations: a set

of anthropological facts and a set of methodological assumptions. We will look at both in examining the case for relativism.

The central anthropological fact is *the existence of cultural diversity*. For decades, anthropologists have been amassing a vast array of data on different cultures. Even a quick review of that data reveals how widely human societies diverge from each other in their beliefs and moral practices. How can we account for such diversity? The ethical relativist claims that such differences exist because there are no universal ethical norms to which all societies can look for guidance in evaluating their acts. If there were universal norms, then surely we could expect some fundamental ethical uniformity among various human societies. But no such uniformity seems to exist. Accordingly, an attractive conclusion is that there simply are no such universal norms.

A second anthropological fact to which ethical relativists appeal is the *cultural origin of values*. It is almost universally acknowledged that human beings develop their beliefs and values within a social context. That is to say, one is not born with a whole set of moral values already formed. Those beliefs are acquired slowly through a sustained encounter with the values of the people who make up society. Where did those people get their values? No doubt they acquired theirs also in an encounter with their social environment. That is to say, values are the product of society's customs. How can we account for those customs? Ethical relativists like to suggest that those customs are based ultimately on the emotions of pain and pleasure that a society in its collective wisdom associates with various actions. By trial and error, and guided by pain and pleasure, our ancestors discovered those actions that satisfied their needs and promoted their pleasure. Similarly they discovered those actions that failed to satisfy their needs and generated pain. The former came to be regarded as "right" or "good," and the latter came to be seen as "wrong" or "evil." The results of these learning experiences were enshrined in society's customs for the benefit of succeeding generations.

If moral values are derived from society's customs, and if those customs are derived from the pains and pleasures of that society's ancestors, then it becomes clear why one society's moral beliefs differ from those of another society. What caused pain and pleasure for one society's ancestors did not necessarily generate pain or pleasure for the ancestors of a different society. Given different ancestral emotional responses in the struggle of different societies for survival, it is understandable that societies would develop different values and practices. Differing ancestral emotional responses, says the relativist, account much better for different current moral beliefs than do assumed universal moral norms.

A third anthropological fact cited by ethical relativists to bolster the case for relativism is *the pervasiveness of ethnocentrism*. Many people at different times and places have believed that their culture in general and their moral values in particular were superior to those of others. Such beliefs of moral superiority, says the relativist, are not based on the knowledge that a culture's morality is

perfectly compatible with certain absolute moral norms. Those beliefs spring instead from the respect for one's culture that society has instilled in its people from early childhood. When that respect escalates into feelings of superiority, the phenomenon of ethnocentrism is present. Ethnocentrism can explain why ethical absolutists are willing to go around evaluating human behavior in other cultures as inferior to their own culture's values.

The Case for Relativism: Methodology

In addition to these anthropological considerations, some relativists also appeal to methodological issues. One issue involves the claim that because the meanings of moral concepts vary from culture to culture, those concepts cannot be understood outside the moral system of a specific culture. For example, *good* in one society may mean "that which is approved by the gods," whereas *good* in another society may mean "that which promotes the happiness of the majority." In yet another society *good* may mean "that which hastens the coming of the communist revolution." How can any person, standing within one society's moral system, really understand the meanings of the key concepts of a different society's morality? Some ethical relativists declare that such understanding is impossible. If that is the case, then cross-cultural evaluations become doubly impossible. The ethical relativist would not only deny any universal moral norms by which all cultures can be judged, but would also argue that no one really has the intimate knowledge of another society's moral concept that is essential for passing judgment on that society's morality.

A second methodological issue that is sometimes urged by ethical relativists involves the claim that the basis for justifying moral obligation varies from culture to culture. Suppose, for example, I said, It is wrong to murder. And suppose, further, that someone asked me on what grounds I based that claim. What convincing basis could I specify? Would it be convincing if I appealed to a divine revelation from God that declared murder to be wrong? Would it be convincing if I said that murder was contrary to my feelings? Or, what if I appealed to the majority of the world's scientists who denounced murder? Or, how would it be if I said that murder violated universal human nature? We could probably find persons who would endorse one or more of these reasons for justifying moral claims; but it is unlikely that we would find all people agreeing on any one of them. Without such agreement, so the relativist argues, it is foolish to expect that we can have an answer to the question What ought I to do? that will be acceptable to all people. In other words, we do not have a universally agreed-upon way of demonstrating what one ought to do. Some people appeal to one basis, others appeal to another. The basis you select is derived from the culture in which you live.

A third methodological basis for ethical relativism comes from the practice of anthropology itself. As a social science, anthropology offers a *description* of cultures and human behavior. The philosophical study of ethics, in contrast, is not so con-

cerned about how people in fact behave but with how they ought to behave; it is *prescriptive* rather than descriptive. Anthropologists who started making value judgments about the behavior of the peoples they were studying would not only cease being anthropologists in so doing, but they would also probably find the people they were studying unwilling to talk with them. There is also the ever-present danger of ethnocentrism, of simply assuming that one's own cultural values are the best. Such an assumption would not only blind one to the values of the culture under study, but it also might simply be wrong. For these and many other reasons, anthropologists have adopted a value-free method of inquiry. As an anthropologist, the investigator does not make value judgments about a society or culture under study but instead seeks as clear an understanding as possible of what values, beliefs, and norms underlie a given society. Some anthropologists, though not all by any means, make the jump from this value-free method of research to the conclusion that no cross-cultural value judgments are ever warranted. Such an assumption apparently has been made by the advocate of ethical relativism presented here.

The Attractiveness of Relativism

Part of the attractiveness of relativism lies in the attitude of tolerance it seems to promote. There seems to be a humility attached to the relativist position ("I can't say my views are right for everybody, although they are right for me") and an arrogance associated with the absolutist view ("There are absolute moral principles, and I know what they are"). Undoubtedly this is one reason many people find ethical objectivism so unattractive. We have seen too many examples of people trying to remake the world in terms of their own religious or ideological views for which they claim absolute certainty. A live-and-let-live attitude, which seems to follow from the relativist position, strikes most of us as an attractive alternative to the dogmatism of the absolutist.

To characterize the two viewpoints in this way is not quite accurate. The degree of intolerance a person has toward others may not be directly related to the philosophical basis for that person's views. A relativist could be just as dogmatic as an absolutist. Ethical absolutists could also realize that tolerance of other views is called for, as their own views may in the future prove to have been wrong. A better characterization of the absolutist's point of view would be: "There are absolute moral principles, but I might not have a full grasp of them; I act on the basis of the best knowledge I have." Throughout the history of philosophy one will find these two views, though perhaps under different labels. One view assumes that there are no fixed moral norms, and that right or wrong is solely determined by society. The other view is that we should keep on searching for a clearer understanding of morality and looking for better ways to relate to other people. We might not know the ultimate truth about things, but we should keep pursuing a better understanding of the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Critic of Relativism: Walter Stace

A person who lived in several different cultures for extended periods of time would have unusually rich opportunities to reflect on ethical relativism. Such a person was Walter T. Stace (1886–1967). He was born in 1886 in London, England, into a family deeply embedded in governmental service. His great grandfather was a general in the Battle of Waterloo, his father was a lieutenant colonel in the British army, and his brother became a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Engineers. Such a family background probably influenced Stace to enter the British civil service in Ceylon in 1910, two years after he had received his B.A. in philosophy from Trinity College at Dublin University. For the next 22 years he lived in Ceylon, serving in positions ranging from district judge to mayor of Colombo. In 1932, governmental changes in Ceylon induced him to leave the country, and he accepted a position at Princeton University, where he taught until his retirement in 1955.

Stace was a member of that vanishing breed of philosophers who became distinguished teachers and scholars without having had any formal graduate education. He did, however, receive a Litt.D. in 1929 from Dublin University in recognition of the contribution he made to the scholarly world with his book *The Philosophy of Hegel*. In the preface to that work Stace indicates that his goal is to reduce the notoriously complex thought of Hegel to an easily understood discussion. Stace succeeds remarkably well, and that same quest for clarity for the sake of communicating to others seems to inform most of his writings.

One of Stace's major philosophical concerns was the wave of ethical relativism that seemed to be flooding the minds of many persons prior to the Second World War. Relativists, though often of a disposition to do so, were unable to defend democracy as morally better than the totalitarian state of fascism. In *The Concept of Morals*, published in 1937 and from which the selection below is taken, Stace mounted a tough-minded attack on ethical relativism. Then in *The Destiny of Western Man*, published in 1942, he made a case for the moral superiority of democracy, and his discussion was so impressive that it won him the Reynal and Hitchcock Prize. Stace went on to publish a total of ten books and many articles, for which in 1959 he was one of ten scholars selected to receive a prize from the American Council of Learned Societies for distinguished scholarship in the humanities.

Relativism Distinguished from Absolutism

At the beginning of his analysis of relativism, Stace describes clearly the disagreement that separates the ethical relativist from the ethical absolutist. That disagreement can be described in a number of ways. It can be discussed in terms of the differing beliefs about universal cross-cultural norms: The absolutist affirms such "absolutes" or norms, and the relativist denies them. Here is his definition of relativism.

Any ethical position which denies that there is a single moral standard which is equally applicable to all men at all times may fairly be called a species of ethical relativity. There is not, the relativist asserts, merely one moral law, one code, one standard. There are many moral laws, codes, standards. What morality ordains in one place or age may be quite different from what morality ordains in another place or age. The moral code of Chinamen is quite different from that of Europeans, that of African savages quite different from both. Any morality, therefore, is relative to the age, the place, and the circumstances in which it is found. It is in no sense absolute.

Another way the disagreement between the relativist and absolutist can be represented is in terms of distinctions that the absolutist affirms and the relativist denies. The absolutist, for example, distinguishes between what people *think* is right, and what is *actually* right. The relativist denies this distinction by affirming that what people *think* is right *is* in fact right. Notice how Stace, without mincing words, characterizes the relativist's creed as declaring, "Cannibalism is right for people who believe in it." We could add: Terrorism is right for people who believe in it. After defining relativism, Stace next makes clear the important distinction between *cultural* relativism and *ethical* relativism. The tendency to confuse them rests, in part, on using the term *standard* in two different senses.

This does not mean merely—as one might at first sight be inclined to suppose—that the very same kind of action which is thought *right in one country and period may be* thought *wrong in another. This would be a mere platitude, the truth of which everyone would have to admit. Even the absolutist would admit this—would even wish to emphasize it—since he is well aware that different peoples have different sets of moral ideas, and his whole point is that some of these sets of ideas are false. What the relativist means to assert is, not this platitude, but that the very same kind of action which is right in one country and period may be wrong in another. And this, far from being a platitude, is a very startling assertion.*

It is very important to grasp thoroughly the difference between the two ideas. For there is reason to think that many minds tend to find ethical relativity attractive because they fail to keep them clearly apart. It is so very obvious that moral ideas differ from country to country and from age to age. And it is so very easy, if you are mentally lazy, to suppose that to say this means the same as to say that no universal moral standard exists,—or in other words that it implies ethical relativity. We fail to see that the word "standard" is used in two different senses. It is perfectly true that, in one sense, there are many variable moral standards. We speak of judging a man by the standard of his time. And this implies that different times have different standards. And this, of course, is quite true. But when the word "standard" is used in this sense it means simply the set of moral ideas current during the period in question. It means what people think *right, whether as a matter of fact it* is *right or not. On the other hand when the absolutist asserts that there exists a single universal moral "standard," he is not using the word in this sense at all. He means by "standard" what* is *right as distinct from what people merely think right. His point is that although what people think right varies in different countries and periods, yet what actually is right is everywhere and always the same. And it follows that when the ethical relativist disputes the position of the absolutist and denies that any universal moral standard exists he too means by "standard" what actually is right.*

But it is exceedingly easy, if we are not careful, to slip loosely from using the word in the first sense to using it in the second sense; and to suppose that the variability of moral beliefs is the same thing as the variability of what really is moral. And unless we keep the two senses of the word "standard" distinct, we are likely to think the creed of ethical relativity much more plausible than it actually is.

The genuine relativist, then, does not merely mean that Chinamen may think right what Frenchmen think wrong. He means that what is wrong for the Frenchman may be right for the Chinaman. And if one enquires how, in those circumstances, one is to know what actually is right in China or in France, the answer comes quite glibly. What is right in China is the same as what people think right in China; and what is right in France is the same as what people think right in France. So that, if you want to know what is moral in any particular country or age all you have to do is to ascertain what are the moral ideas current in that age or country. Those ideas are, for that age or country, *right. Thus what is morally right is identified with what is thought to be morally right, and the distinction which we made above between these two is simply denied. To put the same thing in another way, it is denied that there can be or ought to be any distinction between the two senses of the word "standard." There is only one kind of standard of right and wrong, namely, the moral ideas current in any particular age or country.*

Moral right means *what people think morally right. It has no other meaning. What Frenchmen think right is, therefore, right for* Frenchmen. *And evidently one must conclude—though I am not aware that relativists are anxious to draw one's attention to such unsavory but yet absolutely necessary conclusion from their creed—that cannibalism is right for people who believe in it, that human sacrifice is right for those races which practice it, and that burning widows alive was right for Hindus until the British stepped in and compelled the Hindus to behave immorally by allowing their widows to remain alive.*

When it is said that, according to the ethical relativist, what is thought right in any social group is right for that group, one must be careful not to misinterpret this. The relativist does not, of course, mean that there actually is an objective moral standard in France and a different objective standard in England, and that French and British opinions respectively give us correct information about these different standards. His point is rather that there are no objectively true moral standards at all. There is no single universal objective standard. Nor are there a variety of local objective standards. All standards are subjective. People's subjective feelings about morality are the only standards which exist.

To sum up. The ethical relativist consistently denies, it would seem, whatever the ethical absolutist asserts. For the absolutist there is a single universal moral standard. For the relativist there is no such standard. There are only local, ephemeral, and variable standards. For the absolutist there are two senses of the word "standard." Standards in the sense of sets of current moral ideas are relative and changeable. But the standard in the sense of what is actually morally right is absolute and unchanging. For the relativist no such distinction can be made. There is only one meaning of the word standard, namely, that which refers to local and variable sets of moral ideas. Or if it is insisted that the word must be allowed two meanings, then the relativist will say that there is at any rate no actual example of a standard in the absolute sense, and that the word as thus used is an empty name to which nothing in reality corresponds; so that the distinction between the two meanings becomes empty and useless. Finally—though this is merely saying the same thing in another way—the absolutist makes a

distinction between what actually is right and what is thought right. The relativist rejects this distinction and identifies what is moral with what is thought moral by certain human beings or groups of human beings. . . .[1]

The Case for Relativism Examined

Stace now examines several of the major arguments usually made to support ethical relativism. The first argument, which we have already encountered, suggests that the diversity of moral beliefs and practices is conclusive evidence for ethical relativism. Stace's attack on this argument is clear and strong. He does not deny that there are varieties of moral beliefs and practices among the world's peoples; there is ample data to support this claim. What he denies is that this data by itself leads to ethical relativism. Stace argues that the diversity of moral beliefs and practices is compatible with either ethical relativism or ethical absolutism. That is, the facts can be accounted for by either position and cannot be used to argue for the truth of only one of them. Stace begins by characterizing the argument as it would be put by an ethical relativist using anthropological data to undergird the argument.

There are [several] . . . main arguments in favour of ethical relativity. The first is that which relies upon the actual varieties of moral "standards" found in the world. It was easy enough to believe in a single absolute morality in older times when there was no anthropology, when all humanity was divided clearly into two groups, Christian peoples and the "heathen." Christian peoples knew and possessed the one true morality. The rest were savages whose moral ideas could be ignored. But all this is changed. Greater knowledge has brought greater tolerance. We can no longer exalt our own moralities as alone true, while dismissing all other moralities as false or inferior. The investigations of anthropologists have shown that there exist side by side in the world a bewildering variety of moral codes. On this topic endless volumes have been written, masses of evidence piled up. Anthropologists have ransacked the Melanesian Islands, the jungles of New Guinea, the steppes of Siberia, the deserts of Australia, the forests of central Africa, and have brought back with them countless examples of weird, extravagant, and fantastic "moral" customs with which to confound us. We learn that all kinds of horrible practices are, in this, that, or the other place, regarded as essential to virtue. We find that there is nothing, or next to nothing, which has always and everywhere been regarded as morally good by all men. Where then is our universal morality? Can we, in face of all this evidence, deny that it is nothing but an empty dream?

This argument, taken by itself, is a very weak one. It relies upon a single set of facts—the variable moral customs of the world. But this variability of moral ideas is admitted by both parties to the dispute, and is capable of ready explanation upon the hypothesis of either party. The relativist says that the facts are to be explained by the nonexistence of any absolute moral standard. The absolutist says that they are to be explained by human ignorance of what the absolute moral standard is. And he can truly point out that men have differed widely in their opinions about all manner of topics including the subject matters of the physical sci-

[1]Reprinted with permission of Macmillan Publishing Company from *The Concept of Morals* by Walter Stace.

ences—just as much as they differ about morals. And if the various different opinions which men have held about the shape of the earth do not prove that it has no one real shape, neither do the various opinions which they have held about morality prove that there is no one true morality.

Thus the facts can be explained equally plausibly on either hypothesis. There is nothing in the facts themselves which compels us to prefer the relativistic hypothesis to that of the absolutist. And therefore the argument fails to prove the relativist conclusion. If that conclusion is to be established, it must be by means of other considerations.

Because it is the anthropologists who have expanded so vastly our knowledge of cultural diversity, and because anthropologists are characterized as scientists in their work, and because science is accorded such great respect in our society, it is understandable why so many people accept as true the doctrine of ethical relativism when it is declared to be the truth by anthropologists. But, says Stace, it is an error to think that no one knew about ethical diversity before anthropologists appeared on the scene. Long before modern anthropological methods were brought to bear on the issue, it was known—even in antiquity—that various peoples of the world differed in their moral attitudes and practices. Although Stace does not mention it, one could also note that anthropology is a fairly recent academic discipline, and its great contribution to learning has not been in informing a previously ignorant world of cultural diversity.

The work of the anthropologists, upon which ethical relativists seem to rely so heavily, has as a matter of fact added absolutely nothing in principle *to what has always been known about the variability of moral ideas. Educated people have known all along that the Greeks tolerated sodomy, which in modern times has been regarded in some countries as an abominable crime; that the Hindus thought it a sacred duty to burn their widows; that trickery, now thought despicable, was once believed to be a virtue; that terrible torture was thought by our own ancestors only a few centuries ago to be a justifiable weapon of justice; that it was only yesterday that western peoples came to believe that slavery is immoral. Even the ancients knew very well that moral customs and ideas vary—witness the writings of Herodotus. Thus the principle of the variability of moral ideas was well understood long before modern anthropology was ever heard of. Anthropology has added nothing to the knowledge of this principle except a mass of new and extreme examples of it drawn from very remote sources. But to multiply examples of a principle already well known and universally admitted adds nothing to the argument which is built upon that principle. The discoveries of the anthropologists have no doubt been of the highest importance in their own sphere. But in my considered opinion they have thrown no new light upon the special problems of the moral philosopher.*

Although the multiplication of examples has no logical bearing on the argument, it does have an immense psychological *effect upon people's minds. These masses of anthropological learning are impressive. They are propounded in the sacred name of "science." If they are quoted in support of ethical relativity—as they often are—people* think *that they must prove something important. They bewilder and over-awe the simple-minded, batter down their resistance, make them ready to receive humbly the doctrine of ethical relativity from those who have acquired a reputation by their immense learning and their claims to be "scientific." Perhaps this is why so much ado is made by ethical relativists regarding the anthropological*

evidence. But we must refuse to be impressed. We must discount all this mass of evidence about the extraordinary moral customs of remote peoples. Once we have admitted—as everyone who is instructed must have admitted these last two thousand years without any anthropology at all—the principle that moral ideas vary, all this new evidence adds nothing to the argument. And the argument itself proves nothing for the reasons already given.

Problematic Consequences of Relativism

Stace acknowledges that one of the difficulties the ethical absolutist faces is that of providing a foundation for morality to which everyone would agree. Stace acknowledges this difficulty in sections of his paper that are not included here. The various approaches to an objective basis for ethics will be explored in the second section of this book; to go into them here would require too much detail at the present time. But the difficulty that the absolutist faces, though considerable, is not so serious a challenge to the absolutist view as are the difficulties faced by relativists in defending their position. In an approach reminiscent of William James's evaluation of determinism, Stace argues that the practical consequences of relativism would be devastating.

It is time that we turned our attention from the case in favour of ethical relativity to the case against it. Now the case against it consists, to a very large extent, in urging that, if taken seriously and pressed to its logical conclusion, ethical relativity can only end in destroying the conception of morality altogether, in undermining its practical efficacy, in rendering meaningless many almost universally accepted truths about human affairs, in robbing human beings of any incentive to strive for a better world, in taking the life-blood out of every ideal and every aspiration which has ever ennobled the life of man. In short, the charge against it is that it revolts and outrages man's moral feelings.

To all such arguments it is always possible to reply that they are merely pragmatic, mere appeals to feeling which have no logical cogency and no scientific value. . . . Perhaps we shall find that the purely logical and scientific procedure, which would rule out all feeling as irrelevant, is not wholly applicable to the subject matter of morals; that it rests upon a too rigorous dichotomy between feeling and cognition. But however that may be, let us hear what the antirelativist has to say. It cannot be wrong, it cannot be irrelevant for us, and for the relativist himself, to see what his doctrine actually implies in the way of practical consequences; to see how it tallies with the demands of the "moral consciousness."

The *first* effect of ethical relativism would be to render meaningless any cross-cultural moral comparisons. No matter how depraved a society's attitudes might be—the Nazi's attitude toward Jews, South Africa's official policy of apartheid, a society's official endorsement of terrorism as a political weapon, the list could go on and on—the ethical relativist in our society would not have any grounds on which to condemn such attitudes. Why? Because, in the relativist view, there are no cross-cultural standards to which one could appeal.

First of all, then, ethical relativity, in asserting that the moral standards of particular social groups are the only standards which exist, renders

meaningless all propositions which attempt to compare these standards with one another in respect of their moral worth. And this is a very serious matter indeed. We are accustomed to think that the moral ideas of one nation or social group may be "higher" or "lower" than those of another. We believe, for example, that Christian ethical ideas are nobler than those of the savage races of central Africa. Probably most of us would think that the Chinese moral standards are higher than those of the inhabitants of New Guinea. In short we habitually compare one civilization with another and judge the sets of ethical ideas to be found in them to be some better, some worse. The fact that such judgments are very difficult to make with any justice, and that they are frequently made on very superficial and prejudiced grounds, has no bearing on the question now at issue. The question is whether such judgments have any meaning. *We habitually assume that they have.*

But on the basis of ethical relativity they can have none whatever. For the relativist must hold that there is no common *standard which can be applied to the various civilizations judged. Any such comparison of moral standards implies the existence of some superior standard which is applicable to both. And the existence of any such standard is precisely what the relativist denies. According to him the Christian standard is applicable only to Christians, the Chinese standard only to Chinese, the New Guinea standard only to the inhabitants of New Guinea.*

Stace's *second* objection to relativism is that it makes impossible even the comparison of different epochs within the same culture.

What is true of comparisons between the moral standards of different races will also be true of comparisons between those of different ages. It is not unusual to ask such questions as whether the standard of our own day is superior to that which existed among our ancestors five hundred years ago. And when we remember that our ancestors employed slaves, practiced barbaric physical tortures, and burnt people alive, we may be inclined to think that it is. At any rate we assume that the question is one which has meaning and is capable of rational discussion. But if the ethical relativist is right, whatever we assert on this subject must be totally meaningless. For here again there is no common standard which could form the basis of any such judgments.

The *third* objection to relativism is that it makes the whole idea of moral progress meaningless.

This in its turn implies that the whole notion of moral progress *is a sheer delusion. Progress means an advance from lower to higher, from worse to better. But on the basis of ethical relativity it has no meaning to say that the standards of this age are better (or worse) than those of a previous age. For there is no common standard by which both can be measured. Thus it is nonsense to say that the morality of the New Testament is higher than that of the Old. And Jesus Christ, if he imagined that he was introducing into the world a higher ethical standard than existed before his time, was merely deluded.*

The ethical relativist, however, can salvage some meaning from cross-cultural comparisons, intracultural comparisons, and notions of moral progress. But the salvaged meaning ends up being simply the affirmation that another culture is more like one's own (if one assesses that culture positively) or less like one's own (if one assesses the culture negatively).

There is indeed one way in which the ethical relativist can give some sort of meaning to judgments of higher or lower as applied to the moral ideas of different races or ages. What he will have to say is that we assume our standards to be the best simply because they are ours. And we judge other standards by our own. If we say that Chinese moral codes are better than those of African cannibals, what we mean *by this is that they are better* according to our standards. *We mean, that is to say, that Chinese standards are* more like our own *than African standards are. "Better" accordingly* means *"more like us." "Worse" means "less like us." It thus becomes clear that judgments of better and worse in such cases do not express anything that is really true at all. They merely give expression to our perfectly groundless satisfaction with our own ideas. In short, they give expression to nothing but our egotism and self-conceit. Our moral ideals are not really better than those of the savage. We are simply deluded by our egotism into thinking they are. The African savage has just as good a right to think his morality the best as we have to think ours the best. His opinion is just as well grounded as ours, or rather both opinions are equally groundless. And on this view Jesus Christ can only have been led to the quite absurd belief that his ethical precepts were better than those of Moses by his personal vanity. If only he had read Westermarck and Dewey he would have understood that, so long as people continued to believe in the doctrine of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, that doctrine was morally* right, *and that there could not be any point whatever in trying to make them believe in his new-fangled theory of loving one's enemies. True, the new morality would* become *right as soon as people came to believe in it, for it would then be the accepted standard. And what people think right is right. But then, if only Jesus Christ and persons with similar ideas had kept these ideas to themselves, people might have gone on believing that the old morality was right. And in that case it would have* been *right, and would have remained so till this day. And that would have saved a lot of useless trouble. For the change which Jesus Christ actually brought about was merely a change from one set of moral ideas to another. And as the new set of ideas was in no way better than the set it displaced—to say that it was better would be meaningless for the reasons already given—the change was really a sheer waste of time. And of course it likewise follows that anyone who in the future tries to improve the moral ideas of humanity will also be wasting his time.*

Stace's *fourth* objection to relativism is similar to the third one. He charges that ethical relativism undercuts the seriousness of moral striving for higher ideals. If, as ethical relativism maintains, one cannot say that one moral ideal is superior to another, what is the point in striving for so-called higher ideals? Why should anyone bother to change a comfortable pattern of life?

Thus the ethical relativist must treat all judgments comparing different moralities as either entirely meaningless; or, if this course appears too drastic, he has the alternative of declaring that they have for their meaning-content nothing except the vanity and egotism of those who pass them. We are asked to believe that the highest moral ideals of humanity are not really any better than those of an Australian bushman. But if this is so, why strive for higher ideals? Thus the heart is taken out of all effort, and the meaning out of all human ideals and aspirations.

The ethical relativist may perhaps say that he is being misjudged. It is not true that, on the basis of his doctrine, all effort for moral improvement is vain. For if we take such a civilization as our own, and if we assume that the standard of morals

theoretically accepted by it is that of Christian ethics, then there is surely plenty of room for improvement and "progress" in the way of making our practice accord with our theory. Effort may legitimately be directed towards getting people to live up to whatever standards they profess to honour. Such effort will be, on the relativistic basis, perfectly meaningful; for it does not imply a comparison of standards by reference to a common standard, but only a comparison of actual achievements with an admitted and accepted standard within a social group.

Now I do not believe that even this plea can be accepted. For as soon as it comes to be effectively realized that our moral standard is no better than that of barbarians, why should anyone trouble to live up to it? It would be much easier to adopt some lower standard, to preach it assiduously until everyone believes it, when it would automatically become right. But even if we waive this point, and admit that the exhortation to practice what we preach may be meaningful, this does not touch the issue which was raised above. It will still be true that efforts to improve moral beliefs, *as distinguished from moral* practice, *would be futile. It will still be true that Jesus Christ would have done better had he tried only to persuade humanity to live up to the old barbaric standards than he did in trying to propagate among them a new and more enlightened moral code. It will still be true that any reformer in the future who attempts to make men see even more noble ideals than those which we have inherited from the reformers of the past will be wasting his time.*

The *fifth* objection made to relativism is that it tends to produce moral anarchy, the view that one moral view is just as legitimate as any other, that anything goes. This consequence results from the serious difficulty of defining what one means by "social group." According to the relativist, the ethical question, What ought I to do?, must be restated into the form, Within the context of my social group, what ought I to do? But what is one's social group? All the people in the nation? Does everyone who lives in a nation subscribe to the same moral standards? Hardly. Is one's social group all the people in the province, state, or territory? Or is it the people in one's city, district, neighborhood, or home? When pressed to identify the meaning of the term *social group*, the relativist encounters these kinds of difficulties. Perhaps the only group that affirms exactly the same moral standards I do is a group of one person—myself. If so, I alone determine what is right and wrong; and so does everyone else. If that is the logical consequence of relativism, then we have a situation of moral anarchy where conflicts of interest are settled not by an appeal to an acknowledged cross-group standard but by force. In the situation of moral neutrality, might makes right.

Up to the present I have allowed it to be taken tacitly for granted that, though judgments comparing different races and ages in respect of their moral codes are impossible for the ethical relativist, judgments of comparison between individuals living with the same social group would be quite possible. Individuals living within the same social group would presumably be subject to the same moral code, that of their group, and this would therefore constitute, as between these individuals, a common standard by which they could both be measured. We have not here, as we had in the other case, the difficulty of the absence of any common standard of comparison. It should therefore be possible for the ethical relativist to say quite meaningfully that President Lincoln was a better

man than some criminal or moral imbecile of his own time and country, or that Jesus was a better man than Judas Iscariot.

But is even this minimum of moral judgment really possible on relativist grounds? It seems to me that it is not. For when once the whole of humanity is abandoned as the area covered by a single moral standard, what smaller areas are to be adopted as the loci of different standards? Where are we to draw the lines of demarcation? We can split up humanity, perhaps—though the procedure will be very arbitrary—into races, races into nations, nations into tribes, tribes into families, families into individuals. Where are we going to draw the moral *boundaries? Does the locus of a particular moral standard reside in a race, a nation, a tribe, a family, or an individual? Perhaps the blessed phrase "social group" will be dragged in to save the situation. Each such group, we shall be told, has its own moral code which is, for it, right. But what* is *a "group"? Can anyone define it or give its boundaries? . . .*

The difficulty is not, as might be thought, merely an academic difficulty of logical definition. If that were all, I should not press the point. But the ambiguity has practical consequences which are disastrous for morality. No one is likely to say that moral codes are confined within the arbitrary limits of the geographical divisions of countries. Nor are the notions of race, nation, or political state likely to help us. To bring out the essential practical character of the difficulty let us put it in the form of concrete questions. Does the American nation constitute a "group" having a single moral standard? Or does the standard of what I ought to do change continuously as I cross the continent in a railway train? Do different states in the Union have different moral codes? Perhaps every town and village has its own peculiar standard. This may at first sight seem reasonable enough. "In Rome do as Rome does" may seem as good a rule in morals as it is in etiquette. But can we stop there? Within the village are numerous cliques each having its own set of ideas. Why should not each of these claim to be bound only by its own special and peculiar moral standards? And if it comes to that, why should not the gangsters of Chicago claim to constitute a group having its own morality, so that its murders and debaucheries must be viewed as "right" by the only standard which can legitimately be applied to it? And if it be answered that the nation will not tolerate this, that may be so. But this is to put the foundation of right simply in the superior force of the majority. In that case whoever is stronger will be right, however monstrous his ideas and actions. And if we cannot deny to any set of people the right to have its own morality, is it not clear that, in the end, we cannot even deny this right to the individual? Every individual man and woman can put up, on this view, an irrefutable claim to be judged by no standard except his or her own.

If these arguments are valid, the ethical relativist cannot really maintain that there is anywhere to be found a moral standard binding upon anybody against his will. And he cannot maintain that, even within the social group, there is a common standard as between individuals. And if that is so, then even judgments to the effect that one man is morally better than another become meaningless. All moral valuation thus vanishes. There is nothing to prevent each man from being a rule unto himself. The result will be moral chaos and the collapse of all effective standards. . . .

Even if it were possible to identify a morally relevant social group, the relativist's problem is not solved. Within a social group, however defined, complete agree-

ment on moral attitudes is most unlikely to be present. When complete agreement is lacking, how does one decide what really is the standard of the group? Either one takes the majority opinion, or goes with the minority. If one takes the majority view, then one must judge all social reformers to be misfits. If one goes with the minority view, then one seems to be led into individualism and moral anarchy. Such is the dilemma of the relativist.

But even if we assume that the difficulty about defining moral groups has been surmounted, a further difficulty presents itself. Suppose that we have now definitely decided what are the exact boundaries of the social group within which each moral standard is to be operative. And we will assume—as is invariably done by relativists themselves—that this group is to be some actually existing social community such as a tribe or nation. How are we to know, even then, what actually is *the moral standard within that group? How is anyone to know? How is even a member of the group to know? For there are certain to be within the group—at least this will be true among advanced peoples—wide differences of opinion as to what is right, what wrong. Whose opinion, then, is to be taken as representing* the *moral standard of the group? Either we must take the opinion of the majority within the group or the opinion of some minority. If we rely upon the ideas of the majority, the results will be disastrous. Wherever there is found among a people a small band of select spirits, or perhaps one man, working for the establishment of higher and nobler ideals than those commonly accepted by the group, we shall be compelled to hold that, for that people at that time, the majority are right, and that the reformers are wrong and are preaching what is immoral. We shall have to maintain, for example, that Jesus was preaching immoral doctrines to the Jews. Moral goodness will have to be equated always with the mediocre and sometimes with the definitely base and ignoble. If on the other hand we say that the moral standard of the group is to be identified with the moral opinions of some minority, then what minority is this to be? We cannot answer that it is to be the minority composed of the best and most enlightened individuals of the group. This would involve us in a palpably vicious circle. For by what standard are these individuals to be judged the best and the most enlightened? There is no principle by which we could select the right minority. And therefore we should have to consider every minority as good as every other. And this means that we should have no logical right whatever to resist the claim of the gangsters of Chicago—if such a claim were made—that their practices represent the highest standards of American morality. It means in the end that every individual is to be bound by no standard save his own.*

The ethical relativists are great empiricists. What *is the actual moral standard of any group can only be discovered, they tell us, by an examination on the ground of the moral opinions and customs of that group. But will they tell us how they propose to decide, when they get to the ground, which of the many moral opinions they are sure to find there is* the *right one in that group? To some extent they will be able to do this for the Melanesian Islanders—from whom apparently all lessons in the nature of morality are in future to be taken. But it is certain that they cannot do it for advanced peoples whose members have learnt to think for themselves and to entertain among themselves a wide variety of opinions. They cannot do it unless they accept the calamitous view that the ethical opinion of the majority*

is always right. We are left therefore once more with the conclusion that, even within a particular social group, anybody's moral opinion is as good as anybody else's, and that every man is entitled to be judged by his own standards.

Stace's *sixth* and final criticism of relativism is that it has a disastrous effect on human conduct. Relativism breeds the kind of indifference toward the actions of others that allows those other groups to do terrible things to people without the relativist raising an objection or striking a defensive blow.

Finally, not only is ethical relativity disastrous in its consequences for moral theory. It cannot be doubted that it must tend to be equally disastrous in its impact upon practical conduct. If men come really to believe that one moral standard is as good as another, they will conclude that their own moral standard has nothing special to recommend it. They might as well then slip down to some lower and easier standard. It is true that, for a time, it may be possible to hold one view in theory and to act practically upon another. But ideas, even philosophical ideas, are not so ineffectual that they can remain for ever idle in the upper chambers of the intellect. In the end they seep down to the level of practice. They get themselves acted on.

Speaking of the supposedly dangerous character of ethical relativity Westermarck says, "Ethical subjectivism instead of being a danger is more likely to be an advantage to morality. Could it be brought home to people that there is no absolute standard in morality, they would perhaps be on the one hand more tolerant, and on the other hand more critical in their judgments." Certainly, if we believe that any one moral standard is as good as any other, we are *likely to be more tolerant. We shall tolerate widow-burning, human sacrifice, cannibalism, slavery, the infliction of physical torture, or any other of the thousand and one abominations which are, or have been, from time to time approved by one moral code or another. But this is not the kind of toleration that we want, and I do not think its cultivation will prove "an advantage to morality."*

Stace sums up his analysis of the weaknesses of relativism by placing his criticism in the frame of reference of our contemporary society.

These, then, are the main arguments which the antirelativist will urge against ethical relativity. And perhaps finally he will attempt a diagnosis of the social, intellectual, and psychological conditions of our time to which the emergence of ethical relativism is to be attributed. His diagnosis will be somewhat as follows.

We have abandoned, perhaps with good reason, the oracles of the past. Every age, of course, does this. But in our case it seems that none of us knows any more whither to turn. We do not know what to put in the place of that which has gone. What ought we, supposedly civilized peoples, to aim at? What are to be our ideals? What is right? What is wrong? What is beautiful? What is ugly? No man knows. We drift helplessly in this direction and that. We know not where we stand nor whither we are going. . . .

And the philosophers of our age, where have they stood? They too, as is notorious, speak with many voices. But those who preach the various relativisms have taken upon themselves a heavy load of responsibility. By formulating abstractly the defeatism of the age they have made themselves the aiders and abettors of death. They are injecting poison into the veins of civilization. Their influence upon practical affairs may indeed be small. But it counts for something. And they cannot

avoid their share of the general responsibility. They have failed to do what little they could to stem the tide. They have failed to do what Plato did for the men of his own age—find a way out of at least the intellectual confusions of the time.

Assessment of Relativism

The fundamental ethical question, What ought I to do? is addressed to each and every human being. The answer we are seeking is a statement of moral obligation, You ought to do such and such, that likewise holds for each and every human being. Ethical relativism is radically opposed to this whole approach. For the relativist, there are no universal moral obligations because, according to the relativist, there is no universal moral basis of obligation (such as a god whose uniform moral commands are made known to all persons). For the relativist, the only moral obligations are those that have been commanded by a specific social group. Herskovits has defended ethical relativism. Stace has attacked it. Now we must decide which position has the best support.

We cannot appeal to the range of empirical facts to decide the issue. Stace correctly points out that the vast array of differing moral attitudes and practices can be integrated into either perspective without difficulty. The ethical relativist can argue that the great diversity of moral beliefs and practices indicates that there are no universal norms to guide the human moral enterprise. The ethical absolutist can argue that the diversity simply indicates human ignorance of the objective moral norms under which all persons are held accountable. To be sure, absolutism would be in a stronger position if it would point to a series of norms that legitimately would apply to all persons. But absolutists so far have not been successful in doing that. The relativist could falsify absolutism by demonstrating that there are no universal norms; but this, too, has proved to be an unsuccessful venture.

The upshot is that we have two opposing theories—ethical relativism and ethical absolutism—both vying for our assent and both compatible with the facts. Herskovits has argued that relativism leads to a greater sense of tolerance of the views of others. Stace finds this tolerance to be precisely one of the objectionable features in relativism, for it leads to tolerance of actions that are injurious to other human beings. Stace also points us to other undesirable consequences of relativism, not the least of which is that it requires that we give up all striving for higher moral ideals, all attempts at moral improvement, and any goal of moral progress.

Given these consequences that are offensive to our moral sensibilities, why are there any advocates of ethical relativism at all? The attractiveness of ethical relativism is not only in the aura of science within which it clothes itself but also in the tolerance it seems to encourage, in contrast to the bigotry that is often associated with moral absolutism. When people believe that they have possession of *the* universal morality, that belief has often been justification for imperialistic, dehumanizing moves against other people who espouse a different morality. No doubt such a justification contributed to the wars of religion, the heresy hunts of the

Inquisition, the brutalization of primitive peoples by colonial empires, and the destruction of whole races and groups in the name of some monstrous ideology.

But note the irony of this attack on ethical absolutism: such immoralities as mentioned above can be recognized as *immoralities* only if there is some objective standard by which to judge these actions. Relativism denies that there is any such standard; therefore, if consistent, the relativist would have to say that the actions of the Inquisition were right for that social group at that time. It is only from the viewpoint of ethical absolutism that the barbarities of the past, and present, can be condemned as morally wrong. How one justifies such a claim requires a moral foundation within which such judgments are made.

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Ethical Relativism

There are no universal truths or cross-cultural ethical norms.

- What is morally right varies fundamentally from person to person, culture to culture, or time to time.
- Moral values are not universally applicable in all times or places.
- All morality is defined by the conventions of one's society and conditioned by one's social or cultural circumstances.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

What is considered morally right or wrong differs from culture to culture.

- Different cultures have diverse moral beliefs.
- What people in one culture believe to be right or wrong may differ from what people in another culture believe to be right or wrong.
- Different cultures disagree on particular moral judgments or on fundamental moral principles.

Ethical Absolutism

There are absolute universal truths and cross-cultural ethical norms.

- Absolute moral standards are both universal and objective. They apply to everyone at all times, in all situations. They exist a priori or independent of a belief in them.
- What is fundamentally right or wrong is the same for all people at all times and places.
- If two cultures disagree about what is right or wrong, one of them must be mistaken.

OBJECTIONS TO ETHICAL RELATIVISM

1. Cross-cultural comparisons are rendered meaningless.

2. Comparisons of the same culture over time are impossible.

3. Therefore, any idea of moral progress is meaningless.

4. The seriousness of moral pursuits is undercut.

5. Moral anarchy is the logical outcome.

—*Walter T. Stace (1937)*

NEAR ABSOLUTES

There are basic moral principles that are absolute across time, place, and culture, but for which there may be some *justifiable exceptions.*

- If an exception is made, it must be carefully and fully justified.
- To make unjustified exceptions is to act immorally.
- The moral principle remains true whether people act in accordance with it or not.

—*Jacques P. Thiroux (1986)*

NEAR ABSOLUTES

The greatest problem raised in the absolutism versus relativism controversy is how to introduce stability, order, and security (absolutism) into morality and moral systems and still allow for individual and group freedom and creativity (relativism). This problem is important because the very crux of a moral system is its ability to match the tremendous complexity of human thoughts, feelings, and actions with absolute moral propositions.

The way we can do this is by setting up basic moral principles that are near absolutes. We will try to observe these principles as absolutes in every case we can, but we will realize that there may be some justifiable exceptions to the principles. The term *justifiable* is a key one here, since it means that if we intend to make an exception to a near absolute, then we must fully justify that exception.

. . . This does not mean that morality is relative, for many absolutes are founded on propositions that are known to be true by means of evidence gained through the senses and logical argument supplied through reasoning.

—*Jacques P. Thiroux.* Ethics: Theory and Practice. *New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986.*

TOLERANCE

Allowable deviation from a specified value or standard

or

The practice of allowing or respecting the rights, beliefs, and practices of others, whether agreeing with them or not

LIMITS OF TOLERANCE

The concept of tolerance is important to address in the context of moral relativism. Many who advocate moral relativism do so out of a belief in the tolerance or acceptance of differences, i.e., allowing or respecting the rights, beliefs, and practices of others, whether agreeing with them or not. Pushed to the limit, this level of tolerance also includes a tolerance of intolerance, an inherent contradiction in the moral relativism argument.

The extremes of tolerance also can lead to an infringement upon the rights and welfare of others, such as the tolerance of oppression by a fascist government that does not respect the human rights of its citizens. Although a worthy moral value in itself, tolerance consistently placed above all other values can lead to a failure to recognize more essential values such as compassion, freedom, and the health and safety of others. We need to consider that tolerance has limits.

DEBATE PLANNING: MORAL RELATIVISM VERSUS MORAL ABSOLUTISM

Gather information and ideas to support your assigned position and to criticize the opposing view. Be prepared to work with your teammates in class to organize your major points and the supporting evidence. Consider the following information as you research and organize your thinking:

Support: _____

_____

Major points:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Evidence for Position: _____

_____

_____

_____

Weakness of Your Position: _____

_____

_____

_____

Counteraguments: _____

_____

_____

_____

Oppose: _____

_____

Major points:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Evidence against Opposing Position: _____

_____

_____

_____

Strengths of Opposing Position: _____

_____

_____

_____

Counteraguments: _____

_____

_____

_____

Cite Authorities and Resources:

SUPPLEMENTAL ACTIVITIES

FUNDAMENTALISM—ATTRACTIONS AND PITFALLS

Ask students to gather information about fundamentalism and cultism. What characterizes these absolutist ideologies and processes? Have students define these terms, give examples, and describe how each might appeal to an individual. What methodologies are used to persuade someone to become a fundamentalist or join a cult? How do these ideologies promote intolerance and ignorance? What are the consequences of fundamentalism and cultism for individuals and societies? How can these forces be counteracted?

THE EXTREME OF ABSOLUTISM: AUTHORITARIANISM

Research the literature on authoritarianism and the authoritarian personality. What characterizes authoritarianism and the authoritarian personality? Who is vulnerable to subjugating him or herself to authoritarianism? How is authoritarianism established in a society? What are the consequences, and how can they be counteracted? For more on this topic, see the Web site, "F Scale—Assessment of the Authoritarian Personality" (*http://www.anesi.com/fscale.htm*).