Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism asserts that words such as "right," "wrong," "justice," and "injustice" derive their meaning and truth value from the attitudes of a given culture. Moral concepts, insofar as they possess objectivity, gain legitimacy only through the habits and attitudes of a given culture; in turn, all intercultural comparisons of values are meaningless. For example, it makes no sense to claim that the Western practice of locking thieves up is preferable to the Moslem practice of chopping off their hands. As meaningless claims, *transcultural* comparisons are neither true nor false. Meaningless propositions exist one step below even false propositions, since false propositions may be said at least to possess a truth status, that is, there are conditions under which we can imagine them to be true. Meaningless propositions, however, fail even to possess truth status, and hence from the standpoint of cultural relativism the assertion that the imprisonment of thieves as a social practice is preferable to their mutilation constitutes a claim admitting of neither truth nor falsity. The claim, rather, is akin to the nonsensical proposition that "Green ideas think furiously."[9]

Cultural relativists are able to point to the obvious lack of moral consensus in international affairs. Americans moralize about freedom, Shiite Moslems moralize about the revealed truths of Islam, and both Jews and Palastinians moralize about the right to a home land. Hence, the most common question from nonacademic quarters about integrating values with international policy is simply *whose* values should be integrated? Not only do our values differ from those of other cultures, but we differ among ourselves. Suppose I happen to believe as a moral matter that nation-states ought not interfere with the internal activities of sovereign states—even when those activities are themselves immoral—and someone else does not. Which of us is correct?

Yet a number of important arguments advanced against cultural relativism merit consideration. The first derives from an analysis of the nature of moral language[10] and underscores a conspicuous fact about international disagreements. The conspicuous fact is that those engaged in international discussion often use moral language consciously in an attempt to convince their hearers of the truth of their views. For example, when arguing against the claims of capitalism, Soviet Marxists use moral language replete with words such as "exploitation" and "slavery," while defenders of capitalism accuse Marxists of violating basic "rights" and not treating political dissidents "fairly." They believe their arguments are ultimately intelligible and rationally persuasive; were they convinced that moral language is

truly empty, they would speak differently. Now of course, some language users may simply employ moral terminology for its calculated effect; they may simply wish to provoke anger or psychological acceptance from the individuals or countries accused; or, perhaps they wish simply to utter words with an eye to domestic impact, hoping to gain approval from local followers. But often something deeper happens. Often, citizens of one country, whether world leaders or not, talk to citizens of another country in an attempt to *convince* those persons of the correctness of their normative views. A citizen of the United States in 1989, for example, might attempt to convince a Soviet citizen by using reasons and facts that more Jews should be allowed to emigrate to Israel, or attempt to convince a Chinese citizen that social criticism ought never be censored by the state.

The point is that if cultural relativism is correct these individuals cannot even be said to be "arguing" with one another. If moral language is truly empty, the exercise of argument itself would be pure nonsense. No true argument, as such, between representatives of different cultures could occur because an argument requires at least the logical possibility of resolution. An implication of cultural relativism would be that exchanges such as this are merely a series of utterances, attempts, perhaps, to express subjective feelings, or perhaps calculated to achieve a certain psychological effect, but not arguments. A further implication is that the person who finally succeeds in expressing his feelings, or in achieving his psychological effect—even if he has failed to *convince* his hearers—should simply stop talking.

This is what appears to make a moral dispute between one culture and another quite different from the instance in which a soccer referee assigns a spectator a "foul." For in the odd and hypothetical instance of the soccer referee, the referee cannot, unless he is insane, believe that the spectator will be brought on the basis of true facts and good reasons to accept his assignment of "foul": indeed, he will expect just the reverse, knowing that the rules of soccer do not claim "facts" or "reasonableness" for their legitimacy, but only convention. But when a citizen argues with a foreign citizen, she *does* presume that facts and reasons are relevant to judging the matter; she presumes that argument may not be entirely futile, and she hopes that in the end she may be successful in bringing the other to "see" the correct alternative. So by the very logic of international debate, by the very act of language that classifies the convictions of advocates in the global struggle, reference appears to be made to some common, if not absolute, framework for resolving moral disputes. (The argument, of course, is a standard one against the doctrine of emotivism, a doctrine popular in English philosophical circles in the 1930s.

If moral language is nothing more than the expression of emotion, it is asked, then what can be the point of moral argument?)

Let us take a moment to note that some people mistakenly endorse cultural relativism because they confuse it with cultural tolerance. Cultural relativism, however, bears little resemblance to tolerance. If a culture disagrees with the Shiite Moslem practice of having women wear veils, yet owing to its tolerance believes nonetheless that it should refrain from forcing its views on Shiite Moslems, then tolerance counts as a *moral,* not relativistic, value. Suppose the U.S. belief in tolerance leads it to reject the call of U.S. fanatics to employ military force in compelling a Moslem change of custom—even though most U.S. citizens believe the wearing of veils unfairly discriminates against Moslem women. Now certainly a corollary of the U.S. belief is that any country that disagrees, and believes it *should* force a change in custom, is *wrong.* Were the Soviet Union to invade Moslem countries in order to improve the status of women, the U.S. citizenry would, in this instance, deny the moral validity of the Soviet's rationale. Such implications stamp the U.S. defense of tolerance in this instance as inconsistent with cultural relativism. In turn, were a cultural relativist asked whether culture A's belief in tolerance is any better than B's belief that values should be forced down peoples' throats, the relativist would be forced to deny it. The relativist could not endorse tolerance over intolerance.

Another argument against cultural relativism takes the form of a *reductio ad absurdum.* The claim is that virtually no person can live with cultural relativism's severe consequences because consistent cultural relativism demands jettisoning more than naive relativists imagine. Granted, when toying with the prospect of relativism, most are willing to allow that prejudice and custom infect many cultural norms. It is only custom that makes English rules of etiquette requiring, for example, the fork to be used in the left hand, "better" than U.S. rules of etiquette. And one may even argue that it is only prejudice that condemns the practice of polygamy, or the torture of animals (practiced by American Hopi children and accepted by Hopi parents). But for most people the moral buck stops somewhere. Consider two instances of practices once common in "civilized" societies. First-century Romans followed a law under which, if a slave owner was killed by one of his slaves, *all* of his slaves were executed, even ones entirely innocent of the murder, and the law was applied strictly to households of 300 and more slaves. Or consider the practice of Japanese Samurai warriors in earlier centuries. A new sword would be tested by murdering a complete stranger. When the sword had been forged, the Samurai would find a stranger in the road, confront him face to face, and without warning swing the sword down

in a diagonal arc. If the sword cut neatly from the side of neck to the waist on the opposite side, it was of adequate quality. If not, it was unfit for a warrior.

Now perhaps some can grit their teeth and declare that however shocking, such practices are not objectively "wrong." It all boils down, they may add, to how one defines "wrong," or perhaps even to how important one thinks it is to discourage murder or test swords. But even such a person as this must be subject to one further test to conclusively establish her relativism. She must be unable to imagine even a single *hypothetical* instance which counts as objectively evil. No limits are placed on the person's imagination; practices may be imagined, for example, that serve no purpose other than mere amusement. In other words, the person must consider the worst practices her most hideous nightmares can concoct.

Now we may predict that most people engaging in the thought-experiment will back down. But what if one or two holdouts remain? What are we to say of a person who thinks, for example, that the torture of babies for mere amusement is not objectively wrong? That the rightness or wrongness of torturing infants for sport is only a matter of cultural taste? Here one may be reminded of Aristotle's answer to the question of how we should respond to a person who refuses to accept the law of noncontradiction. How, the question goes, should we respond to a person who claims to deny the most elementary proposition in logic, the principle that a statement or proposition cannot be both true and not true at the same time and in the same respect. Artistotle's succinct answer is that we should regard such a person as a "vegetable."

If it is true that there are practices which, however hypothetical or unlikely, a reasonable person would regard as wrong no matter *what* the surrounding beliefs system decreed, then cultural relativism cannot be true. For cultural relativism requires the absence of any objective ground whatsoever for morality. Hence it is noteworthy that very few persons indeed—from whatever culture—are willing to accept Draconian practices of the sort we have been describing. Moreover, for most people the line is drawn long before this; for them there exists a fundamental intuition that political torture, the systematic denial of human freedom, and the persecution of the homeless and hungry is wrong no matter where it occurs.

It is not altogether surprising, then, that cultural relativism has fared poorly as a philosophical doctrine. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to name a single recognized contemporary or classical philosopher who espouses it. One can find a great many philosophers defending what might be called "modified relativism," the notion that although some objective cross-cultural points of comparison exist,

significant gray areas exist that are best called regions of moral "taste," for which no rational method can give the "right" answer. But, then, most of us allow the intrusion of personal taste into ethics at some point or other. For those who do, but who stop short of cultural relativism, the issue of modified cultural relativism versus nonrelativism is simply that of how broadly one should paint the area of taste in morals. On this interpretation, the salient issue is no longer simply whether any objective cross-cultural comparisons are possible, but how many and to what degree. As should be obvious, modified relativism is actually a form of constrained objectivism rather than genuine relativism.

The central reasons for professional philosophy's rejection of cultural relativism do not lie in some positive defense of absolutism, the doctrine that there are eternal, universal, ethical principles capable of being formulated. The rejection arises from relativism's own failure to defend itself through more than guilt by association. Relativism relies on the fact that cultural norms differ: that sexual customs in the Trobriand Islands are different from those in Sioux City, and that while nepotism may be acceptable in India, it is unacceptable in England. But this can be only the beginning, not the end of the argument. For as Richard Brandt has noted, if cultural relativism were correct, it must not only be true that transcultural disagreements exist, but that each side of a transcultural argument has an equally valid perspective, and, further, that the reason for the equal validity of perspective lies not in the content or relative content of the various views, but in the nature of all transcultural disagreements.[11] Given the ordinary understanding of the expression "equally valid," this would mean showing either that no rational method exists whereby one moral view can be shown to be preferable to another (on moral grounds), or that, if such a method exists, it fails in a trans*cultural* context even as it succeeds in a trans*individual* context. It also means demonstrating that some transcultural ethical disagreements exist such that their resolution cannot be achieved through the resolution of factual misunderstandings.

For example, suppose culture A disagrees with culture B's view that infants should be punished for crying at night. But suppose that culture B is the Apache tribe of earlier centuries, a culture whose nomadic ways and almost constant state of warfare with other tribes meant that a child's cry in the night could doom its members by disclosing the tribe's location to attackers. Culture A may come to agree that, *under factual circumstances similar to that of B's,* infants should be punished for crying at night. Or suppose in another instance that culture A defends the practice of human sacrifice, and B does not. A member of culture A may learn that B practices human sacrifice

because it believes that it is necessary to appease the gods, and to prevent the destruction of humankind. Culture A may be willing to grant that if B's factual belief about the gods were true, then human sacrifice would be justified, but it may insist on denying that B's factual belief is true. So in this instance again, if one clears up the factual misunderstanding, the ethical disagreement vanishes. Now if all moral disagreements among cultures turned in this manner on factual disagreements, then making the case for cultural relativism would be impossible. Relativism would be merely a reflection of transcultural factual confusion, not a deeper relativity of values. Hence, it is necessary for the defenders of cultural relativism both to deny such a possibility, and to prove either that no rational method for settling moral disputes exists, or that if one does exist, it is strangely impotent in transcultural contexts.

These tasks, and especially the latter of the two, are sufficiently foreboding that philosophers have generally concluded that cultural relativism—at least in its unmodified form—is intellectually untenable. And, in the absence of serious attempts to undertake these tasks—attempts that we might evaluate and analyze for their validity—we seem forced to agree. In rejecting the claims of cultural relativism for purposes of this book we do not thereby imply that a single, shining code of transnational ethics is possible. Indeed, it is not necessary to assume any potential transcultural agreement beyond a bare ethical minimum—for example, of respect for human life, eschewing indiscriminate torture, and so on. The possibility, hence, shall be left open that the region of "taste," or the region of behavior in which there is no objective right and wrong beyond cultural disposition, encompasses far more than most even imagine. But in rejecting cultural relativism we *do* mean that the doctrine of cultural relativism fails to establish that the international arena exists as a pure moral "free zone." We mean that cultural relativism offers no persuasive reason for seeing the international realm as a moral free-for-all in which anything goes.[12]

Traditional Hobbesianism

The argument of choice for most modern realists is usually the moral theory, or a close copy thereof, of the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes. In contrast to cultural relativism, this defense of realism constitutes an intellectually formidable view with no lack of devotees. Hobbes believed that nations exist in a "state of nature" characterized by the absence of binding moral obligations and the unfettered pursuit of self-interest. Hence, power, not right, must be the operative principle for nations in international affairs just as it is