

Relativism and Universalism

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As the moral philosopher David Wong has noted (2006: xi): “The standard characterizations of [moral] relativism make it an easy target and seldom reveal what really motivates people who are attracted to it. Introductory textbooks in ethics frequently portray the view as an extreme variety of subjectivism (or conventionalism) in which anything goes – a person’s (or group’s) accepting that something is right makes it right for that person (or group).” This variety of moral relativism pictures human subjectivity in terms of human reactions of both acceptance (feelings of approbation) and rejection (feelings of opprobrium). Its central principle states that approving of some act or customary practice makes it right (good, virtuous, moral) and disapproving of the very same act or customary practice makes it wrong (bad, vicious, immoral); and this is so for any conceivable act or customary practice whether it is eating pork, terminating a pregnancy, drinking alcohol, spanking a child, banning a book, marrying a member of your own sex, marrying more than one member of the opposite sex, walking bare breasted on a public beach, covering yourself with a burqa¹ in the public square, conducting a Bris,² surgically reshaping the genitals of all the children in ones family regardless of their gender, assisting someone in committing a suicide or immolating yourself on the funeral pyre of your husband. Writing more or less in this vein the anthropologist Ruth Benedict once defined morality as “a convenient term for socially approved habits” (1934).

It is not too surprising that this variety of moral relativism is viewed as extreme by many moral philosophers. If for no other reason than the fact that moral relativism of this variety rejects the most basic principle of moral reasoning presupposed by each of the parties to any genuine moral dispute; namely the presupposition that if I am right in judging a particular course of action to be wrong, bad, vicious or immoral then you cannot be equally right in thinking it right, good, virtuous or moral (see for example Rashdall 1914, also Cook 1999). One implication of moral relativism so portrayed is that the very same act or customary practice becomes right *and* wrong, good *and* bad, virtuous *and* vicious, moral *and* immoral to the very extent that two people (or groups) *disagree* about whether it is right or wrong, good or bad, virtuous or vicious, moral or immoral. This is because the extreme variety of moral relativism (as subjectivism or conventionalism) asserts that in fact there is nothing objective

¹ The enveloping outer garment and face cover worn by women in public spaces in some Islamic traditions.

² The Jewish ritual in which there is the surgical removal of the foreskin of a male infant eight days after his birth.

(impersonal, impartial) to be right or wrong about (no such thing as “natural” or “inalienable” rights, for example)³ when one person (or group) calls an action or custom or law right and another person (or group) calls it wrong. Instead, according to moral relativism so-portrayed, when one person (or group) says such and such is right (good, virtuous, moral) and another person (or group) says the opposite they are merely expressing their feelings (for example of pleasure or displeasure) or registering a difference in subjective preferences (desires, likes), in personal opinions, habits or intuitions or in past collective choices as explicitly expressed through legal enactments or implicitly made manifest in inherited traditions and local social norms.

According to moral relativism so-portrayed those feelings, preferences, tastes, opinions, habits, intuitions, enactments, traditions and social norms are the only moral standards in town. They are constitutive of what is right and wrong. But their definitions of right and wrong are also subject-relative. Thus each moral standard applies only to the person (or group) in question and has no universal validity. Germany has its own moral standards concerning the separation of church and state in public schools and they are different from the standards in the United States; hence according to moral relativism (so-portrayed) teaching religion in the public schools is right in Germany and wrong in the United States and there is nothing more to be said. Saudi Arabia has its own moral standards concerning sex differences and they are different from the standards in the United States; hence according to moral relativism (so-portrayed) a ban on issuing drivers licenses to women is right in Saudi Arabia and wrong in the United States and there is nothing more to be said. If that extreme doctrine of moral relativism as subjectivism or conventionalism is true then genuine moral disputes can never even arise let alone be resolved through the intelligent use of evidence and reason.

This variety of relativism has become a frequent target in ethics textbooks largely because moral philosophy is about the proper use of the human intellect to resolve genuine moral disputes and because moral relativism (so-portrayed) denies that it is possible to ever have a genuine moral dispute in moral philosophy, in public policy arenas, in courtrooms, in everyday life or anywhere else. “It is all subjective and political stupid!” is the eventual message of this variety of moral relativism. That message strikes many moral philosophers as the ultimate expression of irrationalism.

³ For a useful historical and critical discussion of debates about the “natural” or objective status of human rights see Moyn (2010).

Moral Universalism: The Standard Characterization

A point similar to the one made by David Wong might be made about standard characterizations of universalism, where moral universalism is sometimes portrayed in anthropological texts as an extreme variety of objectivism (or absolutism) in which only one thing goes. The easy target in that case is the view that there exists a single true and detailed moral charter for the organization of the ideal universal civilization. That detailed moral charter is a uniformly applicable set of authoritative prescriptions for kinship, marriage, parent-child relations, sex roles, politics, economics, religion, and even cuisine, which can and should be used as the global standard for judging the validity of diverse ways of life and ranking them in terms of their moral worth (for example, on a developmental scale from savage to civilized or backward to advanced).

Moral universalism, so-characterized, is a doctrine postulating the objective reality of concrete touchstones for judging what is right and wrong. Its posited moral charter is concrete in the sense that it sets forth clear and determinate instructions, principles or commands for the actual behavior of individuals and members of groups (do and don'ts such as "thou shall not bow down before carved images"; or "thou shall never use physical punishment to discipline a child"; or "thou shall always permit widows to remarry if they want to, but never require them to do so"). Those concrete touchstones of the moral charter are then said to be objective in the sense that (according to the doctrine) their requirements (obligations, duties, rights, prohibitions) are, and always have been, binding on all persons (or groups) without exception, and are universally obligatory regardless of a person's or peoples' subjective or conventional acceptances, actual cultural practices or historical circumstances.

At least since the early 20th century most (although certainly not all) anthropologists have rejected extreme versions of moral universalism. Many anthropologists associate moral universalism with either religious missionary efforts or with secular colonial interventions (military occupation and/or direct or indirect political rule) justified on the basis of cultural superiority, the "white man's burden" and "the civilizing project." The suspicion was also in full evidence in 1947 when the Executive Board of the American Anthropological Association (whose membership included the avowed cultural relativist Melville Herskovits) refused to endorse the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of

Man on the grounds that it was an ethnocentric document. The members of the Executive Board asked: “How can the proposed Declaration be applicable to all human beings, and not be a statement of rights conceived only in terms of the values prevalent only in the countries of Western Europe and America?” (AAA Executive Board 1947, also see Engle 2002)

Indeed that distrust was so widespread and deep that one suspects that if extreme versions of moral relativism have ever had any appeal to cultural anthropologists it is largely because the doctrine may initially seem to offer an effective counter to this or that despised version of moral universalism (or absolutism). Moral relativism as conventionalism or subjectivism does provide one way to oppose on philosophical grounds the imperial and globe trotting project of using an imagined one true moral charter to draw a moral map of the peoples and cultures of the world. This is frequently a map according to which the customary practices of the peoples and cultures studied by anthropologists (in Africa and Asia, for example) were, and still are, designated as morally backward or even barbaric (for example, with respect to their customary treatment of women and children), and as ripe for moral uplift by activists and interventionists who view themselves as altruistic, compassionate, righteous reformers of morally defective ways of life.

The counter offered by extreme versions of moral relativism runs as follows: If, for each and every person or group, the mere belief or acceptance that something is right (or good) is all that it takes to make it right (or good) then the very idea of the one true (objective and absolute) morality is itself really nothing other than a projection of the subjective preferences (likes and dislikes made manifest in habits and customs) of particular agents. The rub of course is that some of those proselytizing universalizers may also have the wealth, influence or power to successfully project or spread their subjective preferences widely, even among local elites in other societies.

It should be acknowledged, however, that since the advent of global feminism and the international human rights movement, the scene within the discipline of anthropology has become more complex. Some anthropologists have even begun to look more favorably on doctrines of moral universalism, especially versions of the doctrine formulated in the language of “natural rights” or as part of a moral critique of patriarchy aimed at liberating women (and children) and cleansing the world of so-called oppressive or harmful cultural practices: bride price, polygamy, female genital surgeries, child labor, arranged marriage, the sexual division of labor in the family and “veiling” might be examples of

customs that are disfavored by contemporary versions of moral universalism within the profession of cultural anthropology. Nevertheless that historical distrust evidenced by the 1947 AAA Executive Board Statement is not just a thing of the past. A similar view was forcefully expressed in 1995 by Roy D'Andrade in his critical response to various re-emergent moral universalisms in anthropology when he remarked: "Finally, the current moral model [in the discipline of anthropology] is ethnocentric. It is strong for equality (the escape from inequality) and freedom (the release from oppression). In my opinion these are not bad values but they are very American. These are not the predominant values of modern Japan, India, China, the Middle East or Southeast Asia, but they are the predominant values in the United States and much of Europe. It is ironic that these moralists should be so colonialist in their assumptions about what is evil." (D'Andrade 1993; also see Menon 2003, Menon and Shweder 1998).

Fortunately, those extreme characterizations of moral relativism and moral universalism are not the end of the story. Many so-called moral relativists in anthropology will recoil at extreme characterizations of their doctrine. They will recoil because in their own minds their primary aim is not to subvert the entire process of genuine moral debate by denying the existence of moral truths. By their lights their primary aims are to caution against haste (rapid, habitual, affect-laden or spontaneous information processing) and parochialism (assimilating all new experiences to readily available local frames of reference) and to lend credence to the general caution that one should be slow to make moral judgments about the customary practices of little known others.

Many who embrace moral universalism in anthropology will recoil at extreme characterizations of their doctrine as well. They will recoil because in their own minds the primary aim of their objectivism (and invocation of moral absolutes) is not to congratulate their own way of life as the best or only way to live a moral life but rather to provide insiders and outsiders, minority groups and majority groups, (in other words everyone) with a common frame of reference for engaging in genuine moral debates and for judging what is right and what is wrong in ones own society, and in other societies as well.

In the remainder of this essay I try to honor the aims of both camps by sketching a conception of relativism as "universalism without the uniformity." This is an approach to the anthropological study of morality inspired by Michel de Montaigne (and many others) in which one tries to credibly advance one particular type of answer to the central question posed by the global diversity of concrete moral

judgments. That central question of course is why do the many peoples of the world disagree with each other so much in their concrete moral judgments and why don't those judgments possess the universality that is characteristic of the idea of truth?⁴

Descriptive Work in Moral Anthropology: A Summary of Findings and Limits

Here it may be useful in clarifying the doctrines of moral relativism and moral universalism to mention a few of the more robust findings from descriptive work in anthropology on the human experience of moral value. Descriptive fieldwork on a world-wide scale (including reports found in the writings of Montaigne and other early ethnographers) has of course demonstrated that moral judgments are ubiquitous in human groups. A moral judgment is the expressed or (more typically) implied judgment that person P *ought to* do X under such and such circumstances, where the doing of X under those circumstances is thought to be the right thing to do because it is presumed to be productive of some objective good. When it comes to the human perception of value moral judgments are experienced as though they are judgments about the true nature of some posited objective moral charter (see for example, Beldo 2011; Haidt, Koller and Dias 1993, Shweder 1982, Shweder and Much 1991, Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller 1987).

This truth-seeking (or “cognitive”) feature of everyday moral judgments has been noted by the philosopher Arthur Lovejoy. He points out that when someone says “It is wrong to oppress the helpless” or “the conduct of Adolph Hitler was wicked”, they “do not in fact conceive of themselves merely to be reporting on the state of their own emotions” and mean to be saying something more than “I am very unpleasantly affected when I think of it” (Lovejoy, 1961: 253, 255). On a worldwide scale it appears that when folk make a moral judgment (for example, “male circumcision is an outrage”, “abortion is evil) they themselves believe there are matters of objective fact to which their judgment refers and that they are making a truthful claim about some impersonal or independently existing domain of moral reality.

Lovejoy's observation is consistent with several classic ethnographically based research findings on moral norms and moral reasoning, including the work of Read (1955), Ladd (2004, originally 1957), Malinowski (1926), Firth (2011, originally 1951) and Fortes (1987, originally 1959). Raymond Firth's

⁴ For a useful sampling of answers to this question see the collections edited by Wilson 1991 and Hollis and Lukes 1992.

pithy remark about the people of Tikopia is typical of these ethnographers' accounts of the objectivism characteristic of local understandings of the moral charter whether in New Guinea, West Africa, Melanesia or among native American populations in the USA: "The spirits, just as men, respond to a norm of conduct of an external character. The moral law exists in the absolute, independent of the Gods" (quoted in Nadel 1969:270-271).

That observation is not meant to gainsay the fact that moral judgments (that's good, that's wrong, that's sinful) around the world are also felt (see for example Rozin, Lowery, Imada and Haidt 1999). They are often experienced as aesthetic and emotional reactions (that's ugly, that's odious, that disgusts me, "I am very unpleasantly affected when I think of it") and not solely as objective representations of moral truths. Indeed, moral judgments are motivators of action in significant measure because they are affect-laden and produce in people powerful feelings of arousal, distress, pollution, repugnance, guilt, indignation, pride or shame. Characteristically however the moral judgments of the peoples of the world studied by anthropologists are truth seeking judgments about some moral charter assumed to be "of an external character."

At the same time fieldwork by anthropologists has also documented that as a matter of fact many concrete moral judgments about actions and customs do not seem to spontaneously converge across autonomous or even semi-autonomous cultural groups.⁵ Actions and cultural practices that are a source of moral approbation in one community (for example, polygamy or female genital surgeries) are frequently the source of moral opprobrium in another, and moral disagreements can persist over generations, if not centuries. Indeed, the history of moral anthropology as an empirical undertaking is in some significant measure the history of the discovery of astonishing cultural variations in human judgments about the proper moral charter for an ideal way of life.

Nevertheless, the import of ethnographic findings of variability in concrete moral judgments for the doctrine of moral relativism is far from obvious. In and of itself the mere existence of diversity in moral judgments across (and within) cultural groups is not necessarily incompatible with the normative doctrine of moral universalism. From a strictly descriptive point of view Clifford Geertz

⁵ Those concrete moral judgment are not typically uniform within cultural groups either and the challenge of factions, sections, interest groups or "wings" for the organization of a viable society is a classic issue in the social sciences dating from at least the brilliant treatment of the topic by James Madison in the Federalist Papers (Federalist 10). See for example Jensen (1997, 1998) and Haidt and Graham (2007).

(2000:44) may have been on firm ground when he remarked that the encounter with anthropological evidence on other societies has *seemed* like “a massive argument against absolutism in thought, morals and esthetic judgment...” and that the message anthropologists *have been thought to have* is this one: “that, as they see things differently and do them otherwise in Alaska or the D’Entrecasteaux, our confidence in our own seeings and doings and our resolve to bring others around to sharing them are rather poorly based.” Nevertheless, from a strictly normative point of view both the argument and the message are far from compelling and are themselves rather poorly based. This is because by the lights of the doctrine of moral universalism diversity in moral opinions is not necessarily a surprise and any failure of either individuals or groups to actually recognize the one true morality (or to abide by the moral charter once its requirements have been understood) is simply viewed as an index of the lower (or arrested) stage of moral development of that individual or group.

Among the most influential moral development stage theories in the history of social science research are those proposed by Leonard T. Hobhouse in his book Morals in Evolution: A Study in Comparative Ethics (1915) and by Lawrence Kohlberg in his collection of essays The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice (1981). Both Hobhouse and Kohlberg subscribed to a doctrine of moral universalism. Both believed that liberal enlightenment thinking had come closest to discovering the terms of the one true moral charter. Both viewed tribalism (in-group favoritism) and hierarchy (which they viewed as incompatible with autonomy) as lower forms of social organization. Both argued that the moral consciousness of human beings had not only evolved over the course of cultural history but should be encouraged to continue to develop in what they viewed as the progressive liberated and liberal direction. Kohlberg went so far with his universalism as to suggest that the history of the cultures of the world (and the history of childhood in all societies) is (and ideally ought to be) a history of the discovery of the moral principles underlying the American Revolution, as expressed in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the United States (also see Rawls 1971, Turiel 2008).

Echoes of this liberal version of the doctrine of moral universalism can be readily found in contemporary public policy forums and throughout the academy in North America and Europe. Consider for example this resonant formulation by the former United States President George W. Bush, which he voiced in his first “State of the Union Address to Congress and the Nation” after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. “America will lead by defending liberty and justice because

they are right and true and unchanging for all people everywhere. No nation owns these aspirations and no nation is exempt from them. We have no intention of imposing our culture, but America will always stand firm for the non-negotiable demands of human dignity, the rule of law, limits on the power of the state, respect for women, private property, free speech, equal justice and religious tolerance.” Those were weighty and portentous words expressing the foreign policy doctrine that American wealth and power should be used to make the world a better place by upholding what many American activists and interventionists (both on the “left” and on the “right”) view as an incontestable universal framework for promoting moral development and social progress on a global scale.

Thus the anthropological documentation of cultural variability in moral judgments is not an argument-ending discovery. At best it is just the beginning of a conversation, precisely because when “red state” evangelical Christians condemn gay marriage and “blue state” secular liberals condone it the difference in their judgments might just be a sign of the deficient moral development of one of the parties to the disagreement. Even self-evident moral truths might not be evident to those who live and think at a lower level of moral consciousness. That idea of an uneven or patchy moral development of the peoples of the world (or of the members of different factions within a society) is readily adduced by adherents of the doctrine of moral universalism as a compelling (and even compassionate) ground for supporting global moral education campaigns, cultural reform movements and even (under special circumstances) forceful interventions into foreign lands.

Edward Westermarck, who is arguably the deepest and most philosophically sophisticated moral relativist (and subjectivist) in the history of anthropology and whose book length critique of moral universalism titled Ethical Relativism (first published in 1932) should be mandatory reading in any curriculum on moral anthropology, describes the core idea of moral universalism as follows: “...objectivity presupposes universality. As truth is one it has to be the same for anyone who knows it, and if⁶ morality is a matter of truth and falsity, in the normative sense of the terms, the same must be the case with moral truth. If a certain course of conduct *is* good or bad, right or wrong, it is so universally, and cannot be both good and bad, right and wrong.” With regard to the doctrine of moral universalism Westermarck in fact concedes that: “The universality of truth does not mean, of course, that everybody knows what is true and false. It has constantly been argued against ethical subjectivism

⁶ Westermarck of course believed this was a big “if” and he contested it.

that the variety of moral judgments no more justifies the denial of moral objectivity than the diversity in judgments about the course of things disproves the objectivity of truth.” (Westermarck 1932:183)

Back to Montaigne: On Being Slow to Judge Little Known Others

If one wants to accurately understand the appeal of so-called moral relativism for many of those anthropologists who have in one way or another been attracted to some variety of it then it is not a bad idea to go back to the late sixteenth century, to the famous essay by Michel de Montaigne titled “Of Cannibals” (or “On the Cannibals”). In that essay Montaigne, who was an early ethnographer of sorts, tried to come to terms with the recently discovered cultural practices of the native peoples of La France Antartique (today known as the Caribs of Brazil). He describes and morally evaluates the beliefs, values and customs of a people who believed that hosting a captive of war and then killing, roasting and making a common meal of him, and “sending chunks of his flesh to absent friends” was right and good. That particular practice seemed shocking and repulsive to Portuguese and French moral sensibilities in the 16th century, just as many customary practices of peoples in the Southern and Eastern worlds of Africa, Asia and the Americas south of the border seem barbaric, odious and detestable to many peoples of the Northern and Western worlds today. Nevertheless, Montaigne dared to offer a critical (and ironical) response to the Portuguese and French opprobrium directed at the so-called cannibals of La France Antartique.

It is noteworthy that early in his essay Montaigne cautions the reader to step back and be reflective about his or her own spontaneous aversive response to stories about Carib practices: “...we should beware of clinging to vulgar opinions and judge things by reason’s way, not by popular say.” It is also noteworthy that throughout there are many references to the universal virtues and duties readily detectible by any human being open to being informed about the details of the Carib way of life: “...their whole ethical science contains only these two articles: resoluteness in war and affection for their wives” which he also describes as “valor against the enemy and love for their wives.” Writing as an ironist, a skeptic and a detached observer of human behavior Montaigne was prepared to complicate the European colonial encounter with alien societies. He was not inclined to let the righteous elite moralists of the metropol of the Western World make the world safe for

condescension and for an imperial European rule justified under the banner of cultural superiority. Indeed by means of various cultural comparisons he invited his readers to see the dark side of their own way of life. He writes: “But there never was any opinion so disordered as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny and cruelty, which are our ordinary vices. So we may well call these people barbarians, in respect to the rules of reason, but not in respect to ourselves, who surpass them in every kind of barbarity. Their warfare is wholly noble and generous, and as excusable and beautiful as this human disease can be; its only basis among them is their rivalry in valor. They are not fighting for the conquest of new lands...they have no wish to enlarge their boundaries.” Commenting on the customary practice of polygamy by the Carib he remarks favorably on the lack of jealousy among the women of the society and notes “Being more concerned for their husbands’ honor than for anything else, they strive and scheme to have as many companions as they can, since that is a sign of their husbands’ valor.” And, perhaps most remarkably, he goes on to rebut the anticipated counter-claims (which are still commonplace today) that “...all this is done through a simple and servile bondage to usage and through the pressure of the authority of their ancient customs, without reasoning or judgment, and because their minds are so stupid that they cannot take any other course...” In other words for Montaigne the “cannibals” did not lack either agency or virtue, and by his lights their exercise of their agency was quite compatible with the embrace of their cultural tradition. The essay was written between 1578 and 1580!

Somewhat more recently, on the occasion of the 1984 Distinguished Lecture at the American Anthropological Association Meeting, the eminent cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz delivered an oration titled “Anti Anti-Relativism” in which he featured the following provocative (and often misunderstood) quotation from Montaigne’s essay: “Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice...for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in.” Geertz went on to say, “What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism – the danger that our perceptions will be dulled, our intellects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the overlearned and overvalued acceptances of our own society.” (2000:45)

But what precisely is that expressed notion of Montaigne’s and precisely how should cultural anthropology make use of it to sharpen our perceptions, expand our intellects and widen our sympathies? David Frame’s translation of Montaigne’s essay (1943:185) renders the key passage this

way: “Now, to return to my subject [namely the question, how should we go about thoughtfully evaluating our intuitive or spontaneous moral judgments about other peoples’ customs?], I think there is nothing barbarous and savage in that nation, from what I have been told, except that each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice; for it seems we have no other test of truth and reason than the example and pattern of the opinions and customs of the country we live in. *There* [in the country we live in] is always the perfect religion, the perfect government, the perfect and accomplished manners in all things.”

Even more recently Montaigne’s essay (and that passage in particular) has been a subject for interpretation by the moral philosopher David Wiggins (2005 footnote 15). Wiggins points to the obvious ironical tone in the quoted material. He then persuasively dismisses the interpretation that Montaigne was a relativist of the subjectivist or conventionalist variety. According to Wiggins the overriding message of “On the Cannibals” is to caution us about a very general human liability. That liability is our unfortunate inclination to rush to judgment about others, especially when confronted with cultural differences that instantly flood and arouse us with unpleasant feelings. Hence, Wiggins avers, we are vulnerable to “mistakes and misapprehensions in findings of barbarity.” There in those particular ironic sentences, he concludes, “Montaigne is only reporting that he has the same difficulty as everyone else in fighting free of parochial misconceptions.”

Montaigne’s essay not only remains a leading example of an admirable attempt to correct spontaneous misunderstandings when engaging cultural differences. His sixteenth century critique of parochial misconstruing sets the agenda for all subsequent discussions (including this one) of the scope and limits of moral relativism in cultural anthropology. Towards that end the remainder of this essay seeks to identify a hybrid variety of moral relativism (more accurately described as “moral universalism without the uniformity”) that is appealing precisely because it embraces and puts to work that basic principle of all moral reasoning, namely that the very same act or custom cannot be both right (good, virtuous, moral) and wrong (bad, vicious, immoral) at the same time. That basic principle holds true even when the very same act or custom initially or habitually elicits pleasure from one person and disgust from another; that is to say, prior to thoughtful reflection upon the full and true nature of the act in question and before the correction of factual mistakes and/or parochial misapprehensions. And it is that basic principle that assists many thoughtful anthropologists in their own confrontations with cultural differences, because that principle cautions anthropologists to bracket or set aside their own

initial or spontaneous reactions of aversion to alien customs, to seek a fuller and more objective understanding of the true nature of the act in question, and to press on, as did Michel de Montaigne, in their search for some universally recognizable moral goods promoted by the unfamiliar customs of little known others.

Why do the many peoples of the world disagree with each other so much in their concrete moral judgments and why don't those judgments possess the universality that is characteristic of the idea of truth? The challenge for cultural anthropologists who are inspired by Montaigne is to answer that question (a) without suggesting that objective reality is devoid of moral truths; (b) without suggesting that those who disagree with our own judgments of right and wrong are either moral cretins or barbarians who fail to understand the requirements of the one true morality or demonic others who willfully seek to promote vice over virtue; and (c) without assuming in advance that one's own way of life is the only possible flowering of the ideals of an objective moral charter. How might one proceed in meeting that challenge? Allow me to proceed by example.

Moral Judgment in Two Temple Towns

Consider the following illustration of global diversity in concrete moral judgments drawn from my own collaborative research in the Hindu temple town (the so-called "Old Town") of Bhubaneswar in Orissa India and in the Hyde Park community surrounding the secular temple known as the University of Chicago (see for example, Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller 1987, Shweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park 2002, Shweder, Jensen and Goldstein 2002). Reflect on the following four courses of action and rank them in terms of your personal judgment of the seriousness of moral breach or ethical failure in each instance

1. A poor man went to the hospital after being seriously hurt in an accident. At the hospital they refused to treat him because he could not afford to pay. [The reader is likely to judge this a very serious moral failure]
2. In a family the first-born son slept with his mother or grandmother until he was ten years old. During these ten years he never slept in a separate bed [The reader is likely to judge this a moral breach although perhaps only a minor violation of the moral order and moral attitudes toward

cross-generational and even cross-gender co-sleeping may be changing in the reader's cultural group]

3. The day after his father's death the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken [The reader will not judge this a moral breach]
4. A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week [The reader will not judge this a moral breach]

The following is the way most Oriya Hindu Brahmans, women and men, in the temple town of Bhubaneswar would rank these courses of action, with the most serious moral breach listed first.

1. The day after his father's death the eldest son had a haircut and ate chicken [This would be judged a very serious moral breach, indeed one of the most serious moral failures imaginable]
2. A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week [This would be judged a very serious moral breach]
3. A poor man went to the hospital after being seriously hurt in an accident. At the hospital they refused to treat him because he could not afford to pay. [This would be judged a serious moral breach but not quite as serious as the other two]
4. In a family the first-born son slept with his mother or grandmother until he was ten years old. During these ten years he never slept in a separate bed [This would not be judged a moral breach and might be viewed as morally desirable]

David Wong, the moral philosopher mentioned at the start of this essay, points to one possible way to rise to the challenge (answering the question why peoples disagree in their concrete moral judgments) when he reminds his readers that it is not incoherent to “be a universalist and a ‘situational’ ethicist at the same time” holding that what is right, good, virtuous or moral “varies with context in such a way that anyone reasoning correctly [by which he means logically and consistently] and with all the relevant facts would judge in the same way, regardless of ones society or culture.” (2006:xii). And David Wiggins, the moral philosopher inspired by Montaigne, provides a provisional account of situational ethics (he calls it “contextualism”) (2005 footnote 17) in which he writes: “No act or practice can be assessed as right or wrong, good or bad, etc. without the full specification of circumstances and context (context embracing, in some versions, the identity of agents). An act or a practice is a

response in some situation to something somehow discriminable in that situation or a framework that contains that situation.” Wiggins cautions his readers that “properly to situate an act or a practice or an instance of a practice is the necessary preliminary to passing judgment on that act, that practice, or that instance. *Unless we do this, we shall scarcely know what we are passing judgment upon.*” (my emphasis)

Indeed, what *are* we passing judgment on when we learn that a typical Oriya Brahman, female or male, in an Indian temple town in the late 20th century judges that it is a greater evil for the first born son to get a haircut and eat chicken the day after his father’s death than for doctors in a hospital to refuse to treat an accident victim because he is too poor to pay? And what type of judgment should we make about the moral development of those Oriya Brahman adults? A primary task for a moral anthropology of the sort imagined (universalism without the uniformity) is to provision us with a “full specification of circumstances and context” in such a way “that anyone reasoning correctly and with all the relevant facts would judge in the same way, regardless of ones society or culture.” How might one proceed to do that in the instance of the first born son who eats chicken and gets a haircut the day after his father dies? ⁷

Here is a brief sketch of the intellectual framework (the goals, values and pictures of the world) that contains the relevant situation and leads to the local moral condemnation reported above. Oriya Brahmans who live in the temple town generally believe that every person has an immortal reincarnating soul. They believe that when a person dies his or her soul strongly desires to detach itself from his or her corpse and go on its transmigratory journey. Nevertheless the soul of the person finds itself initially trapped or attached to the corpse and held back by the so-called death pollution that emanates from the dead body and from its subsequently processed physical remains. As an act of beneficence, care, and reciprocity (all of which are assumed to be objective moral goods) relatives of the deceased (and especially the first born son, for whom this is a major and widely acknowledge moral duty and perhaps the most profound moment in the relationship of a son to his father) undertake the project of assisting the soul of the dead person and enabling it to get free of its ties to the physical form it once occupied. Thus, some of the kinsmen of the dead person turn their own living bodies into what I as an outside observer have sometimes referred to as “death pollution collection sites.” They essentially suck up the death pollution associated with the corpse (and its cremation and disposal) into themselves. They believe that the most effective way to do this is by

⁷ This is a situation, a framework and a moral judgment I have discussed in other writings.

keeping all other types of pollutions away from their living bodies, thus providing maximal space for the personal intake of the death pollution. Among the most commonplace competing types of pollutions that might interfere with their project are sexual activities and the ingestion of “hot foods” (for example, fish and meat – the relevant social fact here is that chicken is a “hot food”). Thus for twelve days they stay at home fasting (maintaining a very restricted diet of “cool” foods) and abstinent. On the twelfth day they believe the soul of the deceased has been released from its bondage to its bygone material form and is free to go on its journey to the world of transmigrating spirits. On that twelfth day they cleanse themselves of the death pollution, which they have absorbed into their own bodies and which has accumulated there. They believe that the pollution migrates to the extremities of the body, and is especially concentrated in their hair and under their fingernails. On that twelfth day of abstinence and fasting the family barber cuts off all their hair and the barber’s wife cuts their fingernails. Then they take a ceremonial bath and go back to the workaday world, having fulfilled their moral obligation to the soul of the deceased.

“The day after his father’s death the first born son had a haircut and ate chicken”! To any Oriya Hindu Brahman in the temple town that conduct signals a willful and horrifying renunciation of the entire project of assisting the soul of your father and places the father’s spiritual transmigration in deep jeopardy. No wonder they are morally distraught at the very idea of such behavior, and judge it more severely than not treating the accident victim at the hospital, who is too poor to pay. Wouldn’t you judge things that way too if that was your picture of the essential parts of the person (including the idea of an immortal reincarnating soul), of means-ends connections (cause and effect with respect to death pollution and its absorption) and the objective moral charter for particular kinship relationships (the values ideally made manifest in father-son and other kinship obligations)? And doesn’t David Wiggins make the decisive point – without such a specification of the local framework we (as innocent and untutored outsiders) in fact did not know what we were passing judgment upon when we initially heard that a first-born son in an Oriya Brahman temple town got a haircut and ate chicken the day after his father’s death.

The main point I wish to make with respect to this illustration is that the imaginative framework used by Oriya Brahmans in discriminating aspects of the situation and judging the son to have behaved immorally is a framework that provides reasons that would justify anyone drawing that same conclusion, if they adopted that Oriya world view. The framework of interpretation is of course

contingent in this instance and rests on a set of metaphysical, causal and means-ends beliefs. The point however is that if *we* don't draw that conclusion (that the first-born son committed a very serious moral breach) it is because we don't employ that framework of interpretation (and hence don't situate or even identify the course of action in the same way) and not because either Oriya Brahmans or we ourselves fall short in our recognition of some existing universal values? Many cultural anthropologists who are attracted to cultural relativism ultimately trace the source of cross-cultural diversity in concrete moral judgments to differences in world view or beliefs and to the particular subset of universal goods privileged in any particular cultural or historical tradition of values.

Moral Pluralism as Universalism Without the Uniformity: In Brief

An alternative way to name this version of relativism is moral pluralism. It is the doctrine that human reason at some point reaches a limit that allows for discretion as to which values or goods to privilege and how they should properly be applied in the light of local beliefs, interests and social facts. Indeed it is out of respect for our rationality that moral pluralists hold that there is no single and complete rational ordering of morally relevant goods (See Gray 1996, 2000 and Galston 2002 for a discussion of Isaiah Berlin and his theory of the inherent multiplicity and irreducibility of the objective domain of moral goods or values). And it is also out of respect for the limits of our rationality that moral pluralists recognize that many universal existential and metaphysical questions relevant to the organization of a social life are cognitively un-decidable and leave room for morally sensitive and reasonable truth-seeking members of different cultural traditions to disagree about which interpretative framework to employ in situating a course of action..

Writing as a moral pluralist I once referred to those universal existential and metaphysical questions as social existence themes (Shweder 1982). The variations in concrete moral judgments of the many peoples of the world can be viewed, in part, as expressions of the many answers that are possible to those universal questions or social existence themes. Questions such as these: what is me and what is not me? (The question of personal boundaries); what is male and what is female? (The question of gender identity); who is one of my kind and who (or what) is not one of my kind? (The question of in-group versus out-group identity); who is up and who is down? (The question of hierarchy); how should the burdens and benefits of life be distributed (The question of justice); and others.

Those in the social sciences over the decades who have engaged in descriptive research in the cultural psychology of morality investigate local answers to those unavoidable and hence universal existential and metaphysical questions. And as noted throughout this essay what they have discovered is that many of those answers have local authority because of their perceived connection to an imagined objective moral charter mediated by local beliefs or world views.⁸ What they have discovered is that moral judgments around the world are ubiquitous, passionate, motivating, truth asserting and divergent; and that in all cultures there is some sense of natural moral law and the development of some kind of normative language of rights, duties, obligations or values for regulating and justifying action (see for example, Kroeber 1952, Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck 1961, D'Andrade 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, human beings are not typically extreme relativists of the subjectivist variety. Values or moral goods are universally viewed as such undeniably good reasons for engaging in a course of action that once a moral end is the perceived result of a course action nothing more needs to be said by way of its justification. Nevertheless at the same time the imagined moral truths or goods asserted in deliberative moral judgments around the world are many, not one. Researchers who study moral discourse and the reflective application of human intelligence to evaluate spontaneous or intuitive moral judgments have discovered that the objective moral character of an action or practice (e.g., voluntarily ending a pregnancy) is typically established by connecting that action through a chain of factual, means-ends and causal reasoning to some argument-ending terminal good, for example, personal freedom, family privacy, or the avoidance of physical or psychological harm. On a worldwide scale the argument-ending terminal goods of deliberative moral judgments privileged in this or that cultural community are rich, diverse and include such moral ends as autonomy, justice, harm avoidance, loyalty, benevolence, piety, duty, respect, gratitude, sympathy, chastity, purity, sanctity, and others. Several proposals have been advanced in the social sciences for classifying these goods into a smaller set, such as the “big three” ethics of autonomy, community and divinity proposed by this author and his colleagues and the four dimensional classification of types of interpersonal

⁸ It should be noted of course that there is considerable cross-cultural and intra-cultural variation in the extent or degree to which all social norms are moralized and viewed as manifestations of an objective, external or sacred charter (see for example Turiel 1979, Shweder, Turiel and Much 1981, Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller 1987, Haidt, Koller and Dias 1993).

relationships and associated duties and moral responsibilities proposed by Alan Fiske (1993) and his colleagues.

Universalism without the uniformity is one way to describe the variety of relativism characteristic of all these proposals. The “Big Three”, for example, proposes that the human self or subject can be represented and experienced as either an autonomous preference structure seeking to maximize the satisfaction of its wants; or as an office holder or social status bearer in a bounded community (a family for example) defined by role based and often hierarchically interdependent duties and responsibilities; or as a free will or spirit whose capacities to initiate action and experience things of value derives from some kind of elevating connection to something that is inherently higher, dignified, pure or divine. These pictures of the self are probably present in some degree in all cultural groups but they are emphasized to different degrees and made manifest or institutionalized in different ways. So too the values associated with them: the moral goods favored by the ethics of autonomy and by many liberal societies (harm, rights, justice, self-governance and equality for example) are not those favored by the ethics of community (duty, hierarchy, loyalty, interdependence, personal sacrifice) or by the ethics of divinity (sanctity, pollution avoidance, purity, cleanliness). Many descriptions of cultural and sub-cultural differences in moral orientation and judgment utilizing this framework or similar frameworks (for example the “Big Five” proposed by Jon Haidt and his colleagues) are available in the moral anthropology and moral psychology literature (see Shweder, Mahapatra and Miller, 1987; Shweder, Much, Mahapatra and Park 2003; Haidt, Koller and Dias 1993; Haidt and Joseph 2004; Haidt and Graham 2007; Hickman 2011; Jensen 1997, 1998, 2008; Menon 2003; Miller 1994 1997; Beldo 2011; for an influential discussion of culture and the self also see Markus and Kitayama 1991). The development and defense of this type of moral pluralism is an ongoing process and will face many challenges. But perhaps its most basic principle (and its Montaigne-like caution for researchers in moral anthropology) is that the illiberality of a cultural practice is not necessarily an index of its immorality.

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