As the social sciences began to be recognized in the nineteenth century, many thinkers developed a particular interest in the customs and morals of other groups of people. In 1865 (six years after naturalist Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species* and six years before his *Descent of Man*), Sir Edward Tylor (1832–1917), one of the great leaders in the scientific study of human beings, published his *Researches Into the Early History of Mankind*. Tylor believed that the study of ancient pagans and the study of uncivilized people and various heathen groups that lived outside the scope of civilized Victorian culture would throw light on English culture itself. It was Tylor’s view that all people shared the same human capacities and mental potentialities and that there had been a progression, or positive development, from ignorant savagery to civilized culture. This was a daring view at the time. Many people (especially defenders of religious orthodoxy) believed both that Darwin was seriously wrong to affirm a development or evolution of human beings from animals and that Tylor was seriously wrong to affirm a development or evolution of intelligent civilized Christians from ignorant uncivilized pagan savages. The conventional view held by many was that God had created human beings in his image as rational and moral beings; any savages who existed in the nineteenth century must have fallen into that state through a neglect of reason, a lack of morality, and an absence of faith. Surely, this view continued, human beings were not initially created as ignorant savages who wore beads (if anything at all) and followed a pagan life of promiscuity and superstition.

Sir James Frazer (1854–1941) was greatly stimulated by his reading of Tylor. He too wrote extensively about the customs of primitive people, and he believed that such people exhibited “the rudimentary phases, the infancy and childhood, of human society.” To the question of whether or not he had actually seen any of the savages that he had written so much about, Frazer is said to have replied, “God forbid!” Frazer and most social scientists of the late nineteenth century studied books, read the diaries of travelers, and corresponded with those in distant lands. Field study had not yet established itself as a necessary social scientific technique. The armchair studies of Frazer are by no means manifestations of laziness or lack of commitment; Frazer devoted his life to the scientific study of humankind and is said to have spent 12 hours a day for over 50 years reading, taking notes, and writing.

Presently, several well-known social scientists have endorsed a sophisticated type of cultural relativism. The armchair studies have been replaced by years of field studies that include a sympathetic involvement with the lives of the people one is studying. Gone is the view that so-called primitive people are standing on the lower rungs of the same ladder that leads to modern Western culture. There is no separation of the “civilized” and the “uncivilized.” There are various civilizations and various cultures, and our own culture is only one of many.

Melville J. Herskovits was a champion of cultural relativism, which he saw as an antidote to European colonial attitudes and the ethnocentrism that they express. Herskovits was, in particular, a student of African societies and of the experience of blacks in the New World. He regarded it as a great mistake and a great tragedy that Europeans thought that they were the civilized ones and that the Africans were not. It was by force, not by civilization, that Europeans imposed themselves upon African cultures. According to cultural relativism, it is false to think that, in matters of morality, our own Western culture is uniquely in a position to make absolute moral judgments. The fact is that different cultures simply have different moralities. The moral precepts of a given culture might appear as absolute to the individual who is enculturated in that culture, but this is a common error. Such is the view that Herskovits expresses in the following selection.

Louis P. Pojman responds critically to cultural relativism. He agrees with Herskovits on the wrongfulness of ethnocentrism, but he argues that cultural relativism, at least with respect to morality, has several highly implausible consequences. And these consequences, when understood, should lead to the rejection of moral relativism.
Cultural Relativism and Cultural Values

All peoples form judgments about ways of life different from their own. Where systematic study is undertaken, comparison gives rise to classification, and scholars have devised many schemes for classifying ways of life. Moral judgments have been drawn regarding the ethical principles that guide the behavior and mold the value systems of different peoples. Their economic and political structures and their religious beliefs have been ranked in order of complexity, efficiency, desirability. Their art, music, and literary forms have been weighed.

It has become increasingly evident, however, that evaluations of this kind stand or fall with the acceptance of the premises from which they derive. In addition, many of the criteria on which judgment is based are in conflict, so that conclusions drawn from one definition of what is desirable will not agree with those based on another formulation.

A simple example will illustrate this. There are not many ways in which the primary family can be constituted. One man may live with one woman, one wife. But if we evaluate these forms according to their function of perpetuating the group, it is clear that they perform their essential tasks. Otherwise, the societies wherein they exist would not survive.

Such an answer will, however, not satisfy all those who have undertaken to study cultural evaluation. What of the moral questions inherent in the practice of monogamy as against polygamy, the adjustment of children raised in households where, for example, the mothers must compete on behalf of their offspring for the favors of a common husband? If monogamy is held to be the desired form of marriage, the responses to these questions are predetermined. But when we consider these questions from the point of view of those who live in polygamous societies, alternative answers, based on different conceptions of what is desirable, may be given.

Let us consider, for example, the life of a plural family in the West African culture of Dahomey. Here, within a compound, live a man and his wives. The man has his own house, as has each of the women and her children, after the basic African principle that two wives cannot successfully inhabit the same quarters. Each wife in turn spends a native week of four days with the common husband, cooking his food, washing his clothes, sleeping in his house, and then making way for the next. Her children, however, remain in their mother's hut. With pregnancy, she drops out of this routine, and ideally, in the interest of her child's health and her own, does not again visit her husband until the child has been born and weaned. This means a period of from three to four years, since infants are nursed two years and longer.

The compound, made up of these households, is a cooperative unit. The women who sell goods in the market, or make pottery, or have their gardens, contribute to its support. This aspect, though of great economic importance, is secondary to the prestige that attaches to the larger unit. This is why one often finds a wife not only urging her husband to acquire a second spouse but even aiding him by loans or gifts to make this possible.

Tensions do arise between the women who inhabit a large compound. Thirteen different ways of getting married have been recorded in this society, and in a large household those wives who are married in the same category tend to unite against all others. Competition for the regard of the husband is also a factor, when several wives try to influence the choice of an heir in favor of their own sons. Yet all the children of the compound play together, and the strength of the emotional ties between the children of the same mother more than compensates for whatever stresses may arise between brothers and sisters who share the same father but are of different mothers. Cooperation, moreover, is by no means a mere formality among the wives. Many common tasks are performed in friendly unison, and there is solidarity in the interest of women's prerogatives, or where the status of the common husband is threatened.

We may now return to the criteria to be applied in drawing judgments concerning polygamous as against monogamous families. The family structure of Dahomey is obviously a complex institution. If we but consider the possible lines of personal relations among the many individuals concerned, we see clearly how numerous are the ramifications of reciprocal right and obligation of the Dahomean family. The effectiveness of the Dahomean family is, however, patent. It has, for untold generations, performed its function of rearing the young; more than this, the very size of the group gives it economic resources and a resulting stability that might well be envied by those who live under different systems of family organization. Moral values are always difficult to establish, but at least in this society marriage is clearly distinguished from casual sex relations and from prostitution, in its supernatural sanctions and in the prestige it confers, to say nothing of the economic obligations toward spouse and prospective offspring explicitly accepted by one who enters into a marriage.

Numerous problems of adjustment do present themselves in an aggregate of this sort. It does not call for much speculation to understand the plaint of the head of one large compound when he said: "One must be something of a diplomat if one has many wives." Yet the sly digs in proverb and song, and the open quarreling, involve no greater stress than is found in any small rural community where people are also thrown closely together for long periods of time. Quarrels between co-wives are not greatly different from disputes over the back fence between neighbors. And Dahomeans who know European culture, when they argue for their system, stress the fact that it permits the individual wife to
space her children in a way that is in accord with the best precepts of modern gynecology.

Thus polygamy, when looked at from the point of view of those who practice it, is seen to hold values that are not apparent from the outside. A similar case can be made for monogamy, however, when it is attacked by those who are enculturated to a different kind of family structure. And what is true of a particular phase of culture such as this, is also true of others. Evaluations are relative to the cultural background out of which they arise.

Cultural relativism is in essence an approach to the question of the nature and role of values in culture. It represents a scientific, inductive attack on an age-old philosophical problem, using fresh, cross-cultural data, hitherto not available to scholars, gained from the study of the underlying value-systems of societies having the most diverse customs. The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation. Those who hold for the existence of fixed values will find materials in other societies that necessitate a re-investigation of their assumptions. Are there absolute moral standards, or are moral standards effective only as far as they agree with the orientations of a given people at a given period of their history? We even approach the problem of the ultimate nature of reality itself. Cassirer holds that reality can only be experienced through the symbolism of language. Is reality, then, not defined and redefined by the ever-varied symbolisms of the innumerable languages of mankind?

Answers to questions such as these represent one of the most profound contributions of anthropology to the analysis of man's place in the world. When we reflect that such intangibles as right and wrong, normal and abnormal, beautiful and plain are absorbed as a person learns the ways of the group into which he is born, we see that we are dealing here with a process of first importance. Even the facts of the physical world are discerned through the enculturative screen, so that the perception of time, distance, weight, size, and other "realities" is mediated by the conventions of any given group.

No culture, however, is a closed system of rigid molds to which the behavior of all members of a society must conform. In stressing the psychological reality of culture, it was made plain that a culture, as such, can do nothing. It is but the summation of the behavior and habitual modes of thought of the persons who make up a particular society. Though by learning and habit these individuals conform to the ways of the group into which they have been born, they nonetheless vary in their reactions to the situations of living they commonly meet. They vary, too, in the degree to which they desire change, as whole cultures vary. This is but another way in which we see that culture is flexible and holds many possibilities of choice within its framework, and that to recognize the values held by a given people in no wise implies that these values are a constant factor in the lives of succeeding generations of the same group. . . .

While recognizing the role of both father and mother in procreation, many peoples have conventions of relationship that count descent on but one side of the family. In such societies, it is common for incest lines to be so arbitrarily defined that "first cousins," as we would say, on the mother's side call each other brother and sister and regard marriage with one another with horror. Yet marriage within the same degree of biological relationship on the father's side may be held not only desirable, but sometimes mandatory. This is because two persons related in this way are by definition not considered blood relatives.

The very definition of what is normal or abnormal is relative to the cultural frame of reference. As an example of this, we may take the phenomenon of possession as found among African and New World Negroes. The supreme expression of their religious experience, possession, is a psychological state wherein a displacement of personality occurs when the god "comes to the head" of the worshipper. The individual thereupon is held to be the deity himself. This phenomenon has been described in pathological terms by many students whose approach is nonanthropological, because of its surface resemblance to cases in the records of medical practitioners, psychological clinicians, psychiatrists, and others. The hysteria-like trances, where persons, their eyes tightly closed, move about excitedly and presumably without purpose or design, or roll on the ground, muttering meaningless syllables, or go into a state where their bodies achieve complete rigidity, are not difficult to equate with the neurotic and even psychotic manifestations of abnormality found in Euro-American society.

Yet when we look beneath behavior to meaning, and place such apparently random acts in their cultural frame of reference, such conclusions become untenable. For relative to the setting in which these possession experiences occur, they are not to be regarded as abnormal at all, much less psychopathological. They are culturally patterned, and often induced by learning and discipline. The dancing or other acts of the possessed persons are so stylized that one who knows this religion can identify the god possessing a devotee by the behavior of the individual possessed. Furthermore, the possession experience does not seem to be confined to emotionally unstable persons. Those who "get the god" run the gamut of personality types found in the group. Observation of persons who frequent the cults, yet who, in the idiom of worship "have nothing in the head" and thus never experience possession, seems to show that they are far less adjusted than those who do get possessed. Finally, the nature of the possession experience in these cultures is so disciplined that it may only come to a given devotee under particular circumstances. In West Africa and Brazil the gods come only to those who have been designated in advance by the priest of their group, who lays his hands on their heads. In Haiti, for an initiate not a member of the family group giving a rite to become possessed at a ceremony is considered extremely "bad form" socially and a sign of spiritual weakness, evidence that the god is not under the control of his worshipper.

The terminology of psychopathology, employed solely for descriptive purposes, may be of some utility. But the connotation it carries of psychic instability, emotional imbalance, and departure from normality recommends the
use of other words that do not invite such a distortion of cultural reality. For in these Negro societies, the meaning this experience holds for the people falls entirely in the realm of understandable, predictable, normal behavior. This behavior is known and recognized by all members as an experience that may come to any one of them, and is to be welcomed not only for the psychological security it affords, but also for the status, economic gain, aesthetic expression, and emotional release it vouchsafes the devotee.

The primary mechanism that directs the evaluation of culture is ethnocentrism. Ethnocentrism is the point of view that one's own way of life is to be preferred to all others. Flowing logically from the process of early enculturation, it characterizes the way most individuals feel about their own culture, whether or not they verbalize their feeling. Outside the stream of Euroamerican culture, particularly among nonliterate peoples, this is taken for granted and is to be viewed as a factor making for individual adjustment and social integration. For the strengthening of the ego, identification with one's own group, whose ways are implicitly accepted as best, is all-important. It is when, as in Euroamerican culture, ethnocentrism is rationalized and made the basis of programs of action detrimental to the well-being of other peoples that it gives rise to serious problems.

The ethnocentrism of nonliterate peoples is best illustrated in their myths, folk tales, proverbs, and linguistic habits. It is manifest in many tribal names whose meaning in their respective languages signifies “human beings.” The inference that those to whom the name does not apply are outside this category is, however, rarely, if ever, explicitly made. When the Suriname Bush Negro, shown a flashlight, admires it and then quotes the proverb: “White man’s magic isn’t black man’s magic,” he is merely reaffirming his faith in his own culture. He is pointing out that the stranger, for all his mechanical devices, would be lost in the Guiana jungle without the aid of his Bush Negro friends.

A myth of the origin of human races, told by the Cherokee Indians of the Great Smoky Mountains, gives another instance of this kind of ethnocentrism. The Creator fashioned man by first making and firing an oven and then, from dough he had prepared, shaping three figures in human form. He placed the figures in the oven and waited for them to get done. But his impatience to see the result of this, his crowning experiment in the work of creation, was so great that he removed the first figure too soon. It was badly underdone—pale, an unlovely color, and from it descended the white people. His second figure had fared well. The timing was accurate, the form, richly browned, that was to be the ancestor of the Indians, pleased him in every way. He so admired it, indeed, that he neglected to take out of the oven the third form, until he smelled it burning. He threw open the door, only to find this last one charred and black. It was regrettable, but there was nothing to be done; and this was the first Negro.

This is the more usual form that ethnocentrism takes among many peoples—a gentle insistence on the good qualities of one's own group, without any drive to extend this attitude into the field of action. With such a point of view, the objects, sanctioned modes of behavior, and value systems of peoples with whom one's own group comes into contact can be considered in terms of their desirability, then accepted or rejected without any reference to absolute standards. That differences in the manner of achieving commonly sought objectives may be permitted to exist without a judgment being entered on them involves a reorientation in thought for those in the Euroamerican tradition, because in this tradition, a difference in belief or behavior too often implies something is worse, or less desirable, and must be changed.

The assumption that the cultures of nonliterate peoples are of inferior quality is the end product of a long series of developments in our intellectual history. It is not often recalled that the concept of progress, that strikes so deep into our thinking, is relatively recent. It is, in fact, a unique product of our culture. It is a part of the same historic stream that developed the scientific tradition and that developed the machine, thus giving Europe and America the final word in debates about cultural superiority. "He who makes the gun-powder wields the power," runs a Dahomean proverb. There is no rebuttal to an argument, backed by cannon, advanced to a people who can defend their position with no more than spears, or bows and arrows, or at best a flint-lock gun.

With the possible exception of technological aspects of life, however, the proposition that one way of thought or action is better than another is exceedingly difficult to establish on the grounds of any universally acceptable criteria. Let us take food as an instance. Cultures are equipped differently for the production of food, so that some peoples eat more than others. However, even on the subsistence level, there is no people who do not hold certain potential foodstuffs to be unfit for human consumption. Milk, which figures importantly in our diet, is rejected as food by the peoples of southeastern Asia. Beef, a valued element of the Euroamerican cuisine, is regarded with disgust by Hindus. Nor need compulsions be this strong. The thousands of cattle that range the East African highlands are primarily wealth to be preserved, and not a source of food. Only the cow that dies is eaten—a practice that, though abhorrent to us, has apparently done no harm to those who have been following it for generations.

Totemic and religious taboos set up further restrictions on available foodstuffs, while the refusal to consume many other edible and nourishing substances is simply based on the enculturative conditioning. So strong is this conditioning that prohibited food consumed unwittingly may induce such a physiological reaction as vomiting. All young animals provide succulent meat, but the religious abhorrence of the young pig by the Mohammedan is no stronger than the secular rejection of puppy steaks or colt chops by ourselves. Ant larvae, insect grubs, locusts—all of which have caloric values and vitamin content—when roasted or otherwise cooked, or even when raw, are regarded by many peoples as delicacies. We never eat them, however, though they are equally available to us. On the other hand, some of the same peoples who feed on these with gusto regard substances that come out of tin cans as unfit for human consumption. . . .
Before we terminate our discussion of cultural relativism, it is important that we consider certain questions that are raised when the cultural-relativistic position is advanced. "It may be true," it is argued, "that human beings live in accordance with the ways they have learned. These ways may be regarded by them as best. A people may be so devoted to these ways that they are ready to fight and die for them. In terms of survival value, their effectiveness may be admitted, since the group that lives in accordance with them continues to exist. But does this mean that all systems of moral values, all concepts of right and wrong, are founded on such shifting sands that there is no need for morality, for proper behavior, for ethical codes? Does not a relativistic philosophy, indeed, imply a negation of these?"

To hold that values do not exist because they are relative to time and place is to fall prey to a fallacy that results from a failure to take into account the positive contribution of the relativistic position. For cultural relativism is a philosophy that recognizes the values set up by every society to guide its own life and that understands their worth to those who live by them, though they may differ from one's own. Instead of underscoring differences from absolute norms that, however objectively arrived at, are nonetheless the product of a given time or place, the relativistic point of view brings into relief the validity of every set of norms for the people who have them, and the values these represent.

It is essential, in considering cultural relativism, that we differentiate absolutes from universals. Absolutes are fixed, and, as far as convention is concerned, are not admitted to have variation, to differ from culture to culture, from epoch to epoch. Universals, on the other hand, are those least common denominators to be extracted from the range of variation that all phenomena of the natural or cultural world manifest. If we apply the distinction between these two concepts in drawing an answer to the points raised in our question, these criticisms are found to lose their force. To say that there is no absolute criterion of values or morals, or even, psychologically, of time or space, does not mean that such criteria, in differing forms, do not comprise universals in human culture. Morality is a universal, and so is enjoyment of beauty, and some standard of truth. The many forms these concepts take are but products of the particular historical experience of the societies that manifest them. In each, criteria are subject to continuous questioning, continuous change. But the basic conceptions remain, to channel thought and direct conduct, to give purpose to living.

In considering cultural relativism, also, we must recognize that it has three quite different aspects, which in most discussions of it tend to be disregarded. One of these is methodological, one philosophical, and one practical. As it has been put:

As method, relativism encompasses the principle of our science that, in studying a culture, one seeks to attain as great a degree of objectivity as possible; that one does not judge the modes of behavior one is describing, or seek to change them. Rather, one seeks to understand the sanctions of behavior in terms of the established relationships within the culture itself, and refrains from making interpretations that arise from a preconceived frame of reference. Relativism as philosophy concerns the nature of cultural val-

ues, and, beyond this, the implications of an epistemology that derives from a recognition of the force of enculturative conditioning in shaping thought and behavior. Its practical aspects involve the application—the practice—of the philosophical principles derived from this method, to the wider, cross-cultural scene.

We may follow this reasoning somewhat further.

In these terms, the three aspects of cultural relativism can be regarded as representing a logical sequence which, in a broad sense, the historical development of the idea has also followed. That is, the methodological aspect, whereby the data from which the epistemological propositions flow are gathered, ordered and assessed, came first. For it is difficult to conceive of a systematic theory of cultural relativism—as against a generalized idea of live-and-let-live—without the pre-existence of the massive ethnographic documentation gathered by anthropologists concerning the similarities and differences between cultures the world over. Out of these data came the philosophical position, and with the philosophical position came speculation as to its implications for conduct.

Cultural relativism, in all cases, must be sharply distinguished from concepts of the relativity of individual behavior, which would negate all social controls over conduct. Conformity to the code of the group is a requirement for any regularity in life. Yet to say that we have a right to expect conformity to the code of our day for ourselves does not imply that we need expect, much less impose, conformity to our code on persons who live by other codes. The very core of cultural relativism is the social discipline that comes of respect for differences—of mutual respect. Emphasis on the worth of many ways of life, not one, is an affirmation of the values in each culture. Such emphasis seeks to understand and to harmonize goals, not to judge and destroy those that do not dovetail with our own. Cultural history teaches that, important as it is to discern and study the parallelisms in human civilizations, it is no less important to discern and study the different ways man has devised to fulfill his needs.

That it has been necessary to consider questions such as have been raised reflects an enculturative experience wherein the prevalent system of morals is not only consciously inculcated, but its exclusive claim to excellence emphasized. There are not many cultures, for example, where a rigid dichotomy between good and evil, such as we have set up, is insisted upon. Rather it is recognized that good and evil are but the extremes of a continuously varied scale between these poles that produces only different degrees of greyness. We thus return to the principle enunciated earlier, that "judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his enculturation." In a culture where absolute values are stressed, the relativism of a world that encompasses many ways of living will be difficult to comprehend. Rather, it will offer a field day for value judgments based on the degree to which a given body of customs resembles or differs from those of Euroamerican culture.

Once comprehended, however, and employing the field methods of the scientific student of man, together with an awareness of the satisfactions the
most varied bodies of custom yield, this position gives us a leverage to lift us out of the ethnocentric morass in which our thinking about ultimate values has for so long bogged down. With a means of probing deeply into all manner of differing cultural orientations, of reaching into the significance of the ways of living of different peoples, we can turn again to our own culture with fresh perspective, and an objectivity that can be achieved in no other manner.

Notes

2. E. Cassirer, 1944, p. 25.
3. This unpublished myth was told to F. M. Olbrechts of Brussels, Belgium, in the course of field work among the Cherokee. His having made it available is gratefully acknowledged. A similar tale has been recorded from the Albany Cree, at Moose Factory, according to information received from F. Voget.
5. Instances of the rejection of relativism on philosophical grounds, by writers who attempt to reconcile the principle of absolute values with the diversity of known systems, are to be found in E. Vivas, 1950, pp. 27–42, and D. Bidney, 1953a, pp. 689–95, 1953b, pp. 423–9. Both of these discussions, also, afford examples of the confusion that results when a distinction is not drawn between the methodological, philosophical, and practical aspects of relativism. For a critical consideration of relativism that, by implication, recognizes these differences, see R. Redfield, 1953, pp. 144 ff.

Ethical Relativism: Who's to Judge What's Right and Wrong?

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

John Ladd, *Ethical Relativism*

In the 19th century Christian missionaries sometimes used coercion to change the customs of pagan tribal people in parts of Africa and the Pacific Islands. Appalled by the customs of public nakedness, polygamy, working on the Sabbath, and infanticide, they paternalistically went about reforming the “poor pagans.” They clothed them, separated wives from their husbands in order to create monogamous households, made the Sabbath a day of rest, and ended infanticide. In the process they sometimes created malaise, causing the estranged women to despair and their children to be orphaned. The natives often did not understand the new religion, but accepted it in deference to the white man’s power. The white people had guns and medicine.

Since the 19th century we’ve made progress in understanding cultural diversity, and now realize that the social dissonance caused by “do-gooders” was a bad thing. In the last century or so, anthropology has exposed our penchant for ethnocentrism, the prejudicial view that interprets all of reality through the eyes of one’s own cultural beliefs and values. We have come to see enormous variety in social practices throughout the world.

For instance, Eskimos allow their elderly to die by starvation, whereas we believe that this is morally wrong. The Spartans of ancient Greece and the Dobu of New Guinea believe that stealing is morally right; but we believe it is wrong. Many cultures, past and present, have practiced or still practice infanticide. A tribe in East Africa once threw deformed infants to the hippopotamus, but our society condemns such acts. Sexual practices vary over time and climate. Some cultures permit homosexual behavior, whereas others condemn it. Some cul-

cures, including Moslem societies, practice polygamy, while Christian cultures view it as immoral. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict describes a tribe in Melanesia that views cooperation and kindness as vices, and anthropologist Colin Turnbull has documented that the Ik in Northern Uganda have no sense of duty toward their children or parents. There are societies that make it a duty for children to kill their aging parents (sometimes by strangling).

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus (485–430 B.C.) told the story of how Darius, the king of Persia, once brought together some Callatians (Asian tribal people) and some Greeks. He asked the Callatians how they disposed of their deceased parents. They explained that they ate the bodies. The Greeks, who cremate their parents, were horrified at such barbarous behavior. No amount of money could tempt them to do such an irreverent thing. Then Darius asked the Callatians, “What should I give you to burn the bodies of your fathers at their decease?” The Callatians were utterly horrified at such barbarous behavior and begged Darius to cease from such irreverent discourse. Herodotus concluded that “Custom is the king o’er all.”

Today we condemn ethnocentrism as a variety of prejudice tantamount to racism and sexism. What is right in one culture may be wrong in another, what is good east of the river may be bad west of the same river, what is a virtue in one nation may be seen as a vice in another, so it behooves us not to judge others but to be tolerant of diversity.

This rejection of ethnocentrism in the West has contributed to a general shift in public opinion about morality, so that for a growing number of Westerners, consciousness-raising about the validity of other ways of life has led to a gradual erosion of belief in moral objectivism, the view that there are universal moral principles, valid for all people at all times and climes. For example, in polls taken in my ethics and introduction to philosophy classes over the past several years (in three different universities in three areas of the country) students affirmed by a 2 to 1 ratio, a version of moral relativism over moral absolutism with barely 3 percent seeing something in between these two polar opposites. Of course, I’m not suggesting that all these students have a clear understanding of what relativism entails, for many of those who say they are ethical relativists also state on the same questionnaire that “abortion, except to save the mother’s life, is always wrong,” that “capital punishment is always morally permissible.” The apparent contradictions signal some confusion on the matter.

[Here] we examine the central notions of ethical relativism and look at the implications that seem to follow from it.

**An Analysis of Relativism**

**Ethical relativism** holds that there are no universally valid moral principles, but rather that all moral principles are valid relative to culture or individual choice. It is to be distinguished from **moral skepticism**—the view that there are no valid moral principles at all (or at least we cannot know whether there are any)—and from all forms of **moral objectivism** or **absolutism**. John Ladd’s statement... is a typical characterization of the theory:

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

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

1. What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.
2. Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs.
3. Therefore, there are no **absolute** or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.

**The Diversity Thesis**

The first thesis, which may be called the **diversity thesis** and identified with **cultural relativism**, is simply an anthropological thesis that acknowledges the fact that moral rules differ from society to society. As we illustrated earlier..., there is enormous variety in what may count as a moral principle in a given society. The human condition is malleable in the extreme, allowing any number of folkways or moral codes. As Ruth Benedict has written:

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

**The Dependency Thesis**

The second thesis, the **dependency thesis**, asserts that individual acts are right and wrong depending on the nature of the society in which they occur. Morality does not exist in a vacuum; rather, what is considered morally right or wrong must be seen in a context, depending on the goals, wants, beliefs, history, and environment of the society in question. As William Graham Sumner says, we learn the [morals] as unconsciously as we learn to walk and hear and breathe, and [we] never know any reason why the [morals] are what they are. The justification of them is that when we wake to consciousness of life we find them facts which already hold us in the bonds of tradition, custom, and habit.
Trying to see things from an independent, noncultural point of view would be like taking out our eyes in order to examine their contours and qualities. We are simply culturally determined beings.

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

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

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

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

### Subjective Ethical Relativism (Subjectivism)

Some people think that even the conclusion just stated is too tame. They maintain that morality is not dependent on the society but on the individual himself or herself. As students sometimes maintain, "Morality is in the eye of the beholder." Ernest Hemingway wrote:

So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine.

The form of moral subjectivism has the sorry consequence that it makes morality a useless concept, for, on its premises, little or no interpersonal criticism or judgment is logically possible. Hemingway may feel good about the killing of bulls in a bullfight, whereas Albert Schweitzer or Mother Teresa would no doubt feel the opposite. No argument about the matter is possible. The only basis for judging Hemingway, or anyone else, wrong would be if he failed to live up to his own principles; however, one of Hemingway's principles could be that hypocrisy is morally permissible (he feels good about it), so that it would be impossible for him to do wrong. For Hemingway, hypocrisy and nonhypocrisy are both morally permissible. On the basis of subjectivism it could very easily turn out that Adolf Hitler was as moral as Mahatma Gandhi, as long as each believed he was living by his chosen principles. Notions of moral good and bad, right and wrong cease to have interpersonal evaluative meaning.

In the opening days of my philosophy classes, I often find students vehemently defending subjective relativism. I then give the students their first test. The next class period I return all the tests, marked F even though my comments show that most of them are of a very high quality. When the students express outrage at this injustice, I answer that I have accepted subjectivism for purposes of marking the exams, in which case the principle of justice has no objective validity.

Absurd consequences follow from subjective ethical relativism. If it is correct, then morality reduces to aesthetic tastes, over which there can be neither argument nor interpersonal judgment. Although many people say they hold this position, there seems to be a conflict between it and other of their moral views (e.g., that Hitler was really morally bad or that capital punishment is always wrong). There seems to be a contradiction between subjectivism and the very concept of morality, which it is supposed to characterize, for morality has to do with proper resolution of interpersonal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament. Whatever else it does, morality has the minimal aim of preventing a state of chaos in which life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." But if so, subjectivism is no help at all in doing this, for it does not rest on social agreement of principle (as the conventionalist maintains) or on an objectively independent set of norms that bind all people for the common good.

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

Radical individualistic relativism seems incoherent. If so, it follows that the only plausible view of ethical relativism must be one that grounds morality in the group or culture. This form of relativism is called conventionalism, which we looked at earlier and to which we now return.

**Conventional Ethical Relativism (Conventionalism)**

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

The most famous of those holding this position is the anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who argues even more explicitly than Benedict that ethical relativism entails intercultural tolerance:

1. Morality is relative to its culture.
2. There is no independent basis for criticizing the morality of any other culture.
3. Therefore we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.

Tolerance is certainly a virtue, but is this a good argument for it? I think not. If morality is simply relative to each culture, then if the culture does not have a principle of tolerance, its members have no obligation to be tolerant. Herskovits seems to be treating the principle of tolerance as the one exception to his relativism. But from a relativistic point of view there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other.

Not only do relativists fail to offer a basis for criticizing those who are intolerant, but they cannot rationally criticize anyone who espouses what they might regard as a heinous principle. If, as seems to be the case, valid criticism supposes an objective or impartial standard, relativists cannot morally criticize anyone outside their own culture. Adolf Hitler’s genocidal actions, as long as they were culturally accepted, were as morally legitimate as Mother Teresa’s works of mercy. If conventional relativism is accepted, then racism, genocide of unpopular minorities, oppression of the poor, slavery, and even the advocacy of war for its own sake are as equally moral as their opposites. And if a subculture decided that starting a nuclear war was somehow morally acceptable, we could not morally criticize those people, for any actual morality, whatever its content, is as valid as every other and more valid than ideal moralities, because the latter aren’t adhered to by any culture.

There are other disturbing consequences of ethical relativism. It seems to entail that reformers are always (morally) wrong, since they go against the tide of cultural standards. William Wilberforce was wrong, in the 18th century, to oppose slavery; the British were immoral in opposing suttee in India (the burning of widows on their husbands’ funeral pyres, which is now illegal in India); and missionaries were immoral in opposing clitoridectomies in Central Africa. The early Christians were wrong in refusing to serve in the Roman army or to bow down to Caesar, since the majority in the Roman Empire believed these acts were moral duties. In fact, Jesus himself was immoral in advocating the beatitudes and principles of the Sermon on the Mount, since it is clear that few in his time (or in ours) accepted them.

Yet we normally believe just the opposite, that the reformer is the courageous innovator who is right, who has the truth, in the face of the mindless majority. Sometimes the individual must stand alone with the truth, risking social censure and persecution. As Dr. Stockman says in Ibsen’s *Enemy of the People*, after he loses the battle to declare his town’s profitable polluted tourist spa unsanitary, “The most dangerous enemy of the truth and freedom among us—is the compact majority. Yes, the damned . . . majority. The majority has *might*—unfortunately—but *right* it is not. Right—are I and a few others.” Yet if relativism is correct, the opposite is necessarily the case. Truth is with the crowd and error with the individual.

Similarly, conventional ethical relativism entails disturbing judgments about the law. Our normal view is that we have a prima facie duty to obey the law, because law, in general, promotes the human Good. According to most objective systems, this obligation is not absolute but rather is conditional, depending on the particular law’s relation to a wider moral order. Civil disobedience is warranted in some cases in which the law seems to be in serious conflict with morality. However, if moral relativism is true, then neither law nor civil disobedience has a firm foundation. On the one hand, for society at large, civil disobedience will be morally wrong, so long as the culture agrees with the law in question. On the other hand, if you belong to the relevant subculture that doesn’t recognize the particular law in question, disobedience will be morally mandated. The Ku Klux Klan, which believes that Jews, Catholics, and Blacks are evil or undeserving of high regard, are, given conventionalism, morally permitted or required to break the laws that protect these endangered groups. Why should I obey a law that my group doesn’t recognize as valid?

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

There is an even more basic problem with the notion that morality is dependent on cultural acceptance for its validity. The problem is that the concepts of culture and society are notoriously difficult to define, especially in a pluralistic society such as our own, in which the concepts seem rather vague. One person may belong to several societies (subcultures) with different emphases on values and arrangements of principles. A person may belong to the nation as a single society with certain values of patriotism, honor, courage, laws (including some that are controversial but have majority acceptance, such as the law on abortion). But he or she may also belong to a church that opposes some of the laws of the state. The same individual may also be an integral member of a socially mixed community in which different principles hold sway, and additionally may belong to clubs and a family that adhere to still other rules. Relativism would seem to tell us that when a person is a member of societies with conflicting moralities, that person must be judged both wrong and not wrong, whatever he or she does. For example, if Mary is a U.S. citizen and a Roman Catholic, she is wrong (qua Catholic) if she chooses to have an abortion and not wrong (qua citizen of the United States) if she acts against the teaching of the church on abortion. As a member of a racist university fraternity, the Klu Klux Klan, John has no obligation to treat his fellow African American students as equals; but as a member of the university community itself (in which the principle of equal rights is accepted), he does have that obligation; but as a member of the surrounding community (which may reject the principle of equal rights), John again has no such obligation; but then again as a member of the nation at large (which accepts the principle), he is obligated to treat his fellow citizens with respect. What is the morally right thing for John to do? The question no longer makes much sense in this moral Babel; morality has lost its action-guiding function.

Perhaps the relativist would adhere to a principle that says in such cases the individual may choose which group to belong to as primary. If Mary chooses to have an abortion, she is choosing to belong to the general society relative to that principle. And John must likewise choose among groups. The trouble with this option is that it seems to lead back to counterintuitive results. If Mafia Mike feels like killing bank president Otis Orucutt and wants to feel good about it, he identifies with the Mafia society rather than with the general public morality. Does this justify the killing? In fact, couldn’t one justify anything simply by forming a small subculture that approved of it? Charles Manson would be morally pure in killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie. How large must the group be in order to be a legitimate subculture or society? Does it need 10 or 15 people? How about just 3? Come to think about it, why can’t my burglary partner and I found our own society with a morality of its own? Of course, if my partner dies, I could still claim that I was acting from an originally social set of norms. But why can’t I dispense with the interpersonal agreements altogether and invent my own morality? After all, morality, on this view, is only an invention anyway. Conventionalist relativism seems to reduce to subjectivism. And subjectivism leads, as we have seen, to the demise of morality altogether.

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

1. **The Diversity Thesis.** What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies.

2. **The Dependency Thesis.** Whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on or is relative to the society to which he or she belongs.

3. **Ethical Relativism.** Therefore, there are no absolute or objective moral standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.

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

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

And Colin Turnbull, whose description of the sadistic, semidisplaced Ik in Northern Uganda was seen as evidence of a people without principles of kindness and cooperation, has produced evidence that underneath the surface of this dying society is a deeper moral code, from a time when the tribe flourished, that occasionally surfaces and shows its nobler face.

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

. . . [T]he first premise doesn’t by itself, imply ethical relativism, and its denial doesn’t disprove ethical relativism.

We turn to the crucial second thesis, the dependency thesis. . . . We distinguished between a weak and a strong thesis of dependency. The weak thesis says that the application of principles depends on the particular cultural predicament, whereas the strong thesis affirms that the principles themselves depend on...
that predicament. The nonrelativist can accept a certain relativity in the way moral principles are applied in various cultures, depending on beliefs, history, and environment. For example, a harsh environment with scarce natural resources may justify the Eskimos' brand of euthanasia to the objectivist, who in another environment would consistently reject that practice. One tribe in East Africa throws its deformed children into the river because it believes that such infants belong to the hippopotamus, the god of the river. We consider this a false belief, but the point is that the same principles of respect for property and for human life are operative in these contrary practices. These people differ with us only in belief, not in substantive moral principle. This is an illustration of how nonmoral beliefs (e.g., deformed children belong to the hippopotamus god), when applied to common moral principles (e.g., give to each his or her due), generate different actions in different cultures. In our own culture the difference in the nonmoral belief about the status of a fetus generates opposite moral prescriptions. So the fact that moral principles are weakly dependent doesn't show that ethical relativism is valid. In spite of this weak dependency on nonmoral factors, there could still be a set of general moral norms applicable to all cultures and even recognized in most, which are disregarded at a culture's own expense.

What the relativist needs is a strong thesis of dependency—that somehow all principles are essentially cultural inventions. But why should we choose to view morality this way? Is there anything to recommend the strong thesis over the weak thesis of dependency? The relativist may argue that in fact we lack an obvious impartial standard from which to judge. “Who's to say which culture is right and which is wrong?” But this seems to be dubious. We can reason and perform thought experiments in order to make a case for one system over another. We may not be able to know with certainty that our moral beliefs are closer to the truth than those of another culture or those of others within our own culture, but we may be justified in believing that they are. If we can be closer to the truth regarding factual or scientific matters, why can’t we be closer to the truth on moral matters? Why can’t a culture simply be confused or wrong about its moral perceptions? Why can’t we say that a society like that of the Ik, which sees nothing wrong with enjoying watching its own children fall into fires, is less moral in that regard than the culture that cherishes children and grants them protection and equal rights? To take such a stand does not commit the fallacy of ethnocentrism, for in doing so we are seeking to derive principles through critical reason, not simply uncritical acceptance of our own mores.

**Conclusion**

Ethical relativism—the thesis that moral principles derive their validity from dependence on society or individual choice—seems plausible at first glance, but when scrutinized closely is seen to have some serious difficulties. Subjectivism seems to boil down to anarchistic individualism, and conventionalism fails to deal adequately with the problems of the reformer, the question of defining a culture, and the whole enterprise of moral criticism.
Is Morality Relative to Culture?

Ethical relativism can be a very difficult thesis to state. It is not the same as what Pojman calls the "diversity thesis"—the thesis that what is considered right and wrong varies from society to society so that there are no universal moral standards held by all societies. The key word in the diversity thesis is considered. Pojman concedes that what is considered moral at one time and place is not always what is considered moral at another time and place. A nonrelativist like Pojman, however, will insist that it does not follow from the fact that people or groups disagree about what is moral (or have different opinions about what is moral) that both opinions are equally correct. Nor does it follow from that fact of disagreement that there are no universally valid moral principles. All that follows is that there is disagreement.

A relativist like Herskovits will agree that there is disagreement—at least when the parties are brought together. But since moral principles are in every case the product of a certain time and place, Herskovits considers Pojman’s so-called universal moral norms pure fantasy.

One problem for the relativist who maintains that the thesis that our own perceptions, beliefs, and opinions are bound by ethnocentrism and are therefore unable to achieve any truly “objective” point of view is that the thesis of relativism seems to require just such a point of view for itself. If, on the other hand, relativistic ideas are simply those that have arisen at a certain time and place, subject to their own ethnocentrism, then we might wonder why it is that a relativist claims special status for them.


Recent publications include Francis J. Beckwith and Gregory Koukl, Relativism: Feet Firmly Planted in Mid-Air (Baker Book House, 1998); John W. Cook,