

2 Human morality

2.1 The nature and functions of morality

Many people react badly to the very idea of morality. It seems too closely associated with religion, and guilt seems to be the god that it is most interested in serving. Morality seems to be mostly about obeying the rules promulgated by parents or other authorities, no matter how pointless or stupid they may be. The very language of morality seems absolutist and dogmatic. At best it has the mustiness of an old attic; at worst, it is dangerous.

Having grown up in a Lutheran boarding school, I have a great deal of sympathy for this reaction. Indeed, the dangers posed by the language of morality are becoming more apparent every day. Too many political leaders see the world in terms of absolute good and evil, and identify these with their own religious beliefs. They exploit people's fears and prejudices with categorical assertions of "our" virtue and simplistic denunciations of "their" venality. Shabby moralizers seek power and domination through fiery condemnations of those whose sexual practices are different from theirs, or have different views about when life begins, or what it means to die with dignity.

In my opinion, the best way to remedy this appropriation of morality is not to give the language away to its abusers, but to go back to the source and examine the concepts and institutions of morality from the ground up. Such a thoroughgoing investigation will not only shed light on why it is sensible to think about the environment from an ethical point of view, but also help to liberate us from stereotypes about morality that prevent us from thinking ethically about many of the distinctive problems of our age.

What, then, is morality? Of course different accounts can be given, but let us begin with this one. As a first approximation, morality is a behavioral

system, with an attendant psychology, that has evolved among some social animals for the purposes of regulating their interactions. Such systems are characteristic of social animals living under certain conditions, such as scarcity, because in these circumstances relentless self-seeking behavior on the part of each individual can lead to disaster for everyone.

This was compellingly demonstrated by the seventeenth-century philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, in his description of what he called “the state of nature.” In this state no one engages in productive work, for they cannot be sure that they will capture the benefits of their labor. As a result,

there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society.

When faced with such a “war of all against all,” it is in each person’s interest to strike first, before they themselves are struck. Even those who prefer peace have reason to attack preemptively, since they can be sure that less peaceable people than themselves will attack first if they have the chance. Thus life in the state of nature, according to Hobbes, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”¹

Hobbes believed that the only solution is to form a state ruled by an absolute monarch. Whatever we may think of this proposed solution, it seems clear that establishing a moral system can at least help in solving the problems posed by the state of nature.² Since moral systems regulate and coordinate behavior by systematically rewarding some and informally sanctioning other behavior, they can complement (or serve as alternatives) to social control by the direct exercise of power or authority. It is thus not surprising that moral systems exist among all known human societies. Whether such systems exist among other animals is controversial, but it is

¹ Quotations are from Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chapter 13, available in many editions, and on line at <<http://oregonstate.edu/instruct/phl302/texts/hobbes/leviathan-c.html#CHAPTERXIII>>.

² Hobbes himself denied this for reasons having to do with his conception of morality, but this detail cannot be pursued here.

clear that precursors of such systems exist among many species of social mammals, including the other Great Apes and canids.³

There are various building blocks that figure in the construction of existing moralities, including sympathy, empathy, generosity, and the ability to appreciate the situations of others. The ability to control one's own behavior by suppressing impulses and desires is important as well. The disposition to reciprocate behavior, a trait that is very deep in our nature, is especially important. Taken together, such abilities and dispositions have the potential to bring us from Hobbes's state of nature into cooperative societies that can accomplish great things.

Imagine a population of organisms in which each individual, when confronted by strangers, either randomly cooperates or not. If strangers meet and initially cooperate, then it is up, up, and away towards establishing a pattern of behavior in which cooperation becomes increasingly likely. My cooperating with you makes it more likely that you will cooperate with me, which makes it more likely that I will cooperate with you, and so on. This is the behavioral infrastructure that makes social institutions possible. Compare this with organisms that do not have the tendency to reciprocate. They may experience random incidents of cooperation, but since these will not increase the probability of cooperation, these organisms will not reap the benefits of sustained, mutually reinforcing cooperation. Those who behave only in immediately self-interested ways will do even worse. They will be stuck in the state of nature in which life is "nasty, brutish, and short."

We can see why Mother Nature would favor children who have tendencies to cooperate and reciprocate, as well as a tendency to pursue their own interests. Under many sets of conditions, including those that are most characteristic of human life, these children will do better than those who do not have these tendencies.

Much more needs to be said about how this story of the construction of morality goes, but we can already see its basic outline. Kindness begets kindness, which begets kindness, which begets kindness, and so on. From here, it is onwards and upwards towards full-blown morality.⁴

³ See De Waal 2006 for discussion.

⁴ For more on the evolution of morality see Jamieson 2002: ch. 1, and the references cited therein.

Once moralities are off and running, like many other institutions they have a tendency to become autonomous. Sympathetic identification and the disposition to reciprocate make moralities possible, but once they come into existence moralities have the power to strengthen their own hands. Our sympathy becomes increasingly vivid, and as our expectations grow, reciprocity becomes normative. Reason also gets into the game, perhaps initially as an instrument for working out the details of implementing reciprocity, but later as a device for imposing order and consistency. These developments make it possible, and in some cases almost irresistible, for us to care about others who are in no position to reciprocate our behavior. Since reason, normative reciprocity, and vivid sympathetic identification make demands on us as well as on others, morality becomes aspirational and critical in a way that other systems of social control are not. It gives rise to the following sorts of questions: What kind of person should I be? In what sort of society do I want to live? Am I doing as well as I can? How can my society be better? These are also the resources that allow us to make trans-historical and trans-cultural judgments, to project ourselves out of our present situation, and to make claims about how we should act, were we in another set of circumstances. We ask children how they would feel if they were treated as they have treated others. To an acquaintance we point out that it would not cost much to visit a sick parent, and that it would do the parent a world of good. We condemn a friend for not acting as a friend.

Once we have reached this point, we are in the domain of full-blown moralities like our own. We have a particular system of social control that embodies the resources for creating personal standards. It also encompasses the possibility of its own critique, and contains the materials for projecting our judgments outward across space and time. Unlike other systems of social control, such as custom, when it comes to morality the demand for reasons is always in order. Thus we can say that morality always involves doing what we have good reason to do.⁵

At this point we are tottering on the edge of what can be said generally about morality, and there is a warning here that we should heed.

⁵ Does it always involve doing what we have most reason to do? Some philosophers such as the eighteenth-century German philosopher, Immanuel Kant, would declare affirmatively. Other philosophers, such as the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, David Hume, would say that I radically exaggerate the importance of reason to morality.

Philosophers have a tendency to import their own views of a controversial matter into the very definition of the subject under investigation. For example, those who theorize about justice often define the very concept in terms of their favored theory rather than arguing for its normative or factual superiority over alternative theories. They define justice as some version of reciprocity, equality, or mutual advantage, rather than arguing on substantive grounds that one of these theories of justice is superior to the others. I have no wish to gain by definition what should be obtained only through hard work and honest argument, though some might say that I have already attempted to do this in characterizing morality in the way that I have. At any rate, it is important to leave open a wide range of questions that can be debated by proponents of various moral theories. For example: What counts as a reason? Must reasons be impartial? Is there a class of distinctively moral reasons? Are moral reasons decisive? Different responses to these questions will follow from various moral theories, and they should be evaluated generally on the basis of how plausible these various theories are. These are the sorts of questions that we will investigate in the next two chapters. First, however, we need to respond to some challenges to morality.

2.2 Challenges to morality

In the previous section I outlined a plausible view about the nature and functions of morality. This, in itself, will not be enough to put at ease those who find morality distasteful. Indeed, we are now in a better position to sharpen the vague, inchoate challenges to morality evoked at the beginning of this chapter. I will refer to these new improved versions as the challenges from amorality, theism, and relativism.

It is important to recognize at the outset that I attach specific meanings to these terms. While I have my doubts about amorality, it is clear that many theists and some relativists would not challenge morality in the ways that I suggest. What I mean by 'theist' in this chapter is not just a religious person who believes in God, but someone who has a quite specific view about the relations between her religious commitments and morality. Clearly, not all theists share this view. Similarly, there are many relativists who do not fall into the traps that I discuss. These caveats should be borne in mind in considering my responses to these challenges.

2.3 Amoralism

An amoralist is someone who listens to what I have said about the nature and functions of morality and says that what this story really shows is that there is no such thing as right and wrong. He accepts my account of why moralities have emerged in human societies, but he sees no reason why he should be bound by any of them. He can understand morality just as he can understand the religion of the Aztecs or the science of the Babylonians, but thinks there is no more reason to feel bound by morality than to worship the Aztec gods or believe that the laws of Babylonian science are true. The amoralist chooses to opt out of morality altogether. He refuses to have any part of it. It has nothing to do with how he is going to live his life. He is going to do exactly as he pleases, and not worry about the state of nature, moral rules, or any of that stuff. As far as he is concerned, nothing that I have said gives him any reason to pay attention to morality, much less shows him why he must.

Initially, amoralism seems romantic. It conjures up the image of an existential hero living his own life, according to his own lights, paying no attention to what “square” society might think. He is James Dean rejecting his parents in *Rebel without a Cause*; Bonnie and Clyde robbing banks in the American south, then making love on the side of the road; or the misunderstood Mafia don, Joey Gallo, as portrayed by Bob Dylan in his album, *Desire*. Yes, these are romantic images, and in some moods, especially after a particularly tedious faculty meeting, I’m tempted to go for them myself. However, rather than being amoralists, these characters are all really moralists. An amoralist is someone who rejects the idea that there is any such thing as right or wrong. All of these figures have a morality, though it may be one that is at odds with the morality of those around them.

James Dean is a frustrated romantic. His beef with his parents and square society is that they are hypocrites who do not live up to their own standards. He has integrity; they do not. He stands up for his friends; they abandon their children. Bonnie and Clyde are basically hedonistically motivated Robin Hood figures. They rob banks because it is exciting, pays for the good times, and lets them give money away to those who need it. Killing people is part of the fun, but generally they are willing to let the little guy get away, unless he is a cop who takes his job too seriously, or someone who really needs killing. They have a loyalty to each other that goes all the way to the

grave. Bob Dylan's Joey may do a "hit" on a member of another crime family or rough up a gambler who owes him money, but that is just business. You can be sure that he is a loving son, kind to his children, and loyal to his family. The church also probably benefits from his largesse.

These characters all have moralities. They think that certain things are right, others are wrong, and still others are of no real importance. They believe that it matters what kind of people they are. They want to exemplify a certain set of virtues. Far from being amorality, they are more like existentialist heroes who place a high value on authenticity. Bonnie and Clyde, and Joey, all have their own codes of conduct. They rob the rich and help the poor, but what really matters to them is their own integrity as they understand it. They want to be true to themselves. It is with such people in mind that Bob Dylan wrote in another song that "to live outside the law you must be honest." It is this concern for honesty that most vividly separates these characters from parents, cops, and other authority figures.

Who, then, is an amoralist? Since it is difficult to name a famous amoralist, let us invent one called "Dirk," and describe what he would have to be like in order to be a real amoralist. Dirk is someone who does not think that any facts about other people's interests or even their suffering provide reasons for him to act one way rather than another. When Dirk sees a man on the side of a road who has just been run over, it is a matter of indifference to him whether he helps him, kicks him in the head, or just walks away. At any particular moment he may feel like doing one thing or another, but he does not feel that one is the right response, or that he should be consistent in what he does. Indeed, he might initially feel like helping the man, and then decide to kick him instead; or the other way around. It doesn't really matter which. Even if the man is Dirk's father or his best friend, he still does not see that he has a reason for acting one way or another. If he were to think or feel that he really ought to help his father, then Dirk would have a morality. It would, perhaps, be a clannish morality of "filial piety" that is not very attractive or plausible, but if Dirk is really an amoralist he does not even have that. Indeed, it is not even clear in what sense Dirk could have a friend as opposed to someone he has hooked up with for some particular purpose. Suppose that it is Dirk who is lying on the side of the road having been beaten and robbed. Between episodes of excruciating pain he can regret that he is in this condition, that he took this road rather than another, that he did not shoot first, and so on. But what he cannot feel is that he was treated unjustly or that his assailants did something wrong in

beating and robbing him. Indeed, even if they tortured him for their own amusement, Dirk cannot consistently resent them, fault them, or hate them for it, for these are moral emotions that are unavailable to Dirk if he is truly an amoralist.⁶ If Dirk has these emotions, then he has a morality. He may be deeply immoral in that he has these feelings only about himself and not others, or that he does not act on these feelings. But if Dirk is a consistent amoralist, then he has no place for such feelings at all.

As we fill in the picture of Dirk, amoralism becomes increasingly less attractive. Rather than being the portrait of an existential hero, it begins to look like the sketch of a sociopath. We also begin to see how difficult it is to choose amoralism and opt out of morality. The very ties that bind us to a society entangle us in a morality. Morality is ubiquitous; amoralists are rare. Indeed, one wonders whether they exist outside of the classroom.

2.4 Theism

Like the amoralists, some theists understand my story about the nature and functions of morality but say that it has nothing to do with them. Unlike the amoralists, they say this, not because they reject morality, but because they reject my conception of morality. Morality comes only from God, they say, and God has no place in my story. As I have explained it, morality is a human construction that emerges in a world controlled by natural selection. Whatever this human construction is, it cannot be a morality. For God alone is the author of morality.

This view is extremely common in America, from the current President on down. In fact, outside of a few pockets in which Enlightenment ideals continue to thrive, it is probably the dominant view in the world. The twentieth-century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre stated the challenge posed by this view when he wrote that “if God is dead, then everything is permitted.”⁷

⁶ But isn't there some notion of “blind” or “animal” hatred in which individuals can hate the cause of their suffering, without this in any way implying that their suffering is unjustified? If so, then in this sense Dirk can consistently hate his torturers.

⁷ These words are from Sartre's 1946 lecture “Existentialism is a Humanism,” available on the web at <www2.cddc.vt.edu/marxists/cd/cd2/Library/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm>. Interestingly, Sartre falsely attributes these words to the nineteenth-century Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoyevski, though it is true that the thought is Dostoyevski's.

There are two distinct reasons why someone might think that without God, everything is permitted. The first reason is that without God, morality would have no content. The second reason is that without God, we would not be motivated to act morally.

Consider the second reason first. Why might someone believe that if we are not motivated to act morally then everything is permitted? The argument might go like this. Suppose for the sake of argument that

- (1) The content of morality is a set of requirements R ; everything else is permitted.

Now suppose that

- (2) We are not motivated to do R ,

where “doing R ” is shorthand for something like “obeying the requirements included in R .” If

- (3) It is a necessary condition for doing R that we are motivated to do R ,

then, given (2),

- (4) We cannot do R .

If

- (5) It is a necessary condition for being required to do R that we can do R ,

then, given (4),

- (6) We are not required to do R .

But if (6), then

- (7) R is an empty set.

But if (7), then, given (1),

- (8) Everything is permitted.

The reasoning in this argument is valid: if we are not motivated to act morally, then everything is permitted. However, for the theist’s challenge to morality to succeed, a further assumption, reflected in step (2), must also

be true: that without God, we are not motivated to act morally. It is this premise that I wish to deny.⁸

Notice first, that this claim is ambiguous. It may mean:

(9) If God does not exist, then we are not motivated to act morally;

or

(10) If we do not believe in God, then we are not motivated to act morally.

If (9) were true, then an atheist would certainly be committed to the view that everything is permitted. However, there is little reason to believe that (9) is true because it is difficult to see how the sheer fact of God's existence can affect people's motivations.

Imagine the following cases. In the first case, what I will call "the baseline,"

(11) God does not exist and no one believes that he does.

In the second case,

(12) God exists, but no one believes that he does.

In the third case,

(13) God does not exist, but everyone believes that he does.

It is difficult to see why there would be greater prevalence of moral motivation in (12) than in the baseline, (11). People's beliefs are the same in both cases, though the facts about the universe are different. It is difficult to see how facts about the universe engage people's motivation, except through psychological states such as their beliefs. Indeed, the power of people's beliefs to affect motivation is highlighted by (13). It seems reasonable to suppose that there would be a greater incidence of moral motivation in (13) than in (12), precisely because there is greater prevalence of belief in God in (13) than in (12), even though God exists in (12) but not in (13). For it does seem plausible to believe that there is some positive correlation between belief in God and the existence of moral motivation. Indeed, if Russian novelists and American presidents are reporting their own cases

⁸ Some might also challenge premise (3). How successful this challenge would be depends exactly on what one means by 'doing' and 'motivated'. Even if this challenge were to succeed, the argument could be revised in such a way as to meet it.

accurately and not just speculating about other people, then we have some testimonial evidence for the existence of this correlation.

So, let us grant that the incidence of moral motivation may be higher in societies like ours when people believe in God than when they do not. Does this show that if we did not believe in God, then (2) would be true? No. In a society in which people did not believe in God, some of us still would be motivated to act morally while some of us would not be so motivated. As I will explain in detail in the next chapter, moral beliefs are distinct from moral motivations. Indeed, this helps explain why there are so few real amoralists among us, despite the apparent popularity of the view. For present purposes what matters is that this “mixed” case, in which some people would be motivated to act morally in the absence of belief in God while some would not be so motivated, is not strong enough to support the truth of (2). The fact that some of us would be motivated to act morally even if we believed that God did not exist shows that (2) cannot be true in the sense needed to support (4).

Why should we believe that many of us would be motivated to be moral even if we believed that God did not exist? Because it is a simple fact that many people today do not believe that God exists, yet are motivated to be moral. Indeed, many moral philosophers fall into this category. For this reason (and others), there is reason to believe that the moral motivation of at least some of those who believe in God would not flag, even if they lost their faith. Perhaps they could be brought to see the connections between moral motivation and other things that they care about, such as their own long-term interests, their families, and their societies, as well as other goods that they value. Moreover, as we saw in our discussion of Dirk, the amoralist, it is quite difficult for someone who lives in a society to escape the tendrils of morality, however much he might claim to do so. Immorality is ubiquitous, but amoralism is rare.

It is the other version of the theistic challenge that has historically been influential.⁹ On this version, it is God who gives content to morality through his divine commandments. What is right is obeying his commands and what is wrong is disobeying them. Thus, without God, there can be nothing that is right or wrong.

⁹ The *locus classicus* of this discussion is Plato's *Euthyphro*.

This view, too, is ambiguous. Obeying God's commandments may be right because

(14) Actions are right in virtue of being commanded by God,

or because

(15) God commands us to do only those actions that are right independently of his commands.

On the view that is expressed in (14), that obeying God's commandments is right because the actions that he commands are right in virtue of his commanding them, rightness is constrained by nothing but God's will. Murder, rape, torture, or whatever, is right so long as God commands it. This is not the view of nice religious people but of Jihadists, Crusaders, terrorists, and cultists who engage in horrifying acts in the name of following God's commandments.

The natural response is to say that these awful people are wrong about what God commands. But how do we know? Religious people disagree about what God commands, and almost every imaginable atrocity has been committed somewhere, sometime, in his name. We are finite creatures who have little grasp of the mind of God. How can any one of us claim more insight into his commandments than anyone else?

This leads to a second response, which is not any better. Since God is good, the nice religious person says, he cannot command us to do evil. Thus we do not have to worry about God commanding us to do horrific things. True enough, we do not have to worry about God commanding us to do evil, but this does not rule out his commanding us to do things that we regard as horrific. On the view under consideration, the goodness of God's commands is secured by definition. Since whatever God commands us to do is right in virtue of his commanding it, if he commands us to commit acts of genocide it would follow that such acts are just as right as most of us now think that it is to feed the hungry. Indeed, if God commanded us not to feed the hungry, then it would be wrong to do so. The appeal to God's goodness has no independent force, since goodness is defined by whatever he commands. Rather than consulting any independent conception of goodness, we are thrown back on our ignorance of the mind of God to find out what is good.

One casualty of this view is the traditional idea that it is an important, substantive truth about God that he is good. Yes, God is good, but this is

true by definition, not in virtue of God's substantive behavior conforming to any normal understanding of goodness. Finding out that God is good, on this view, is like discovering that the standard meter bar is a meter in length, or that an ounce of gold weighs an ounce. This is hardly a relief for those of us who might wonder about God's nature.

There are other unwelcome consequences of this view, but the worst is this. Suppose that God commands us to carry out the most horrific acts imaginable. That we would be compelled to carry them out is bad enough. But worse still is the idea that, in virtue of his command, these horrific acts would somehow be transformed from evil deeds into acts of goodness. If we were certain that our universe were ruled by such a creature, the right thing to say would be not that God is good, but that we are in the hands of an omnipotent genocidal maniac, or even, perhaps, an evil demon.

Consider the alternative view, (15), that God commands us to do what is right according to a standard that is independent of his commanding it. On this view, it is the independent standard of rightness, not God's commands, that gives morality its content. God conforms his commands to morality; he does not shape morality through his commands. What is right is independent of God, just as it is independent of us. Even if God exists and commands us to do what is right, it is still up to us to find out what that is. God, on this view, rather than providing a challenge to the conception of morality that I have sketched, is himself bound by it. His most important role is to provide a little extra motivation to be moral for those who believe in him. Thus, the second version of the theistic challenge goes down to defeat, whichever way we understand it.

2.5 Relativism

The third challenge to morality is different in kind. The two previous challenges have amounted to saying that while they agree that there is a ubiquitous institution of social control of the sort that I have described, they reject the idea that this institution has authority over them. The theist denies that the social institution that I have described is in fact morality, though she accepts the authority of morality. The amoralist grants that the institution that I have described is morality, but rejects its authority.

The relativist is different from either of them. She accepts both the claim that what I have described is morality, and that morality has authority over

her. What she rejects is one important aspect of my conception of morality: the idea that morality embodies resources for critically assessing the views of ourselves and others, and indeed, on some occasions, can project its judgments across times and societies. What the relativist denies is the possibility of moral claims transcending the moral system of the speaker's own society. Relativism is a challenge to morality as I understand it because it threatens to deprive morality of its critical edge, thus assimilating it to other social practices whose ambitions are much more modest, such as "folkways," "customs," or "standards of etiquette." By making cultures the locus of morality, relativism not only threatens our ability to make moral judgments that range across communities and times, but also diminishes the autonomy and responsibility of individuals, features that are also important to morality.

Relativism grows from the simple recognition that different societies and historical epochs judge different actions as right or wrong. Examples of this are legion, and can be found in such diverse areas as sexual morality, judgments about killing, and the treatment of animals and nature. Food preferences, which are often highly moralized, will do as an example.

Most Americans think that it is strange to eat goats, disturbing to eat horses, wrong to eat dogs and whales, and downright ghastly to eat gorillas and chimpanzees. On the other hand they see nothing strange, disturbing, wrong, or ghastly about eating cows, pigs, chickens, sheep, fish, shrimps, and various other sea creatures. Europeans would largely share these views, though their category of the animals that can be eaten without comment might be somewhat more expansive, including, for example, horses and snails. Religious Jews and Muslims are horrified at the idea of eating pigs, but have little trouble with most of the other animals on the list. Hindus and Jains would object to eating any of these animals, especially cows. Most East Asians see little difference between eating any of these animals, and many Africans consider the flesh of gorillas and chimpanzees to be a delicacy.

When faced with such diversity, enlightened people are often inclined to think that this shows that moral rules have sway only over particular societies at particular times. This view is bolstered, it might be thought, by the picture of morality that I have presented. Since, on my view, morality is mainly directed towards regulating a community's behavior, there is little reason to think that the same set of prescriptions and proscriptions would

be appropriate for all communities in all circumstances. According to the relativist, someone who claims that his morality is right and the morality of other communities is wrong fails to grasp the essential relativity of moral judgments. It is one thing for a speaker to report the moral standards of his own society; it is quite another for him to condemn the moral standards of other societies. Worse still is any attempt to impose his own morality on others.

What do we say of people who try to impose their moralities on others? One natural thing to say is that they are immoral, but this is tricky terrain for a relativist. For the tendency to export one's morality may be intrinsic to the morality of those who are doing the exporting, as certainly was the case with the Victorian morality of nineteenth-century England and arguably is the case with the prevailing, Christian-inflected morality of contemporary America. Indeed, it is obvious that many Americans think that that they have a moral obligation to "share" their morality with others. But if the tendency towards exporting one's morality is part of one's culture, then denouncing such attempts as immoral seems to require the same sort of trans-cultural moral judgment that the relativist enjoins us not to make. But what is the alternative? If we cannot denounce attempts to impose one's morality on others in moral terms, what can we say about them? Criticizing such attempts in non-moral language - as rude, insensitive, or tasteless - seems grossly inappropriate to the offence. Saying that a missionary who tries to get a tribal people to worship Jesus, adopt western standards of marriage, and behave like proper Englishmen is "insensitive" is like saying that Hitler had a problem with his aggressive impulses.

The relativist seems trapped by her own theory. The point of her challenge is to prevent us from trying to impose our morality on others. But insofar as this attempt is an expression of one's own culture, it would appear that the relativist is stopped by her own theory from morally denouncing it.

She could try the following maneuver. Just as imposing Christian morality on the natives was an expression of the morality of Victorian England, so the relativist's denunciation of this is an expression of the tolerant, secular morality of her culture. In other words, when it comes to trans-cultural judgments, everyone, including the relativist, is allowed "to do their own thing," so long as it is an authentic expression of their own culture and does not claim any universal privilege, except, of course, from within their own point of view.

This gambit amounts to a sophisticated surrender on the part of the relativist, for it puts her objection to imposing morality on others on the same level as the attempt itself. Each is an equally authentic expression of the morality of the culture in which the impulse originates. What started as a noble, if misguided, attempt to use moral language to prevent dominant cultures from imposing their moralities on others has, under pressure, degenerated into the view that when it comes to moralizing we should let a thousand flowers bloom, acknowledging that insofar as they are all authentic expressions of a culture, no view has any special claim to acceptance beyond the culture in which it originates. What has been lost is any principle, method, insight, or approach for deciding when culturally transcendent claims are appropriate, insightful, true, or right. Instead, we are left with a clash of competing cultures, with no guidance about how to resolve it. This kind of relativism ceases to be a serious challenge to anything. It has transformed its own critique into just another provincial voice, with no claim to anything more than local interest.

In addition to this theoretical objection, there are serious difficulties in implementing the relativist view in the highly globalized world in which we live. Relativism takes cultures as the primary locus of moral authority, but it is not easy to determine people's cultural membership and thus identify the standards by which their behavior should be assessed. The following case brings this out clearly.

In 1996 a seventeen-year-old girl, Fauziya Kassindja, arrived in the United States from Togo and asked for political asylum.¹⁰ She had fled in order to escape an elaborate ritual which marks the onset of adulthood in young females in her tribe. Part of this ritual involves a procedure that is variously called "excision," "female circumcision," "female genital cutting," or "female genital mutilation." There is much to say about such cases, but the question I wish to raise here is quite limited. Which is the society whose moral standards are supposed to take precedence in this case? Is it the standards of Kassindja's tribe, those of urban Togo, those of West Africa, those of Africa generally, or those of the United States, where she came to seek asylum? It is clear that each of these societies has different attitudes towards this procedure and would produce different moral judgments about this case. My point here is not to argue any particular view, but rather to

¹⁰ I borrow this example from Rachels 2003.

point out how difficult it is in the contemporary world to assign people to the cultures that are supposed to have moral authority over them.¹¹

Indeed, putting the matter in this way brings out how relativism points in the wrong direction when it comes to locating the grounds for moral judgments. What is central to moral judgments are reasons for action that reflect a host of concerns involving the interests that are at stake, the harms that would be caused, the precedents that would be set, and so on. Cultural membership may bear indirectly on how we assess these considerations, but in itself it is not of central moral importance. By making cultures the locus of morality, relativism turns us away from the reasons that ground and justify moral judgments.

There are other problems with relativism. With its emphasis on cultures as the locus of moralities, it seems to have little place for moral disagreement within cultures. This risks putting horrendous acts of racism and brutality beyond criticism, so long as they occur within a society rather than across societies. For example, what do we say about people who oppose theocracy, slavery, or patriarchy in societies in which these practices are widely accepted? If the content of morality is determined by the moral standards of the society, then these people are just wrong. On the other hand, someone who simply conforms to his society's prevailing morality would be doing the right thing, however horrendous the morality he would be upholding. On this view, an abolitionist in a slave society would be wrong about the morality of slavery while a slave-owner would be right. But surely it is not the abolitionist who is wrong, but the relativist. Every society has cranks, deviants, and rebels, and they are often the revolutionaries who make moral progress possible. Yet relativism seems committed to their moral condemnation. One wonders whether moral progress is possible on such a view, and if so, what its engine might be.

Still there is something to relativism, and before moving on we should make sure that we understand what it is. Certainly one of the gifts of relativism is that it attunes us to the fact that there is a great deal more diversity in moral practices than people were once in a position to recognize, and a great deal more than many people today are willing to accept. Even so, it is easy to exaggerate the extent and depth of moral diversity.

¹¹ Sen (2006) argues strongly that it is immoral to assign people such identities, even when it is possible to do so.

Consider, for example, traditional Eskimo society, in which female infanticide was widely practiced and accepted. Perfectly healthy female infants were sometimes killed at birth. Before jumping to conclusions about the profoundly different moralities of traditional Eskimo and contemporary American societies, consider the circumstances of traditional Eskimo life. The environment was harsh, food was in short supply, and the margin of safety was small. In this society, mothers nursed for many years, thus limiting the number of children who could be supported at a given time. Traditional Eskimos were nomadic, and infants were carried while the mother did her work. Food was primarily obtained by hunting, and this was extremely dangerous under Arctic conditions. Men were the primary food-providers, and they were often in short supply because of premature death. In traditional Eskimo society, female infanticide was not a first but a last resort, often carried out only after attempts at adoption failed. However, it has been estimated that without the practice of female infanticide, an average Eskimo group would have had 50% more females than food-producing males.¹²

What should we say about the moral differences regarding infanticide between traditional Eskimos and contemporary Americans? Surely there are such differences, for one can say, however superficially, that contemporary Americans believe that female infanticide is wrong while traditional Eskimos did not. But if one tries to say anything deeper or more precise, things become quite murky. Neither society approves of murder; neither society approves of the gratuitous killing of innocent people; neither society believes that children are disposable; neither society believes that, everything else being equal, males should be preferred to females. While contemporary Americans and traditional Eskimos would disagree about what general rules they would assent to with respect to infanticide, it is not clear that they disagree about any deep moral principles or even that they would disagree about particular cases. People and communities find themselves in different situations, and achieving common purposes sometimes requires different strategies.

It should not be surprising that in the most general way there would be widespread agreement about morality across societies. Humans form a single species and they face common problems of survival; morality is an

¹² My account of Eskimo infanticide is based on Rachels 2003, who in turn relies on Freuchen 1961 and Hoebel 1954.

institution whose role it is to help solve those problems. However, humans are extremely adaptable and live in a broad range of environmental conditions, and in societies characterized by very different forms of social organization. It is thus not surprising that there is diversity in their moral expressions, especially with respect to “middle-level” principles.

Even though the extent of relativity is often exaggerated, there is no denying both the fact and the importance of diverse moralities. Despite the fact that awareness of diversity and difference is supposed to be part of the common knowledge of our epoch, there continue to be ignorant and arrogant attempts to remake the moral fabric of ancient societies. States whose weaponry far outruns their respect for others behave in ways that are almost as crude as their imperial predecessors. It is difficult to fully appreciate the moralities of others, and there is generally enough work to be done in reforming one’s own society for even the most committed of moral crusaders. The facts of relativity should make us humble about our ability to understand, much less improve, the morality of others.

Moral relativism is a doctrine that can be educative, but as a challenge to morality it fails. Relativism errs when it goes beyond a set of observations about the diversity of cultural practices and begins to promulgate an ethic of its own. This failure is located precisely at the point at which it moves from a description of how morality is exemplified in the world to the normative view that a society’s morality cannot be morally criticized. It commits the fallacy of deriving an “ought” from an “is” – of drawing a normative conclusion from a set of descriptive premises. In its crudest form, it borders on inconsistency. In its more sophisticated versions, it remains implausible, while its claim to be a challenge to morality recedes.

2.6 What these challenges teach us

There is a lot to learn from these challenges to morality. They include the following. Morality is ubiquitous and difficult to escape for even the most hard-bitten of men (e.g. Dirk). Morality does not need the support of God in order to have content or to be motivating. Morality is not culture-bound.

At the same time nothing has been said to suggest that there is a single, true morality, and the facts of moral disagreement should make us sensitive to the difficulty of interpreting and assessing the views of others. Moreover, there is no requirement in morality or any other domain that requires us to

have a judgment about everything. Nothing has been said that suggests that belief in God is inconsistent with morality, or that rules out the idea that belief in God may even be supportive of morality. Finally, the amoralist's challenge highlights the fact that the conflict between morality and individual desire is ongoing, though it is generally a conflict within morality rather than a challenge to morality.

Having thus characterized human morality and responded to some challenges, we can turn our attention to some substantive questions in ethical theory.