In philosophy courses I often encounter people who say things like this: "What anyone believes is true for that person. What you believe is true for you, what I believe is true for me." The view expressed in such statements is usually called "relativism". This view denies that there is any such thing as absolute truth and claims that all truth is relative to the person who believes it.

1. Protagorean relativism

Though relativism is apparently attractive to some beginners in philosophy, there are virtually no relativists among significant figures in the history of philosophy. The principal exception to this last claim is Protagoras of Abdera (c. 485-410 B.C.), a Greek philosopher who apparently put forward a version of relativism in a treatise entitled Truth. None of Protagoras' writings have come down to us, but his views are reported by others, chiefly by Plato in the dialogues Protagoras and Theaetetus.

According to Protagoras, "The human being is the measure of all things, of those that are, that they are, and of those that are not, that they are not." By this Protagoras apparently meant that each individual person is the measure of how things are to that person: things are or are not (to me) according as they appear to me to be or not be. Protagoras was thinking of cases like this: To me the wind feels cold, while to you the wind feels warm. About this case Protagoras wants to say the following: The wind isn't (absolutely or in itself) either cold or warm; "cold" and "warm" are merely subjective states or feelings. To me the wind feels (or is) cold, and to you it feels (or is) warm, and beyond this there is no fact of the matter concerning the temperature of the wind.

Protagoras was apparently disputing the views of Parmenides of Elea. Parmenides' view was: What is, is; what is not, is not; and since the mere seeming of sense perception falls short of full being, it can have no reality at all. Against this, Protagoras understandably wanted to defend the reality of sense perception. But according to Plato's account, Protagoras wanted to extend his defense of appearance beyond perceptual feelings to other kinds of seemings, such as beliefs. If I believe that the world is a certain way, then that's how the world seems to me, and so that's how the world is (to me). If you have a different belief, then that's how the world appears, and therefore how it is, to you. From this Protagoras concluded that error and false belief are absolutely impossible. For a belief says only how things seem to someone, and how they seem to anyone is always how they are (to that person). This view, in fact, is not so far from Parmenides' own, since by inflating the "appearance" side of the appearance/reality distinction to the point where it completely excludes the "reality" side, he too is denying there is room for a difference between appearance and reality.

Let's try to imagine a world of which Protagoras' view would give us a correct account. Suppose a world composed entirely of independent sets of private sensations or experiences (such as my feeling of cold,
which is present only to me and not to you, and your feeling of warmth, which is present to you and not
to me). I have access only to my private experiences, you have access only to yours, and neither of us has
access to anything we might share in common -- to a public or "objective" world, containing things like
material objects. To get Protagoras's view, however, we must suppose not only that my experiences are
there only for me, but also that I can't be mistaken about any of them. And in order to exclude the
possibility of any sort of error, we have to suppose, finally, that in this world people can formulate
judgments only about things with which they are acquainted, so that I couldn't make any erroneous
judgments about someone else's experiences. But in the world we're imagining now, there isn't anything
about which two people could either agree or disagree. Each of us is shut up in our own private
microcosm; my seemings don't even exist in your little world, and yours don't exist in mine. There
couldn't be any error or falsehood, because the only things a person can make judgments about are
exactly as that person thinks they are. In that sense each person's beliefs in that world are (necessarily
and infallibly) true, but they are true only for that person since no one else could possibly have access to
that truth.

But for this very reason, it could equally be argued that in such a world there would be no place at all for
the idea of "truth". Truth applies only to judgments about a shared world, which can be either as
someone believes it is or otherwise than it is believed to be. For the possibility of saying or believing
something true goes hand in hand with the possibility of saying or believing something false; in a world
where there is no possibility of ever calling a belief or assertion "false", there would also be no use for the
word "true". In such a world, however, there would also be no use for the word "belief". For beliefs aim
at truth, and to believe that \( p \) is exactly the same thing as believing that \( p \) is true. If I can't apply "true"
to my thoughts or speech acts, then none of my thoughts could count as a belief. And since to assert that
\( p \) is no different from asserting that \( p \) is true, nothing anyone says in that world could even count as an
assertion.

We don't think we live in a world of that kind. We take ourselves to have beliefs and make assertions,
and we think our world contains public objects for beliefs and assertions to be about. We even think of
our "private" sensations as public objects in the sense that other people can have beliefs about them that
can be true or false. If you say that the wind feels warm to you, I might believe you lying to me, or even
that you are lying to yourself. This could not happen in a Protagorean world. In fact, even our ability to
imagine a Protagorean world shows that for us this world is not Protagorean at all. Although we have
been thinking of that world as one in which people's private experiences would not be public objects in
that world, we have nevertheless been taking it for granted that the judgments we have been making
about their experiences are shared and public between us.

2. Is relativism self-refuting?

What this suggests is that Protagoras' view isn't true in our world. But perhaps relativism couldn't be
true in any world. That is what Plato thought. He argued that Protagoras' relativism is necessarily false,
because it refutes itself.  

---

4 Plato, *Theaetetus* 161C-162A.
The problem arises as soon as Protagoras tries either to assert relativism or believe it. If Protagoras asserts relativism, then he asserts that relativism is true, and that those (such as Plato) who deny relativism say and believe something false. But relativism denies that anyone can say or believe anything false. Hence to be consistent Protagoras must concede that the denier of relativism says and believes something true. Consequently, relativism is committed to saying that its own denial is true, and in this way it refutes itself.

Protagoras might try to escape the problem by saying that relativism is true for the relativist, while the denial of relativism is true for the non-relativist. He might even try to say that when he asserts a proposition, he isn’t asserting that the proposition is (absolutely) true (since the notion of absolute truth is what a relativist wants to get rid of) but only that it is true for him. But what is "true for" supposed to mean here? When you and I disagree about something (suppose I think there was once life on Mars and you think there never was), we do say things like this: "For me it is true that there was life on Mars, but for you it is true that there never was." What this means is: In my opinion, it is (absolutely, objectively) true that life once existed on Mars, while in your opinion it is (absolutely, objectively) true that life never existed on Mars. Or again, we say things like this: "For me it is true that the eighties were financially disastrous, while for you it is true that they were financially good." This might refer to our respective opinions about the eighties whether we think that the eighties were a good or a bad time economically for people in general, but it might also mean that it is (absolutely, objectively) true that my finances did badly in the eighties while yours did well. But none of these uses of "true for" succeed in getting rid of the notion of (absolute, objective) truth; on the contrary, when we spell out what they mean, we see that this notion is indispensable to what they mean. Relativists must think they are using "true for" in some different sense, that doesn’t depend on the notion of (absolute) truth. But what do relativists intend to say about a proposition when they say that it is "true for" them?

When pressed, they usually say that $p$ is "true for me" if I believe that $p$. But this answer is no help, because believing that $p$ is once again no different from believing that $p$ is (absolutely) true. If relativists say that this isn’t what they mean when they assert a proposition or say they believe it, then they are apparently using the terms "assert" and "believe" in a new and mysterious sense, which they apparently can’t explain. Until they do explain the meanings these words have for them, we can’t be sure what (if anything) they are really saying when their mouths make noises that sound (to us) like assertions of relativism. Understanding their words in the usual sense, if you try to assert or believe that there is no (absolute) truth, it has to follow that you can’t believe anything at all (not even relativism), and so nothing can be true even for you (not even relativism). Relativism is self-refuting simply because it has no way of using or making sense of the expression "true for me" without relying implicitly on the notion "(absolutely) true," the very notion relativism wants to reject.

If their assertions of relativism are to make sense, therefore, relativists must allow at least one proposition to be absolutely true, namely relativism itself. Suppose we let the relativist make relativism itself an exception (the sole exception) to its own claim that all truth is relative. The relativist now says that relativism is true absolutely, and all beliefs except relativism and its denial are true only relatively (true for those who believe them). This retreat seems to save relativism from direct self-refutation, but it looks extremely ad hoc. Before it looked as if the relativist’s idea was that there is something wrong with the very idea of absolute truth; but now the relativist can no longer say that. And once we’re allowed to use the notion of absolute truth in asserting relativism, then it’s natural to wonder why there couldn’t be any other absolute truths except relativism. And of course if there are any others, then relativism itself is absolutely false, since it denies that there is any absolute truth (except itself).
Even with this retreat, moreover, relativism becomes just as self-refuting as it was before as soon as the relativist tries to apply the notion of relative truth to what anyone believes. In order to assert that anything is true for someone, the relativist has to say that something else besides relativism is true absolutely. For instance, if the relativist holds that "p is true for Socrates" means "Socrates believes that p", then in order to assert that p is true for Socrates, the relativist has to assert that it is true (absolutely) that Socrates believes that p. But then "Socrates believes that p" is an absolute truth other than relativism, which entails that relativism is absolutely false.

3. Ideas which should not be confused with relativism

People who think they are relativists are often trying to express one (or more) ideas different from relativism and not threatened with self-refutation. Here are four such ideas:

1. Skepticism: All beliefs are uncertain; no belief is justified. Relativism looks something like skepticism in that they both put all beliefs in the same boat. Further, people are often attracted to relativism by the feeling that others are too confident in the absolute truth of what they believe, and skepticism is the view that no one is ever entitled to such confidence. But skepticism is not the same as relativism, and is even in a way its diametrical opposite. For relativism says that whatever anybody believes must be true (for that person), so that no belief can ever be mistaken, unjustified or even uncertain. Skepticism does not deny that some beliefs are (absolutely) true, it denies only that we can ever be sure which beliefs these are. Skepticism is quite an extreme position, and probably false; but it is not threatened with self-refutation, as relativism is. For it is perfectly self-consistent to say that you hold beliefs that are uncertain, or even unjustified. (Religious people sometimes say such things about beliefs they hold on faith.) A consistent skeptic must hold that skepticism itself is uncertain, but there is no self-refutation involved in doing that.

If a relativist catches you audaciously suggesting that there is such a thing as (absolute) truth, then you are bound to be asked the rhetorical question: "But who is to decide what the truth is?" Apparently such a relativist thinks if you hold that there is an absolute, objective truth, then you have to believe there is some authority whose word on that truth must not be questioned. Perhaps the rhetorical question is meant to challenge your right to set yourself up as such an authority; it is supposed to make you either abandon the whole idea of absolute truth or else reveal yourself for the arrogant dogmatist you really are. But the possibility of skepticism shows very graphically that this is an utterly false dilemma. Skeptics don't deny that there is an absolute truth, but they are as far from dogmatism as it is possible to be, since they deny absolutely that anyone (least of all themselves) could ever be in a position to say with certainty what the truth is.

Even though skepticism is the exact opposite of relativism, I sometimes suspect that people have arrived at relativism by going through skepticism. First they became aware that there is widespread disagreement on fundamental philosophical issues, which fostered in them a commendable (though perhaps exaggerated) sense of intellectual modesty. This led them (perhaps rashly) to the extreme skeptical conclusion that nobody knows anything at all about anything and that all opinions are equally doubtful. But that conclusion panicked them, so they began looking around for a way in which people can be certain about something even in the face of this universal uncertainty. As a quick way out, they hit on this compromise: If everyone just stops trying to claim absolute truth for what they believe, then in return we can let each person's beliefs count as "true for them". But this attempt at a negotiated settlement is bound to fail, because it is nothing but an attempt to combine two directly contradictory ideas, namely:
"All beliefs are utterly doubtful" and "All beliefs are unquestionably certain". If the real point of relativism is to try to combine these two contradictory views, then it is easy to see why it is going to be self-refuting.

II. Different people can be justified in holding different beliefs. In the eighteenth century, chemists such as Georg Ernst Stahl and Joseph Priestley held that when something burns, it loses a substance called "phlogiston". Later, after the researches of Antoine Lavoisier, chemists came to reject the phlogiston theory in favor of the theory that combustion involves not the loss of something, but the gain of something, namely, oxygen. Before Lavoisier, the most informed chemists in the world all believed the phlogiston theory; very likely they were justified in doing so: perhaps evidence for the phlogiston theory was so strong that they would have been unreasonable if they had not believed it. But Lavoisier acquired new evidence, which justifies rejecting the phlogiston theory and believing the oxidation theory instead.

There is nothing relativistic in claiming that Stahl and Priestley were justified in believing the phlogiston theory while Lavoisier was justified in rejecting it. That is not at all the same as claiming that the phlogiston theory was "true for Stahl, but not true for Lavoisier." It is one thing for a person to be justified in holding a belief, and a very different thing for the belief to be true. If you and I hold mutually incompatible beliefs, then what at least one of us believes must be false; but it could still be true that my belief is justified on the evidence which I have and your belief is justified on the evidence you have. In a case like this the obvious thing to do is to communicate with one another as we inquire, sharing evidence until (hopefully) we eventually come to agreement on (what we hope is) the truth. But we shouldn't deceive ourselves into thinking that this is a simple or easy process, or that the attempt to reach agreement will always be successful. Priestley was a good scientist, and he knew of Lavoisier's results, but he died still believing in the phlogiston theory, even after most chemists considered it discredited. The fact that intelligent people often can't reach agreement does not show that there is no true or false, no right or wrong.

III. People sometimes hold conflicting beliefs without any of them being wholly mistaken because they each see different aspects of the same reality. Suppose you are climbing a mountain from the south and I am climbing the same mountain from the north. The north side of the mountain is covered with evergreen trees; the south side is barren and rocky. On the basis of what I see around me, I judge that the whole mountain is covered with forest; on the basis of what you see, you judge that the whole mountain is barren rock. Here each of us holds a true belief about the part of the mountain we see, but a false belief about the mountain as a whole. Different religions have sometimes been depicted as different paths up the same mountain (whose summit is God, salvation or religious truth); each describes a different path to the summit, and describes it accurately, but there is more to the mountain (the religious life) than any of them realizes; so every religion is in error when it denies the experience of other religions.

The claim here is not that each religion is "true for" its believers. It is rather that each religion contains some of the (objective, absolute) truth by correctly representing the side of God or religious truth it genuinely experiences. But this also implies that each religion is limited and fallible, containing some falsehood to the extent that it regards itself as complete and in exclusive possession of the truth. The point of the picture might be that each religious tradition deserves respect because it has part of the truth; but it implies equally that the adherents of each religion should be wary of its blind spots and open to the elements of truth in other religions which are missing in their own. This last point, however, is one that a relativist can't make, and is even committed to deny. For since relativists are committed to

saying that every person’s beliefs are wholly true (for that person), there is no room in relativism for the idea that our beliefs are open to correction or completion by considering someone else’s viewpoint.

IV. Fallibilism: We might always be mistaken in what we believe. René Descartes thought that we can be infallible in some of our assertions: for example, that when you attend to your own thinking, your assertion "I think, therefore I exist" could not possibly be mistaken. This denies fallibilism, since Descartes holds that some of our beliefs that could not be mistaken. But Descartes thought that many of his own beliefs had turned out to be erroneous and many beliefs we need for everyday life are always going to be somewhat uncertain. He held that we can achieve infallibility only about a few things, and then only if we follow the right philosophical method very cautiously and carefully. Other philosophers, however, such as Charles Sanders Peirce, have disagreed with Descartes, maintaining that we are always going to be fallible in everything we believe (the term “fallibilism” was Peirce’s invention). Some relativists seem directly to equate relativism with fallibilism; when you deny relativism (or assert that there is such a thing as absolute truth), they can interpret this only as a denial of fallibilism. But this is a confusion. When you assert that \( p \), you take the risk that you will have to take the assertion back if it is shown to be wrong; at the same time you assert that \( p \), you commit yourself to the claim that you aren’t in fact mistaken in your assertion that \( p \), and you risk having to take that back too. But in asserting that \( p \) you aren’t thereby committing yourself to saying that your assertion that \( p \) is infallible and couldn’t possibly be proven wrong in the future. If \( p \) turns out to be false, you don’t have any claim of infallibility to take back because you neither made nor implied such a claim when you asserted that \( p \). Not only is fallibilism perfectly consistent with holding beliefs about what is (absolutely) true, but fallibilism itself makes sense only if you are prepared to make some assertions about what is absolutely true, since unless you do this there is nothing at all for you to be fallible about.

Actually, it is the relativists who are committed to denying fallibilism. For according to them, they can’t be fallible in any of their claims that something is absolutely true (since they make no such claims); nor can they have false beliefs about anything they believe to be relatively true, since relativism says that whatever I believe is true (for me). Therefore, relativists are committed to being total infallibilists — infallibilists not merely about a special class of their beliefs (as Descartes is), but infallibilists about absolutely all their beliefs.

4. Ethical relativism

In § 2 we tried (unsuccessfully) to save relativism from self-refutation by exempting relativism itself from the claim that all truth is relative. We might have better luck if we try admitting that most beliefs (especially scientific or purely factual beliefs) are true or false absolutely, but holding that relativism is nevertheless correct for some limited class of beliefs. Since relativists are often interested in applying their view chiefly to ethical issues, we might try this on ethical relativism: There is no absolute truth about ethics, but only relative truth. What I believe is right is right for me, and what you believe is right is right for you. If I think abortion is wrong, then it is true for me that abortion is wrong; if you think abortion is all right, then it is true for you that abortion is all right.

The natural question is: Why pick on ethical beliefs in this way? The answers most often given are two:

---

A. People never agree on ethical questions.

B. There is no way of knowing any absolute truth about ethics.

Critics of ethical relativism often point out that there is more agreement on ethical questions than (A) admits: for instance, when you take account of the differing circumstances and factual beliefs of different cultures, it is not so hard to account for their differing ethical customs and opinions on the basis of a common set of fundamental ethical principles. There is also a very practical reason for assuming that eventual agreement on ethical questions is possible: namely, that if people are to treat one another with mutual respect and seek rational agreement on disputed questions, they have to proceed on the provisional assumption that the agreement they seek is at least possible. The critics also claim that (B) is a wild exaggeration: For some ethical truths seem virtually impossible for anyone to doubt. Who, outside the artificial atmosphere of a philosophical discussion, would seriously claim they doubt that it would be wrong to torture a child to death before its parents eyes just for the fun of it?

But let us grant both (A) and (B), at least for the sake of argument. The problem for ethical relativism is that they don't entail ethical relativism and ethical relativism isn't the only (or even the best) way of accounting for them. (B) seems to assert ethical skepticism, which would provide a natural explanation for (A) as well, since if no one knows anything about a subject, then that explains why people have widely differing opinions about it.

When we limit relativism to ethical beliefs, relativism itself no longer has to count as only relatively true, so it looks as if it has been rescued from the threat of self-refutation. But the rescue will be successful only if:

i. Ethical relativism itself is not an ethical belief; and

ii. Ethical relativism does not share with ethical beliefs the features which make them only relatively and not absolutely true.

But both (i) and (ii) are doubtful, or at least very difficult for ethical relativists consistently to maintain. The relativist’s main reason for thinking that ethical beliefs can’t be absolutely true is that they are endlessly controversial, and ethical relativism shares this feature with ethical beliefs: people don’t agree about ethical relativism either. Moreover, ethical relativists often want to treat ethical relativism as an ethical belief: for instance, they think ethical relativism endorses an commitment to tolerance of people with ethical beliefs different from our own (however, see § 6 below.) If either (i) or (ii) is false, then ethical relativism must regard itself as only relatively true, and so it would be self-refuting after all. So if ethical relativism is to avoid self-refutation, ethical relativists cannot treat ethical relativism as if it were itself a substantive ethical view (supporting tolerance, for instance). And as long as ethical relativism remains as controversial as many ethical views are, they have to explain why we should regard it as any more true than these views.

Even if these objections are waived, ethical relativism still inherits some serious problems faced by unqualified relativism. Ethical relativists still haven't explained what (if anything) they mean by "true for me". And since an ethical relativist doesn’t believe that it’s true (absolutely) that killing is wrong, then the ethical relativist doesn’t believe that killing is wrong, and so it can’t be true for the ethical relativist that killing is wrong. Thus ethical relativists can’t consistently have any ethical beliefs of their own.
Once again we may learn something if we look at some other views which might be confused with ethical relativism even though they are quite distinct from (and even incompatible with) it:

I. Ethical Skepticism: No ethical belief is certain, all ethical beliefs are unjustified. As before, ethical skepticism is the diametrical opposite of ethical relativism, and as before, ethical skepticism is more defensible than ethical relativism. Even so, unqualified ethical skepticism seems exaggerated, to put it mildly. We need only think again of our belief, which no sane person could seriously doubt, that it would be wrong to torture children before their parents' eyes just for the fun of it.

II. Ethical nihilism: All ethical statements are false. Ethical statements predicate moral properties ("right," "wrong," "good," "evil," "just," "unjust") of people or actions or social institutions, etc.; but (according to the ethical nihilist) the world does not contain any of these properties; the belief in them is an error or a superstition, like believing in gods or black magic or the bad luck which will happen if you spill the salt. As Nietzsche puts it: "There are altogether no moral facts. Moral judgments agree with religious ones in believing in realities which are no realities. Morality is merely an interpretation of certain phenomena -- more precisely, a misinterpretation." Ethical nihilism and ethical relativism both deny that any ethical beliefs are absolutely true, but ethical nihilism doesn't sugar coat this denial by adding the mysterious qualification that these beliefs are all nevertheless "true for" the person who holds them. Ethical nihilism does have one problem in common with ethical relativism: if you are an ethical nihilist, then you are committed to having no ethical beliefs at all, not even beliefs like the one about torturing children cited in the previous paragraph.

III. Emotivism: Ethical statements do not make assertions at all, but instead express emotions or attitudes. According to the emotivist, ethical statements do not really assert anything that could be true or false. Instead, they express emotions of approval or disapproval, rather like exclamations of joy or distaste. On this view, to say "Kindness is good" is like saying: "Hooray for kindness!" To say "Cruelty is bad" is like saying: "Cruelty -- Yuck!" Imperatives, like exclamations, aren't true or false. So "prescriptivism", a variant of emotivism, holds that ethical statements are not assertions but imperatives: "Killing is wrong" means something like: "Don't kill!" Emotivism has to be different from ethical relativism because ethical relativism says that all ethical beliefs are true (for someone), while emotivism says that no one really has any ethical beliefs at all! Like ethical relativists and ethical nihilists, emotivists can't have any ethical beliefs, but this doesn't bother them because they have ethical sentiments or attitudes instead. For example, emotivists can't believe anything about the wrongness of torturing children, but they can have very strong negative feelings about such practices and they can try to get others to share their feelings. Emotivists try to reinterpret (what look like) ethical assertions as really disguised expressions of emotion and commands or exhortations to share emotions. On the basis of such reinterpretations they then claim that their view has the advantage that it rids us of the confused and difficult task of justifying moral beliefs but otherwise makes no difference to normative ethics. Accordingly, emotivists subscribe to normative ethical theories such as utilitarianism and Kantianism just as they would if they thought these theories involved beliefs about ethical truth.

---

defended by some philosophers, though it is no longer nearly as popular among them as it was earlier in this century.

IV. Cultural relativism: Different cultures have different ethical standards and the standards by which the conduct of any individual should be measured are the mores of the community to which that individual belongs.\(^{12}\)

5. Cultural relativism

Cultural relativism, taken in this sense, deserves a separate discussion all to itself. For it is not really a form of relativism at all in the sense we have been using that term. If taken as merely a collectivized form of ethical relativism, then it inherits all the other problems of ethical relativism. And however it is interpreted, cultural relativism seems to share with other forms of relativism the strange notion that some beliefs are true simply in virtue of the fact that they are believed. But cultural relativism could be understood as a version of "subjectivism," which takes moral properties to be reducible to people's subjective beliefs or attitudes. In its simplest form, subjectivism says that "Killing is wrong" means the same as "I disapprove of killing." In a collectivized, cultural relativist form it would say that "Eating meat is wrong" makes sense only when said relative to a certain culture, and then it means "People in this culture disapprove of eating meat". Cultural relativism, however, is sometimes also understood to have substantive normative implications which clearly don't follow from subjectivism by itself. It is taken to imply that there is a single, absolute, objectively right answer to moral questions: If you want to know whether a given action is right or wrong, find out what the agent's culture believes about it. If they think it is right, then it is right; if they think it is wrong then it is wrong. This is the position we should examine.

Anybody who holds that there are (absolute) ethical truths must admit that the rightness or wrongness of an act is relative to the circumstances in which it is performed. Because people's circumstances differ, what is (absolutely, objectively) right for one person, might be different from what is (absolutely, objectively) right for another. For instance, even the most extreme moral absolutist might very well hold that it is right for Joe to have sex with Joe's wife but wrong for Sam to have sex with Joe's wife. Such cases of "right for you, wrong for me" obviously do not support any form of ethical relativism. Cultural relativism could be understood in a similar way, as simply a special view about how moral right and wrong vary with the agent's circumstances. It holds that (absolute, objective) moral rightness and wrongness depend on the prevailing culture's beliefs about a given action. If you want to know the objectively right answer to the question whether a given act is right or wrong, just find out what the agent's culture believes about it: their belief determines what is objectively true.

Accordingly, a moral judgment such as "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" would be like the judgment "It is raining" in that both have implicit reference to a context which determines their objective truth. "It is raining" always means that it is raining at a certain time and place (e.g. in Fresno at 6 pm on September 12, 2002). "Joe's killing Sam was wrong" means that Joe's killing of Sam was wrong in a certain culture at a certain time (e.g. in white Anglo-Saxon Protestant Eastern seaboard American culture at the end of the 20th century, where acts like Joe's act of killing are widely disapproved. Cultural relativism then holds that what a culture believes about an act determines the truth about its objective rightness or wrongness.

in something like the way that spatio-temporal location determines the truth about the weather conditions obtaining then and there.

Cultural relativism and the affirmation of cultural diversity. Much of the appeal of cultural relativism has come from the perception that different cultures have different moral standards and moral practices from ours, but nevertheless get along at least as well with their standards and practices as we do with ours. This perception is often conjoined with the idea that it is wrong for Western culture to be intolerant of other cultures and impose its ways on them. But this idea does not imply cultural relativism, and is probably even inconsistent with it. Probably the intended connection between cultural relativism and cultural tolerance is based on an argument of the following kind:

1. We shouldn't blame, or interfere with, actions that are objectively right.

The actions generally approved in other cultures are objectively right just because they are generally approved there. (Cultural relativism)

Therefore, we should not blame or interfere with the actions of people in other cultures when they are generally approved in those cultures.

But can a cultural relativist consistently put forward such an argument? Cultural relativists often charge that among the ethical beliefs of Western culture is Western Supremacy:

**Western Supremacy:** Western values should be imposed on other cultures, and members of Western culture should blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever these actions violate Western values.

If the cultural relativists are right that Western Supremacy is a belief of Western culture, then what cultural relativism tells us as members of Western culture is that it is absolutely, objectively right for us to impose our ways on others and objectively right for us to blame and interfere with the actions of people in other cultures whenever our values condemn them. That means that cultural relativism supports not (3) but its contradictory.

Further, what account can a cultural relativist can consistently give of the ethical principle stated in (1)? If the principle is supposed to have absolute or trans-cultural validity, how can this be consistent with cultural relativism? If the principle is valid merely because it is one of our culture's ethical beliefs, then it deserves no priority over Western Supremacy. And then it looks as if (1) and Western Supremacy taken together imply the falsity of (2) (that is, of cultural relativism). In that case, cultural relativism is self-refuting for us Westerners (and, indeed, for the members of any culture whose ethical beliefs happen to be incompatible with cultural relativism). It follows from this that cultural relativism is totally incapable of combating any form of culturally entrenched imperialism, racism or ethnocentrism. For whenever we find these ugly things built into a culture's beliefs, cultural relativism is committed to endorsing them; and if cultural relativism is interpreted in such a way as to conflict with these beliefs, then it becomes self-refuting in that culture.

In practice, cultural relativism is sometimes used as a pretext for following whatever ethical beliefs one finds convenient. For instance, a Western-based multinational corporation operating in other parts of the world comes from a culture which believes that it is all right to seek the highest profit you can within the law; cultural relativism says they may do that (even if it means disrupting the traditions of that
culture). But cultural relativism also says that they need not blame or interfere with practices within that culture which might be considered wrong in their own culture: practices such as police-state terror directed against workers who protest the brutally low wage scales and miserable working conditions through which the corporations reap their profits. So interpreted, cultural relativism allows these corporations to do whatever they like.

The above results suggest that cultural relativism doesn't do justice to the actual views of those who really want to promote cross-cultural tolerance or oppose Western imperialism. It looks like those views really consist in holding to certain (absolute, objective, trans-cultural) ethical principles about how the members of different cultures should act toward each other, such as that people should be open-minded and tolerant to all human beings, always treating them with dignity and respect. Perhaps the anti-imperialists are embarrassed to avow such principles because they obviously come from the modern, Western Enlightenment tradition, and avowing them will immediately expose you to the dreaded charge of ethnocentrism. By contrast, cultural relativism's principled stance of absolute cross-cultural neutrality seems to buy us immunity from this charge. But of course cultural relativism is a modern Western idea as much as any moral principle they might have chosen; the only difference is that, as we have seen, cultural relativism is actually hostile to cross-cultural tolerance and mutual respect, whereas certain other Western enlightenment principles do favor them.

Very likely we end up in this paradoxical position because we start from the correct perception that everyone's standpoint is limited by their cultural perspective, and then (directly contradicting this insight) we try immediately to occupy a sublimely neutral standpoint which is above all such limitations. We might be wiser to align ourselves with some standpoint situated within a definite culture which, despite its inevitable limitations, at least makes an effort to be critical of itself and tolerant of other cultural standpoints. We are reluctant to take this wise course because we know that it is hard to identify such a standpoint; we realize that the biases from which we start will doubtless lead us into mistakes, probably culpable ones; and we are aware that by this route we can never hope altogether to escape the accusation of ethnocentrism, but will just have to learn to live with it (as part of our human condition).

We find cultural relativism far more appealing because its empty gestures enable us to announce our good intentions and repudiate our cultural biases in the abstract, with a mere wave of the hand. It enables us to absolve ourselves all of our cultural limitations in general without ever having to overcome any of them in particular. But perhaps what we have really wanted all along is a license to behave like brutal, arrogant imperialists while at the same time thinking of ourselves as tolerant, humane cosmopolitans who have transcended all their cultural prejudices. This makes it unsurprising that cultural relativism has had widespread appeal among the more sophisticated members of Western imperialist culture.

Difficulties in accepting cultural relativism. Even if it lived up to its billing, cultural relativism would still be extremely implausible. It commits you to the objective rightness (in the context of the culture in question) of all the moral beliefs and practices which have ever existed. Slavery was objectively right in ancient Greece and Rome, and even in our own country not so long ago. Human sacrifices were objectively right for the Aztecs; so was the Indian custom of *suttee*, requiring a widow to burn herself to death on her husband's funeral pyre; and also the *pogrom* -- the periodic indiscriminate slaughter of Jews -- which has long been part of the folkways of Christian peoples in Europe. Also objectively right is the sexual mutilation of women, which is still practiced in a variety of cultures. Cultural relativists sometimes refuse to back down even when presented with the most outrageous and grisly cases; but I can't help thinking that if they hadn't been backed into this position by the stance they hastily chose in
a philosophical discussion, these same people would be the first to condemn these practices as strongly as anyone.

The moral problems cultural relativism is trying to address are certainly real ones. In some cases it is simply not obvious what we should do (or even think) when confronted by practices of another culture which offend our moral sense and contradict our deepest convictions. Some things that people do to one another in different cultures are quite evidently the results of wretched superstitions and the brutally unjust distributions of power and authority which are traditional in those societies. On the other hand, we can often see that in other cultures certain actions have a different meaning, and we are quite aware that we lack the capacity to understand and evaluate the practices of alien societies. If we do nothing in the face of evident moral evil, we completely forfeit our integrity; but if we act on the basis of convictions held from our admittedly incomplete perspective, then we run the risk of arrogantly setting ourselves up as infallible moral judges of people who may know more than we do about what is being judged. If traditional cultures in other parts of the world are changing so that they become more like modern Western culture in ways we approve, should we applaud and support this process as the victory of moral progress, or should we deplore, regret and oppose these changes because they amount to the violent extinction of that culture's priceless heritage? What is objectionable about cultural relativism is that it pretends to have found a simple, general, tidy and unambiguous answer to questions where any answer of that description is almost certainly wrong.

Difficulties in applying cultural relativism. Another problem with cultural relativism is that the general criterion of right and wrong which it proposes is actually very unhelpful because it is inherently unclear and impossible to apply in the real world. Cultural relativism tells us that the rightness of an act depends on what the agent's culture believes about it. But most societies today are a complex network of cultures and subcultures, sometimes having widely divergent moral beliefs about controversial issues. For a given person in a given situation, how are we supposed to decide which culture or subculture the person belongs to? How many different cultures, for instance, are represented among the students in this course? How many of us can be entirely sure what culture we ourselves belong to? Can people set up a new culture whenever they want to? How few people would it take to do this?

In most cultures (ours, for instance), many ethical questions are the subject of endless disagreement and debate (this, after all, was what got ethical relativism started in the first place). How are we to determine what the ethical beliefs of the prevailing culture are? Does this require an overwhelming consensus among the culture's members, or is it a matter of simple majority vote? Or does cultural relativism imply that the most old-fashioned and ethnically traditional moral opinion is always the right one? Wherever there is any intra-cultural disagreement at all, the effect of cultural relativism will be to support the dominant view within the culture and to de-legitimize all dissenting views without giving them so much as a hearing. Cultural relativism implies that on any moral question within a culture an opinion is always necessarily wrong whenever it goes against traditional beliefs in the culture which are still very widely held. That means not only that those individuals who raise moral questions about accepted practices are always in the wrong, but also that any movement for moral reform within a culture, even if it eventually succeeds, must have been in the wrong at the time it got started, and therefore that it must always be absolutely wrong to try to reform any culture's accepted moral beliefs and practices.

Cultural relativism seems to give plausible answers to ethical questions only in a culture (utterly unlike our own) which is homogeneous, unreflective, unchangeable and free of serious moral disagreements. Ironically, the very social complexities, mutabilities and controversies which make relativism attractive
also render it useless, unclear and implausible as an account of ethical truth.

6. The appeal of relativism

Relativism and dogmatism. Why does relativism appeal to people? People are often attracted to relativism because they think it expresses and supports attitudes of open-mindedness and tolerance, and that the rejection of relativism commits you to arrogant dogmatism and narrow-mindedness. Since the opposite of "relative" is "absolute," the opposite of "relativism" seems to be "absolutism," a word which usually connotes "authoritarianism" or "dogmatism." Besides, dogmatism and intolerance always seem to be based on the idea that I am right and the other is wrong about something. But if everyone's belief is equally true (because "true for them"), then there never could be any occasion to think that I am any more (or less) right than anyone else about anything. Consequently, it seems to follow that there could never be any possible reason for treating anyone with hostility or disrespect if they hold a belief different from mine.

If you want to avoid a bad thing, however, it isn't always a good idea to fly to the opposite extreme, since that might turn out to be just as bad. If "absolutism" is bad and "relativism" is its opposite, it still doesn't follow that relativism will be good. However, it is not clear that relativism really is the opposite thing from authoritarianism, dogmatism, closed-mindedness and intolerance. In fact, it may not even be a different thing.

Relativism never declares any belief absolutely true or false; this may make us think that it is open-minded. But to be open-minded is to be disposed to think that you are fallible, that you could be mistaken in what you believe (so that what you now think is absolutely true might on closer examination turn out to be absolutely false). This is a thought which a relativist can never have, because relativists are convinced that at any time all their beliefs are necessarily true (for them). You show open-mindedness by leaving open the possibility of changing your beliefs (coming to disagree with what you used to believe) when you are given good reasons to. But relativists can never have any reason for changing their beliefs, since relativism says that at every point their beliefs are already true (for them). Of course relativism doesn't give anyone a reason for not changing their beliefs, since if I just happen to change my beliefs, then relativism says that my new belief is just as true (for me) as, but no truer (for me) than my old belief was. In short, relativism implies that that the right attitude toward our beliefs is always one of total self-complacency.

Relativism is anti-authoritarian only in the sense that it takes away any reason you might have for considering the opinions and arguments of others in forming your beliefs (for instance, the opinion of someone better informed than you are). For relativism says that your beliefs are all true (for you) no matter what anyone else may say or think. Relativism thus undercuts any reason anyone might have for being critical about their own beliefs. As we have already noted, relativism implies that you are always infallible in whatever you believe. The closed-minded arrogance of this view is not diminished by saying, in effect, that everyone else is infallible too. This merely adds to my own dogmatism the proviso that it is all right for everyone else to be just as dogmatic as I am.

Tolerance is the willingness to let others be different from us, especially to let them disagree with us, even if they are wrong. Relativism cuts way down on the need to be tolerant, since it denies that anyone is ever wrong. But this doesn't make the relativist tolerant (for exactly the same reason that successfully fleeing from danger doesn't make you courageous). It is as if relativists can't even conceive of actually
tolerating those they think are in the wrong, and the closest thing to this that they are capable of imagining is the principled refusal ever to admit that anyone could ever be wrong about anything. But relativism does not altogether eliminate the need for tolerance because people can be intolerant not only of those whose beliefs they think are wrong, but also of those who differ from them in other ways (in skin color, customs and folkways, or emotional sensibilities) even when the difference involves no disagreement in beliefs. And when the need for tolerance does arise, relativism provides no reason at all for being tolerant rather than intolerant. If I believe it is wrong to hate people who differ from me, relativism tells me that that belief is true (for me); but equally, if I believe in persecuting others, then relativism tells me that this belief is also true for me. In short, relativism is just exactly as likely to encourage intolerance as it is to encourage tolerance. But this is precisely what we should have expected. In saying that every belief is true for the person who holds it, relativism is absolutely neutral between all pairs of opposed beliefs. But that entails directly that relativism is absolutely neutral between the belief in tolerance and the belief in intolerance.

What this shows is simply that tolerance is not the same thing as neutrality. Tolerance requires some positive convictions about why, when and to what extent we should let people believe and do what we take to be wrong. Relativism can never support or even admit any convictions of this kind, because it can’t even admit that anything is ever wrong.

Relativism and conservatism. Religious or political conservatives or traditionalists often attack "relativism". When they are accused of maintaining their views dogmatically or intolerantly, they sometimes reply that all they are doing is maintaining that there is such a thing as “the truth”, and that it is right to stand by the truth. Or when some view of theirs is challenged, they sometimes engage in the rhetorical move of asserting that their dogmatically held opinion is true (as if this would be sufficient to justify the dogmatic and intolerant manner in which they hold it).

The right reply to them is simply to point out that it is one thing to believe that there is truth and quite a different thing to believe that you are in sole and certain possession of it. They also often need to be told that if their beliefs were true, that would not automatically justify forcing them down other people's throats. But their bad habits do probably encourage the idea that it is inherently conservative to believe in “truth” and that "relativism" is the right name for any view which is open-minded, tolerant, liberal and progressive.

What the traditionalists are usually opposing is not relativism in the sense we have been discussing here. Their target is more often the following views:

1. Traditionally accepted moral principles may not be correct; this is at least something about which intelligent people may disagree.

2. Which moral rules and principles are correct is subject to change with time and circumstances.

3. Moral principles apply differently to different circumstances, so that what is right for one person in one situation can be wrong for another person in a different situation.

4. There are sometimes justified exceptions to even a moral rule that is correct in general.

5. Even if an accepted moral principle is correct, we should sometimes be tolerant of people who disagree with it and refuse to follow it.
Each of these views might be described as “relativist” in the sense that it asserts that moral rules and principles should be considered “relative” to something (in (1) and (2), relative to the grounds or evidence for them, which may not, or may no longer, be sufficient, in (3), (4) and (5), relative to the conditions of their application, which may justify flexibility in applying them. But these forms of “relativity” do not imply “relativism” in the sense we have been discussing, and are even inconsistent with it. For all of (1)-(5) presuppose that there is truth in moral matters, since they challenge traditional ideas about which principles are objectively correct, how certain we can be about this, whether moral truth can change, and how flexible we should be in adapting moral principles to different situations. Those who want to defend views such as (1)-(5) should not let traditionalists get away with suggesting that they are vulnerable to the charges of incoherence and self-refutation which can be brought against relativism.

Relativism itself is a very conservative position. Protagoras was well known for advocating quite conventional views about how to live and what was right and wrong. Cultural relativism, as we have seen, tends to lend uncritical support to dominant cultural views and practices. Those who want to question or criticize traditional creeds and values at least have to admit that they might be wrong. But since relativism holds that everyone's belief is already true (for them), it implies that there is never really any need for anyone to change their views about anything. You don't have to attack the very notion of objective truth in order to challenge traditional ideas about what it is, where it is to be found, or whose views have to be taken into account in looking for it. On the contrary, it is only by presupposing that there is such a truth that you can legitimize challenges to mistaken ideas about what it is and how it should be sought. In fact, since absolute truth is not truth for anyone in particular, this implies that everyone's standpoint needs to be taken into account in searching for it.

Relativism, humbug and hype. Here is a somewhat speculative hypothesis about why relativism appeals to some people in our culture. Much of what we are exposed to in mass culture is what Max Black used to call "humbug." Humbug is when I say something to you that isn't true, where I know it isn't true, I know you know it isn't true, and I know you know I know it isn't true, but I know that if you hear it enough, it will probably influence your behavior (typically, in my interests). "Hype" is a special kind of humbug: it makes wildly exaggerated claims for something: no one believes them, but the hype-artist foresees that people will end up acting as though they believed them, if only just a little. Most political rhetoric and nearly all advertising is both "hype" and "humbug". Nobody believes either of them, or even takes them seriously. But the politicians who spend their donors' money are the ones who get elected and the products that are hyped on TV are the ones that sell.

To be humbugged is to be exposed to something that seems at first at least to pretend to be truth, but which you know from the start is less than truth. You reject it as truth, but then gradually come to accept it as less than truth, but also as not quite nothing either. Humbug therefore works partly by dulling your appetite for truth, getting you used to filling your mind with what you know is less than truth, with what is self-consciously phony, a glitzy but of course unconvincing imitation of truth. Humbug does not function on the level of reality but on the level of subjectivity (the perceptions of the recipient and the interests of the hype- or humbug-artist). Pleasing fictions work well as humbug. We know that the hero of the story is not a real person but we get emotionally involved with the story anyway, and we even end up cheering the hero and wanting to be like him (so that we wear the clothes he wears, buy the car he

---

drives, we live in reality some sad imitation of his glamorous fictional life). We don't take the fiction seriously as reality, but in chasing after it we expend real energy and often spend serious money.

The psychological result of constant bombardment by hype and humbug may help us to understand what relativists might mean by "true for me": humbug is something other than and less than truth, something designed to dull my appetite for truth, something I don't believe (yet eventually sort of believe), a substitute for truth that functions effectively not because of its relation to reality but because of its relation to our subjective susceptibilities (to being deceived and manipulated at least partly with our own knowledge and consent). Humbug puts itself forward as a sort of truth (which will affect my behavior as if I believed it, even though I really don't).

This is one way in which the confused and self-contradictory notion of "true for me" might acquire a semblance of intelligibility. Relativism might express the consciousness of someone whose whole cognitive environment, so to speak, has been taken over by humbug. Nothing anybody believes is really believed, nothing anybody asserts is meant seriously, so nobody would be so crude as to say that it was "true". Nobody would care about the truth even if it came up and hit them in the face. Such a person would have come to regard being humbugged as the normal state. This person thinks of really believing something (holding it to be true, period) as abnormal, a relic of a more innocent age in which people didn't yet realize that everything is humbug. This also explains why relativists often think of themselves as sophisticated compared to people who haven't gotten over the idea of 'absolute truth'. Relativism might even seem to be a way of protecting yourself against being deceived by humbug, since it makes it explicit that no assertion is to be taken at face value and nothing anybody ever says is really to be believed.

But of course people who humbug others do seriously hold some beliefs, even if they don't express them: They seriously believe that if the others are humbugged often enough, they will behave in ways that serve the humbugger's interests at the expense of the humbuggee's interests. And it is only because the humbuggees seriously believe this too that they have any reason to protect themselves against humbug by not taking it seriously. So however prevalent humbug may become, it never really abolishes genuine belief or assertion, or renders the notion of (absolute) truth obsolete. In fact, it is a self-defeating strategy to try to protect yourself from humbug by not taking it seriously. For humbug is by its nature something that is not seriously believed, and it manipulates you despite – sometimes, even because – you do not seriously believe it. Therefore, however prevalent hype and humbug may become in our cognitive environment, we can't ultimately avoid challenging them directly and unsophisticatedly by just recognizing them for what they are and declaring bluntly that they are false. Admittedly, this is not "cool". But it is the nature of humbug to manipulate those who are cool even more than those who are uncool. So the only way really to fight humbug is always by being uncool – like a boring, logic-chopping philosophy professor.

Relativism as an intellectual defense mechanism. Relativism says that whatever you believe is true for you irrespective of anyone else. In effect, relativism marginalizes everybody's standpoint except your own. In relation to humbug, relativism tries to protect me from being manipulated by being cool, blocking the beliefs others are trying to implant in me against my knowledge and will by cutting me off from any pretense at serious communication with them. In relation to what I do seriously believe, however, relativism also cuts me off from serious communication with others and thereby serves as a self-protective mechanism in another way.
When I begin the study of philosophy, I may suddenly discover powerful arguments and theories I never considered before which challenge the opinions I have always taken for granted. This can be very disturbing, and make me feel intimidated and insecure. Relativism comes to the rescue by protecting my opinions (making them all "true for me"). Because relativism is absolutely neutral between all particular opinions, it enables me to remain above the fray, taking the high ground away from those who, by lobbying for their particular version of the absolute truth, make it all too obvious that they have an axe to grind. As a relativist I never have to bother with the frustrating details of any philosophical dispute because relativism explains to me ahead of time not only why the dispute will never get resolved, but also why this is perfectly all right. I can agree that inquiry, reasoning and argument are fine (if someone happens to feel like paying attention to them), but I can rest assured that they need never seriously threaten my own beliefs (which remain true for me however the arguments come out). In this way relativism will encourage the one kind of tolerance for which I have the most desperate need: tolerance toward my own intellectual cowardice, laziness and incompetence. And when it protects me against all those whose powerful arguments might threaten my comfortable little world of convictions, relativism also makes me think I am tolerant toward others, since it releases me from the need to experience their alternative views as a threat to mine, and hence from the need to resist their arguments or to argue back: I can just live and let live. Both the appeal of relativism and its claim to tolerance would then be found in the way it immunizes my dogmatically held opinions against any facts or reasonings that might possibly call them into question.
J. L. MACKIE

Relativism and the Claim to Objectivity*

...[T]he main tradition of European moral philosophy includes the...claim...that there are objective values....

...[T]his objectivism about values is not only a feature of the philosophical tradition. It has also a firm basis in ordinary thought, and even in the meanings of moral terms.... The ordinary user of moral language means to say something about whatever it is that he characterizes morally, for example a possible action, as it is in itself, or would be if it were realized, and not about, or even simply expressive of, his, or anyone else’s, attitude or relation to it. But the something he wants to say is not purely descriptive, certainly not inert, but something that involves a call for action or for the re


fraining from action, and one that is absolute, not contingent upon any desire or preference or policy or choice, his own or anyone else’s. . . .

...[O]rdinary moral judgments include a claim to objectivity, an assumption that there are objective values in just the sense in which I am concerned to deny this. And I do not think it is going too far to say that this assumption has been incorporated in the basic, conventional, meanings of moral terms. . . . The traditional moral concepts of the ordinary man as well as of the main line of western philosophers are concepts of objective value. But it is precisely for this reason that linguistic and conceptual analysis is not enough. The claim to objectivity, however ingrained in our language and thought, is not self-validating. It can and should be questioned. But the denial of objective values will have to be put forward not as the result of an analytic approach, but as an ‘error theory’, a theory that although most people in making moral judgments implicitly claim, among other things, to be pointing to something objectively prescriptive, these claims are all false. It is this that makes the name ‘moral scepticism’ appropriate.

But since this is an error theory, since it goes against assumptions ingrained in our thought and built into some of the ways in which language is used, since it conflicts with what is sometimes called common sense, it needs very solid support. It is not something we can accept lightly or casually and then quietly pass on. If we are to adopt this view, we must argue explicitly for it. . . .

The argument from relativity has as its premiss the well-known variation in moral codes from one society to another and from one period to another, and also the differences in moral beliefs between different groups and classes within a complex community. Such variation is in itself merely a truth of descriptive morality, a fact of anthropology which entails neither first order nor second order ethical views. Yet it may indirectly support second order subjectivism: radical differences between first order moral judgements make it difficult to treat those judgements as apprehensions of objective truths. But it is not the mere occurrence of disagreements that tells against the objectivity of values. Disagreement on questions in history or biology or cosmology does not show that there are no objective issues in these fields for investigators to disagree about. But such scientific disagreement results from speculative inferences or explanatory hypotheses based on inadequate evidence, and it is hardly plausible to interpret moral disagreement in the same way. Disagreement about moral codes seems to reflect people’s adherence to and participation in different ways of life. The causal connection seems to be mainly that way round: it is that people approve of monogamy because they participate in a monogamous way of life rather than that they participate in a monogamous way of life because they approve of monogamy. Of course, the standards may be an idealization of the way of life from which they arise: the monogamy in which people participate may be less complete, less rigid, than that of which it leads them to approve. This is not to say that moral judgements are purely conventional. Of course there have
been and are moral heretics and moral reformers, people who have turned against the established rules and practices of their own communities for moral reasons, and often for moral reasons that we would endorse. But this can usually be understood as the extension, in ways which, though new and unconventional, seemed to them to be required for consistency, of rules to which they already adhered as arising out of an existing way of life. In short, the argument from relativity has some force simply because the actual variations in the moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.

But there is a well-known counter to this argument from relativity, namely to say that the items for which objective validity is in the first place to be claimed are not specific moral rules or codes but very general basic principles which are recognized at least implicitly to some extent in all society—such principles as provide the foundations of what Sidgwick has called different methods of ethics: the principle of universalizability, perhaps, or the rule that one ought to conform to the specific rules of any way of life in which one takes part, from which one profits, and on which one relies, or some utilitarian principle of doing what tends, or seems likely, to promote the general happiness. It is easy to show that such general principles, married with differing concrete circumstances, different existing social patterns or different preferences, will beget different specific moral rules; and there is some plausibility in the claim that the specific rules thus generated will vary from community to community or from group to group in close agreement with the actual variations in accepted codes. . . .

People judge that some things are good or right, and others are bad or wrong, not because—or at any rate not only because—they exemplify some general principle for which widespread implicit acceptance could be claimed, but because something about those things arouses certain responses immediately in them, though they would arouse radically and irresolvably different responses in others. ‘Moral sense’ or ‘intuition’ is an initially more plausible description of what supplies many of our basic moral judgements than ‘reason’. With regard to all these starting points of moral thinking the argument from relativity remains in full force.
RICHARD B. BRANDT

Relativism and Ultimate Disagreements about Ethical Principles

Suppose that Eskimos, through their experience with the hardships of living, think of parricide as being normally the merciful cutting short of a miserable, worthless, painful old age. And suppose the Romans think of parricide as being normally the getting rid of a burden, or a getting one’s hands on the parent’s money—an ungraceful, selfishly motivated aggression against one whose care and sacrifices years ago have made the child’s life a rich experience. The Eskimos are more-or-less unconsciously taking for granted that putting a parent to death is euthanasia under extreme circumstances; the Romans are more-or-less unconsciously taking for granted that putting a parent to death is murder for gain. In this case, although the Romans and the Eskimos may use the very same words to describe a certain sort of act—and then may express conflicting ethical appraisal of it—actually in some sense they have in mind quite different things. The Eskimos, perhaps, are accepting something of the kind ABCD; the Romans are condemning something of the kind ABFG. In this situation, we do not want to say there is necessarily any ultimate disagreement of principle between them.

When, then, do we want to say there is ultimate disagreement about ethical principles?

It is not easy to answer the question whether there is ultimate disagreement on ethical principles between different groups. Most of the comparative material assembled, for instance by Westermarck, is of little value for this purpose, for in large part what it tells us is simply whether various peoples approve or condemn lying, suicide, industry, cleanliness, adultery, homosexuality, cannibalism, and so on. But this is not enough. We need, for our purpose, to know how various peoples conceive of these things. Do they eat human flesh because they like its taste, and do they kill slaves merely for the sake of a feast? Or do they eat flesh because they think this is necessary for tribal fertility, or because they think they will then participate in the manliness of the person eaten? Perhaps those who condemn cannibalism would not do so if they thought that eating the flesh of an enemy is necessary for the survival of the group. If we are to estimate whether there is ultimate disagreement of ethical principle, we must have information about this, about the beliefs, more or less conscious, of various peoples about what they do. However, the comparative surveys seldom give us this.

In view of the total evidence, then, is it more plausible to say that there is ultimate disagreement of ethical principle, or not? Or don’t we re-

ally have good grounds for making a judgment on this crucial issue?

First of all, we must report that no anthropologists, as far as the writer knows, today deny that there is ultimate disagreement—although doubtless many of them have not posed the question in exactly the above form. (Almost no philosophers deny it either.) This seems a matter of importance, because, even if they have not explicitly argued the matter out, their intuitive impression based on long familiarity with some non-Western society should carry considerable weight. However, we must concede that no anthropologist has offered what we should regard as really an adequate account of a single case, clearly showing there is ultimate disagreement in ethical principle. Of course, we must remember that this lack of information is just as serious for any claim that there is worldwide agreement on some principle.

Nevertheless, the writer inclines to think there is ultimate ethical disagreement, and that it is well established. Maybe it is not very important, or very pervasive; but there is some. Let us look at the matter of causing suffering to animals. It is notorious that many peoples seem quite indifferent to the suffering of animals. We are informed that very often, in Latin America, a chicken is plucked alive, with the thought it will be more succulent on the table. The reader is invited to ask himself whether he would consider it justified to pluck a chicken alive, for this purpose. Or again, take the "game" played by Indians of the Southwest (but learned from the Spaniards, apparently), called the "chicken pull." In this "game," a chicken is buried in the sand, up to its neck. The contestants ride by on horseback, trying to grab the chicken by the neck and yank it from the sand. When someone succeeds in this, the idea is then for the other contestants to take away from him as much of the chicken as they can. The "winner" is the one who ends up with the most chicken. The reader is invited to ask himself whether he approves of this sport. The writer had the decided impression that the Hopi disapproval of causing pain to animals is much milder than he would suppose typical in suburban Philadelphia—certainly much milder than he would feel himself. For instance, children often catch birds and make "pets" of them. A string is tied to their legs, and they are then "played" with. The birds seldom survive this "play" for long: their legs are broken, their wings pulled off, and so on. One informant put it: "Sometimes they get tired and die. Nobody objects to this." Another informant said: "My boy sometimes brings in birds, but there is nothing to feed them, and they die."!

Would the reader approve of this, or permit his children to do this sort of thing?

Of course, these people might believe that animals are unconscious automata, or that they are destined to be rewarded many times in the afterlife if they suffer martyrdom on this earth. Then we should feel that our ethical principles were, after all, in agreement with those of these in-

dividuals. But they believe no such thing. The writer took all means he could think of to discover some such belief in the Hopi subconscious, but he found none. So probably—we must admit the case is not definitively closed—there is at least one ultimate difference of ethical principle. How many more there are, or how important, we do not say at present.

Possibly we need not go as far afield as Latin America or the Hopi to establish the point. The reader may have argued some ethical point with a friend until he found that, as far as he could tell, there were just some matters of principle on which they disagreed, which themselves could not be debated on the basis of any further common ground. In this case, the conclusion is the same. Note, however, that we say only "may have argued." Some people say they cannot remember ever having had such an experience; and perhaps the reader has not. In this case, we do not need to go afield.

It is obvious that if there is ultimate disagreement of ethical opinion between two persons or groups, there is also disagreement in basic principles—if we mean by "basic ethical principle"... the principles we should have to take as a person's ethical premises, if we represented his ethical views as a deductive system. We have so defined "ultimate disagreement" that a difference in the ethical theorems of two persons or groups does not count as being "ultimate" if it can be explained as a consequence of identical ethical premises but different factual assumptions of the two parties. Since ultimate ethical disagreements, then, cannot be a consequence of the factual assumptions of the parties, it must be a consequence of their ethical premises. Hence, there is also disagreement in "basic" principles. Our conclusion from our total evidence, then, is that different persons or groups sometimes have, in fact, conflicting basic ethical principles... .

There are some more detailed questions, then, that we may well ask ourselves. For instance, we may ask: Is relativism true for all topics of moral assessment, for perhaps 50 percent, or perhaps for only 1 percent? Or again, is relativism true for all topics except perhaps for those about which we have no strong feelings anyway, or is it true also for some topics (for example, slavery) of strong concern to us? Or, and this is obviously the most important issue, on exactly which topics are conflicting ethical views supportable, and on which topics must we say that all valid views are in agreement?...

On this matter there has been a marked change of opinion among social scientists in the past twenty years. There was a time when anthropologists like Ruth Benedict proclaimed the equal validity of the most diverse modes of living and ideals for humanity. The megalomania of the Kwakiutl, the repressed sobriety of the Pueblo, and the paranoia of the Dobuan culture were different value systems; but it would be ethnocentric, she thought, to make judgments about the relative merits of the systems. Since that time, however, anthropologists have turned attention to the similarities between societies, and to the functioning of social systems, to the analysis of institutions in terms
of their capacity to minister to essential human wants and the maintenance of the social group as a continuing entity. These new interests have led to the following results.

First, it has come to be agreed that certain features of a culture system are essential for the maintenance of life, and that a system of values that permits and sanctions these forms is inevitable in society. For instance, every society must provide for mating and for the rearing of offspring. Again, it must provide for the education of the offspring in the performance of those tasks that are necessary for survival. Moreover, in a complex society there must be differentiation of jobs, assignment of individuals to these jobs and the means for training them for adequate performance, and provision of motivation to do the jobs. Sufficient security must be provided to prevent serious disruption of activities, for example, security against violent attack. And so on.

It must be no surprise, therefore, to find that certain institutional forms are present in all societies: such as the family with its responsibilities for training children and caring for the aged, division of labor between the sexes (and occupational differences in more complex societies), games or art or dance, and so on. 

Second, anthropologists have come to find much more common ground in the value systems of different groups than they formerly did. As Professor Kluckhohn recently put it:

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, of 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.

There are other universals we could mention: disapproval of rape, the ideal for marriage of a lifelong union between spouses, the demand for loyalty to one's own social group, recognition that the interests of the individual are in the end subordinate to those of the group. . . .

What is proved by these observations of anthropologists? First, that there is much agreement about values, especially important values, which provides some basis for the resolution of disputes, even if we set aside completely considerations of validity, and assume there is no such thing as a "valid" value. Second, some values, or some institutions with their supporting values, are so inevitable, given human nature and the human situation in society as they are, that we can hardly anticipate serious question-

---

2See D. F. Aberle et al., "The Functional Pre-requisites for a Society." _Ethics_ 49 (1949), 100-111.
ing of them by anybody—much less any conflicting “qualified attitudes,” that is, conflicting attitudes that are informed (and so on).

Thus, ethical relativism may be true, in the sense that there are some cases of conflicting ethical judgments that are equally valid; but it would be a mistake to take it as a truth with pervasive scope. Relativism as an emphasis is misleading, because it draws our attention away from the central identities, from widespread agreements on the items we care most about. Furthermore, the actual agreement on the central things suggests the possibility that, with better understanding of the facts, the scope of agreement would be much wider.
ALASDAIR MACINTYRE

Moral Disagreements*

I do not want to attend to the details of [moral] disagreements, so much as to the fact of disagreement. For I take it that the inability of professional moral philosophers to resolve disagreement about the concept of morality and the meaning of such words as “moral” and “ethical” through argument is related to the inability of ordinary moral agents to resolve their disagreements about which moral principles are the correct ones. Consider two important contemporary moral debates.

1. A: A just war is one in which the good to be achieved outweighs the evils involved in waging the war and in which a clear distinction can be made between combatants—whose lives are at stake—and innocent noncombatants. But in modern war, calculation of future escalation is never reliable and no practically applicable distinction between combatants and noncombatants can be made. Therefore no modern war can be a just war and we all now ought to be pacifists.

   B: If you wish for peace, prepare for war. The only way to achieve peace is to deter potential aggressors. Therefore you must build up your armaments and make it clear that going to war on any scale is not ruled out by your policies. A necessary part of making this clear is being prepared both to fight limited wars and to go not only to, but beyond the nuclear brink on certain types of occasion. Otherwise you will not avoid war and you will lose.

   C: Wars between the Great Powers are purely destructive and all of them ought to be opposed by revolutionaries; but wars waged to liberate oppressed groups and peoples, especially in the Third World, are a necessary and therefore justified means for destroying exploitation and domination.

2. A: Everybody has certain rights over their own person, including their own body. It follows from the nature of these rights that at the stage when the embryo is essentially part of the mother’s body, the mother has a right to make her own uncoerced decision on whether she will

have an abortion or not. Therefore each pregnant woman ought to decide and ought to be allowed to decide for herself what she will do in the light of her own moral views.

B: I cannot, if I will to be alive, consistently will that my mother should have had an abortion when she was pregnant with me, except if it had been certain that the embryo was dead or gravely damaged. But if I cannot consistently will this in my own case, how can I consistently deny to others the right to life that I claim for myself? I would break the so-called Golden Rule unless I denied that a mother has in general a right on abortion. I am not of course thereby committed to the view that abortion ought to be legally prohibited.

C: Murder is wrong, prohibited by natural and divine law. Murder is the taking of innocent life. An embryo is an identifiable individual, differing from a new-born infant only in being at an earlier stage on the long road to adult capacities. If infanticide is murder, as it is, then abortion is murder. So abortion is not only morally wrong, but ought to be legally prohibited.

About these two arguments I want to make four major points. The first concerns the systematically unsettleable and interminable character of such arguments. Each of the protagonists reaches his conclusion by a valid form of inference from his premises. But there is no agreement as to which premises from which to start; and there exists in our culture no recognized procedure for weighing the merits of rival premises. Indeed it is difficult to see how there could be such a procedure since the rival premises are—to borrow a term from contemporary philosophy of science—incommensurable. That is to say, they employ and involve concepts of such radically different kinds that we have no way to weigh the claims of one alternative set of premises over against another. In the first debate an appeal to an Aristotelian concept of justice is matched against an appeal to a Machiavellian concept of interest and both are attacked from the standpoint of a Fichtean conception of liberation. We have no scales, no set of standards, by which to assess the weight to be given to justice thus conceived over against interest thus conceived or liberation thus conceived. Similarly, in the second debate an understanding of rights which owes something to Locke and something to Jefferson is counterposed to a universalizability argument whose debt is first to Kant and then to the gospels and both to an appeal to the moral law as conceived by Hooker, More, and Aquinas.

Secondly, in this unsettleable character, in this use of incommensurable premises, these debates are clearly typical of moral argument in our society. If the debates had been about euthanasia instead of abortion or social justice instead of war, the characteristics of the arguments would have been substantially the same. Perhaps not all moral disagreement in our society is of this kind, but much is and the more important the disagreement the more likely it is to have this character.

Thirdly—and this is the point of my excursion into the characteristics of moral disagreement—there are crucial links between this kind of disagreement among ordinary moral agents over which moral principles we are to adopt and the current dis-
agreements between moral philosophers about how morality is to be defined. Indeed, one not uncommon type of argument used by contemporary moral philosophers has been of the form: if X’s account of morality is accepted, then such-and-such moral principles would be acceptable; but those moral principles are precisely unacceptable, and therefore X’s account of morality must be rejected. 

This conceptual connection between the content of moral principles and the definition of morality will perhaps be best elucidated by considering its historical explanation. When I characterized the rival moral premises of contemporary debates as Aristotelian, Machiavellian, Fichtean, and so on, I suggested something of the wide range of historical sources on which contemporary moral argument draws, but I did so by using the names of philosophers as a kind of allusive shorthand. Three points need to be made in a more extended way. The first is that the origins of contemporary moral debates are not to be found only or even mainly in the writings of philosophers, but in the forms of argument which informed whole cultures and which the writings of philosophers articulate for us in exceptionally clear and accessible ways: Aristotle is being treated here as a spokesman for at least a central strand in the culture of fourth-century Athens, Fichte as related in a similar way to [the] nineteenth century.

Secondly, the premises of contemporary moral debate have not merely been inherited; they have also been torn from the social and intellectual contexts in which they were originally at home, from which they derived such force and validity as they possess. What we have inherited are only fragments and one reason why we do not know how to weigh one set of premises against another is that we do not know what force or validity to grant to each of them in isolation.

Thirdly, as the conceptual connection between the content of morality and its definition would lead us to expect, this fragmented inheritance is embodied in our rival definitions of morality as well as in our rival sets of moral principles.

Fourthly...the peculiar function of evaluative expressions in our discourse is to refer us to impersonal standards of value, to give reasons whose force is independent of who utters them. The implication is that in this part of our discourse we ought to be able to arrive at rational agreements on central, if not always on peripheral, issues. Yet the state of moral argument in our culture shows this not to be so. We therefore seem to be in a dilemma: either we have to reject the presuppositions of the dominant culture of our own society or we have to reject the possibility of rationality in moral argument. But the roots of this dilemma are, so I have suggested, historical.