

## RELATIVISM AND TYRANNY

You believe that reality is something objective, external, existing in its own right. You also believe that the nature of reality is self-evident. When you delude yourself into thinking that you see something, you assume that everyone else sees the same thing as you. But I tell you, Winston, that reality is not external. Reality exists in the human mind, and nowhere else. Not in the individual mind, which can make mistakes, and in any case soon perishes; only in the mind of the Party, which is collective and immortal. Whatever the Party holds to be truth *is* truth. It is impossible to see reality except by looking through the eyes of the Party.

-- *Nineteen Eighty-Four*<sup>1</sup>

A weaker variant on the dogma admirably explicated above by Thought Police agent O'Brien, known as "cultural relativism" (often interchanged with "moral relativism"), has long been current among cultural anthropologists. In this paper, I will argue that cultural relativism is both incoherent and pernicious.

### 1 Relativism, what

First, let us attempt to define the doctrine in question, a singularly frustrating task. One anthropologist writes:

The simplest statement of the concept of cultural relativism is that since cultures differ in their value systems, yet all have value systems, there is no basis for comparing them in terms of better or worse. Cultures can only be judged on their own terms. There is a time and place limitation on right and wrong. There is 1988 French right and wrong, 1488 Iroquois right and wrong, and so on.<sup>2</sup>

This seems not so simple to me. To begin with, how does the fact that cultures differ in their value systems imply that there is no basis for comparing them? This is as if I were to say that since cultures differ in their cosmological systems, there is no basis for comparing them in terms of more or less accurate. But the important thing here is not to quarrel with the (il)logic involved but to attempt at the outset to at least get straight what it is that is being said; and in particular, we must distinguish two different sorts of claims. On the one hand, there is the anthropological premise that cultures have different value systems - this, I think, is true, and is not what I am arguing about - and on the other hand, there is the meta-ethical conclusion that it is inherently impossible to comparatively evaluate cultures - the latter is what we call "cultural relativism" and is (at least in part) what I am arguing about. The following are versions of relativism:

(1) Moral values generally are established by social conventions.

- (2) All cultures/value systems are equally good.
- (3) Cultures/value systems cannot be compared morally.
- (4) What is right is identical with what is ordained by whatever society a given agent belongs to.

All of these propositions are different, and all of them are false. The following are not versions of relativism, at least not for the purposes of my attack on relativism in this paper:

- (5) It is good to be tolerant of people with differing practices and views.
- (6) Different people/cultures endorse different values.
- (7) People tend to value what they are taught to value.
- (8) Sometimes, when faced with a choice, there may be multiple different courses of action that are equally moral.
- (9) Morals cannot be resolved by some fixed algorithm but must be judged case-by-case.

All of these propositions are to some extent true, and none of them is what I am arguing about herein. This point can scarcely be overemphasized, that all of the above nine propositions are distinct, and that I am attacking the first four, not the latter five. Obstinate failure to take cognizance of this can lead to extensive arguments both irrelevant and exasperating.

Next, let us observe the logical connections among the first four propositions listed above, with an eye toward, hopefully, reducing the stock to a single thesis. It will be noticed upon reflection that it is not possible without the aid of doublethink to maintain all four simultaneously. #2 offers a comparison and evaluation of cultures, finding them to have equal value, while #3 posits that it is inherently impossible to compare cultures or talk about their value. Nevertheless, I believe all four doctrines alike spring from a kind of skepticism - a skepticism about morality and moral philosophy, which doubts that the entire study contains any knowledge or the whole subject has any reference to any reality beyond itself. Morality, it seems to me, has been the poor, abused victim of the most concerted and persistent attempts at discrediting and debunking in intellectual history. The cause of this hostility to morality we shall inquire into later. What it leads to is a constant attempt from various quarters to turn morality into something else, and thereby get rid of it.

Almost all of us, fortunately, understand moral concepts to some extent and seem to sense obligations, injustices, and other moral circumstances from time to time. This cannot be denied. But the moral skeptic wants to explain our moral intuition as something other than just one more application of our faculty of rational cognition, which would seemingly have to imply the real existence of some 'moral facts' to cognize; he therefore replaces morality with something else, the favorite candidate here being some variant on 'culture'. That is to say, the story goes that there really are no moral values in the

world - as philosopher J.L. Mackie, avowed subjectivist/moral skeptic says, values are not "part of the furniture of the world"<sup>3</sup> - but 'societies' (whoever that is?) need to keep people in line, so they have invented this whole mythology of objective moral values and manage to brainwash their members into obeying these edicts through the mythology. Unenlightened people usually think that their value judgements are based on something other than themselves, some truth, but actually they are merely the acceptance of the forms of behavior they have been conditioned into accepting. Hence, morality is replaced by the edicts of society.

There are several other theories that stem from moral skepticism, which attempt to replace morals with different things, such as personal emotions, tastes, tendencies toward Darwinian survival value, the interest of the stronger, et cetera. In the case of most subject matters, with the exception of morals and psychology, we simply accept the existence of the objects of study and get on with studying them. In few cases has the hostility toward an entire field reached the level at which people are pell-mell rushing to get in different candidates for what the offending objects of study 'really' are, by way of dissolving the field. If cultural relativism is true, then ethics doesn't really exist: instead, there is only cultural anthropology. That is, the study of the right and the good should be replaced with the study of what traditions exist, which is a matter for anthropology and not moral philosophy.

Now this replacing of moral values with societal edicts leads to the idea that there is some kind of *logical* error in asking whether the entire set of edicts is good or bad or in attempting to compare different value systems, for there is no goodness or badness independent of these systems. "Good" simply means conformity to the edicts of my society. The attempt to evaluate something logically implies a set of standards relative to which to evaluate the thing; therefore, it makes no sense to attempt to evaluate the standards themselves. It would be like attempting to measure the standard metre in Paris. Thus, #1 and #4 lead to #3. Claim #2 results when it is reflected that since no culture can be better than another, all must be equal. Actually, though, according to the theory, what one should say is not merely that no culture is superior to others but that it literally is unintelligible to say that a culture is good, bad, better than another one, etc., and it makes no sense to talk about 'equality' of cultures either (since that is an evaluative term). However, this point has seldom been grasped, so that moral relativists have commonly inconsistently endorsed the view that value systems were equally good (except for our own, which is evil & exploitive).

## 2 My view

I have been asked by Professor Sarich among others such questions as 'where' are moral values, where do they come from, what do they consist in, to what fact in reality does the judgement that x is good correspond, what is the difference between a world in which x is good and one in which x is bad, etc. These at first perplexing queries all

misunderstand the issue, as frequently happens in philosophy, by actually mistaking the opponent's position for a version of your own central thesis with some illogical or silly variation.

I am not going to answer those questions, on principle. I am not going to try to say what moral values 'really' are. My position is staunch: Everything is what it is, and not some other thing. As G.E. Moore wrote, "good is good, and that is all I have to say on the matter." I am an unregenerate naive realist until someone can prove me wrong.

Now let me endeavor to explain what I mean by the mistaking of my position for a version of my opponents' thesis. My opponents' core position is moral skepticism, together with a search to find something else non-moral with which to replace morality. They seek to define moral concepts in terms of non-moral ones, because they think that only non-moral concepts are ultimately valid or have any sense. They mistake me for simply a strange brand of moral skeptic: They think that I, too, will provide them with some reduction of morality to some other field. Perhaps, they think, I shall say that "right" really means "conforming to God's will" or even "conforming to human nature". Or perhaps I merely think that there is some subset of social conventions that is universal, and these I call "really moral". No. That is not it. I deny that morality can be defined or explained in terms of something else, be it sociobiology, cultural anthropology, psychology, game theory, or what have you. Morality is a separate and distinct, unique subject matter. My point is to treat morality as simply one more, perfectly legitimate, independent subject, on all fours with the other fields of inquiry, as physics, logic, mathematics, psychology, et cetera. Some actions in the world that take place are right; others are wrong; some events are good; others bad; and that is simply an irreducible, unanalyzable fact of the world. I trust I make myself sufficiently clear.

As to the question of how it is that one attains knowledge of this subject matter, I once again see no reason to treat the case differently from all other fields of inquiry. Human beings possess the faculty of reason and understanding. We apply reason to our observations to draw conclusions. Some conclusions (such as those comprising mathematics) rely on intuition alone. Some knowledge depends on observation alone (e.g., the color of the sky, the size of my hand, etc.) Most interesting knowledge arises from a combination of the two (e.g., physics, economics, psychology, anthropology). So it is with morality. I judge that Adolf Hitler was a bad man: I know this a) from reports that he caused eleven million innocent people to be executed and caused the second World War by attempting to take over Europe in order to subject everybody to totalitarian rule and b) the intuitive judgement that these things are wrong (to put matters mildly).

The epistemological controversy surrounding this simple model could divert us far afield, but we must exercise restraint as this is not a paper in the theory of knowledge. To be brief, then: What I have just vaguely indicated about the working of moral cognition I say holds generally for all knowledge; I propose to treat morality just like anything else. But some people doubt that what I have said does hold true of knowledge generally. On the one hand, there are empiricists and illogical positivists who hold that only what can be observed can be known, and on the other hand, there are rationalists

who hold that only what can be proved can be known. My view is known as intuitionism. Examination of just about any ordinary piece of knowledge would show that I am correct. For example, you know that if you hold this paper in the air and let go of it, it will descend to the floor. How do you know this? Not by mere observation, because in fact, you have not (I assume) dropped the paper and therefore have not been able to observe its propensity to fall. You have observed the falling of other objects, but this is a different object; how do you know it will also fall? Nor is it possible to prove from self-evident axioms that the thing will fall. Logically, it could move in any direction, or stand still. Your knowledge is based on a generalization that most objects fall (but note that there are exceptions - balloons, clouds, and birds do not fall). And this generalization is intuitive. It cannot, as noted, be directly observed to be valid, and nor is there, as far as I know, any set of axioms by which to deduce that the extension of the generalization about falling bodies to this paper is valid. In this, as in so many other cases, one just makes an intuitive judgement of the case at hand, and that is all there is to it.

There is, of course, Newton's Law of Gravity, but it is no help, first, because the expectation of falling bodies long predates Newton's appearance in the world, so that the knowledge of the universal law of gravitation can not be the source of the knowledge that particular objects will fall to the ground; and second, because there is no reason why Newton's Law of Gravity should be accepted over Mike's Law of Gravity, which says, "All bodies will be mutually attracted according to Newton's Law, except for Anthropology papers written by Mike, which will float motionless above the earth," both of which laws are supported by all observations - no reason, that is, except that it is counter-intuitive.

Now, I scarcely think I shall have converted die-hard empiricists or rationalists with those brief remarks, but I must move on. I have elsewhere written more extensively and carefully about epistemology and intuitionism.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, I refer the reader to H.A. Prichard, who argues that moral judgements stem from immediate intellectual insights<sup>5</sup>.

### **3 Relativism and the naturalistic fallacy**

Moral relativism is a doctrine that is virtually refuted just by being clarified, which is one reason why it has so rarely been clarified. To do so, we will need to distinguish two different relations, namely synonymy and coextensiveness, from each other. Two terms are *synonymous* when they simply mean the same thing. For instance, "bachelor" means "unmarried man". Two terms are *coextensive*, which is a different matter, when they refer to the same objects. For instance, "human" is, as far as I know, coextensive with "featherless biped". Every human is a featherless biped and every featherless biped is a human. That does not mean, however, that "featherless biped" is a good analysis of the meaning of "human".

To make this distinction clearer still, consider another example: If someone were to ask, "What is yellow?" there are two ways one might answer him. First, one might say, "Sunflowers, the sun, lemons, ..." Second, one might say, "It

is a warm color in the middle of the electromagnetic spectrum, between orange and green, at 570 nanometers and thereabout." If one gave the first kind of answer, one would be attempting to say *what is yellow*, that is, to tell which things happen to have the property of yellowness. If one gave the second kind of answer, one would instead be attempting to say *what yellow is*, that is, what it is for a thing to be yellow - while leaving open the question of which objects in the world, if any, have this quality.

The same distinction, with great import, may be made with respect to good. If someone says, for example, that good is what is ordained by society, then there are two things he may mean by this:

(a) He may mean to say that for a thing to be good is simply nothing more nor less than for it to be ordained by society, so that when we say a thing is good, all we mean is that society ordains it. "Good" is synonymous with "ordained by society."

(b) He may mean that, although goodness and being ordained by society are different things, it so happens that society, in its wisdom, always ordains what is good and only what is good, so that the same things have the property of goodness as have the property of being ordained by society. "Good" is coextensive with "ordained by society."

And there are two interpretations of the claim that what is right is what conforms to the culture's value system:

(a) "Right" means "conforms to the culture's value system."

(b) Everybody ought to conform to his culture's value system.

Let us consider these two interpretations of moral relativism in turn, then.

During the rise and rule of Naziism, there were certain Germans who opposed the Nazis and fought against them and did not participate in militarism or anti-Semitism. Others supported the Nazis and partook of the extermination of Jews and the like. The former were acting contrary to the values of their culture, whereas the latter were conforming. According to the second interpretation of cultural relativism, the objectors were evil and the followers of Naziism were good. This follows directly from the premise that it is always right and good to conform to one's society's dictates. It is difficult to see the plausibility of this view.

Now, if two terms are not coextensive, then it follows immediately that they are not synonymous. Thus, the first interpretation of cultural relativism, viz. that "right" is synonymous with "ordained by society," is alike refuted by the observation that in Nazi Germany what was ordained by society was wrong as is the second interpretation. Furthermore, the first interpretation, which is the one that I think cultural relativists in anthropology actually mean, is open to a second, more general objection, and that is that it commits the naturalistic fallacy<sup>6</sup>. There are several slightly different ways of exposing this error.

Consider the question,

x is ordained by my society; but is it good?

This is a reasonable question. One can understand what it means, and it's a significant question. It isn't simply asking the trivial question does society ordain what it ordains. Nor does it mean

x is good, but is it good?

It is an open question, at least, whether what society ordains is good - it is open to debate. It is not something that could merely be settled by a glance in any good dictionary. But if "ordained by society" truly meant "good" then "Is it good to do what society ordains?" would have to mean, "Is it good to do good?" - which it does not, for the former is an open question, while the latter is a silly question. Or again: "Society ordains so-and-so because it is right" would have to mean the same as "So-and-so is right because it is right;" but it doesn't, for the former could be true while the latter is plainly illogical.

At least we could understand the view of somebody who said that we should be non-conformists (like Emerson), whereas, in contrast, I should have difficulty in understanding the view of someone who said we should do what was wrong rather than what was right, for he would be contradicting himself; which could not be the case if "right" just meant "conforming to society".

Note that the open question argument applies to any attempt to replace moral concepts with something else. That is, for *any* natural property, N, it will always be possible to say,

Granted that x is N, but is it good?

and it's a significant question; it does not mean, "x is N, but is it N?" It was by this argument essentially that G.E. Moore showed that "good" was an indefinable notion.

#### **4 Relativism and coherence**

The objectivity of values can be derived from three premises. First, moral claims exist. That is to say, it is possible to meaningfully express a moral judgement, and thereby be making an assertion. Second, every proposition is either true or false. This is known as the law of excluded middle and is one of the basic principles of logic. Therefore, moral judgements are either true or false. Third, for a thing to be true is for it to correspond to reality, while for it to be false is for it to contravene reality (this is called the correspondence theory of truth). If that is the case, then there must be some

independently existing reality to which the proposition can relate as either corresponding or contravening.

Relativists are in the habit of maintaining (a) that certain statements (moral ones) can be at once both true and false, which is a direct denial of the law of non-contradiction; (b) that some statements can be neither true nor false, a direct denial of the law of excluded middle; and/or (c) that the truth of a statement can depend on who says it, which is a blatant denial of the principle of informal logic that *argumentum ad hominem* is a fallacy because the truth of a statement is independent of who the speaker is. It is hard to know how to refute a theory that so unabashedly contravenes logic, since it is hard to think of any more basic, evident, and universally valid propositions than the laws of logic to appeal to.

It will be noticed that according to this, relativism is not only false but incoherent. That is to say, it is inherently impossible for something to be 'relative' since it must either be true or false, and that necessarily implies a relation to reality. The term "true for you" is meaningless.

## **5 The diversity of value systems**

Usually when one asks for an argument for relativism, one gets one of two things. The first thing that usually happens is that the conversant says something on the order of "I think all values are relative because ..." and then simply produces a paraphrase of moral relativism - e.g., values are relative because there isn't any objective morality out there, or because our values are all determined by our society, or because society just makes up moral systems for the sake of its preservation, et cetera. The reader may be unfamiliar with this process, but arguing with a relativist is a singularly pointless project which normally consists in his simply producing a long series of paraphrases of his thesis and calling them arguments for that thesis.

The second thing that happens is that the relativist points out some variation, some disagreement, in moral codes accepted by different people - and concludes from this that there is no right answer to moral questions. For instance, Scheper-Hughes, who says that anthropologists, herself included, "have tended to understand morality as always contingent on, and embedded within, specific cultural assumptions about human life,"<sup>7</sup> gives the example of shantytown women who take infant mortality lightly and practice a kind of triage with their children. That is, the mothers distribute their resources unequally, abandoning the children who are felt to be lost causes. This is supposed to "disturb, give reason to pause ... and to doubt." I assume that this is supposed to be an example of an ethic contrary to our own.

Well, in the first place, I think that the divergence in moral codes is exaggerated. In the example given by Scheper-Hughes, shantytown mothers, as I say, practice triage. Well, that is not so different from our culture. We practice triage, literally, in war, and I think we would use the same kind of logic in emergency situations or circumstances of extremely limited resources generally (if the ship is sinking and there aren't enough life rafts, are you going to say that



everybody has to go down with the ship?) Frankly, at the risk of offending someone's morals, I see no objection to distributing resources so as to attain the maximum benefit, save the most lives, etc. If this is contrary to our ethic - but I don't think it is - then we are wrong.

More generally, there are several moral judgements that would probably be accepted in every culture. For instance, courage, honesty, and compassion are virtues. Life, happiness, prosperity, security, and health are desirable. Most if not all societies would accept a certain non-aggression principle: i.e., it is wrong to initiate the use of violence against others (although there is frequent disagreement about who initiated what).

However, all of this is somewhat irrelevant. From the fact that people have different beliefs, if it is a fact, how does it follow that no belief is correct? This is as if I were to argue that since different cultures have different cosmological and geographical beliefs (some think the earth is flat, or supported on the back of a large elephant, etc.), therefore, the earth has no definite shape of its own and the solar system has no objective existence. Or: there are deep disagreements in anthropology, and nobody seems to be able to convince everybody of his view; therefore, shall we conclude, that anthropology contains no factual knowledge? How strange that disagreement should be taken as a proof that no answer exists rather than that a lot of people are mistaken.

Religion and culture have given us startlingly divergent - and startling irrational - theories of the structure of the world. I would not expect them to have made much more rational approaches to the field of ethics.

## 6 Relativism and tolerance

Allan Bloom explains the major motivation behind cultural relativism in *The Closing of the American Mind*, where he says of today's college students,

The danger they have been taught to fear from absolutism is not error but intolerance. Relativism is necessary to openness; and this is the virtue, the only virtue, which all primary education for more than fifty years has dedicated itself to inculcating ... The study of history and of culture teaches that all the world was mad in the past; men always thought they were right, and that led to wars, persecutions, slavery, xenophobia, racism, and chauvinism. The point is not to correct the mistakes and really be right; rather it is not to think you are right at all.<sup>9</sup>

Nancy Scheper-Hughes confirms this observation from the other side:

And so the "Enlightenment," with its universal and absolute notions of truth and reason, may be seen as a grand pretext for exploitation and violence and for the expansion of Western culture.<sup>9</sup>

In essence, the argument is this: if we accept objectivism, then we are bound to think that people who disagree with us

are wrong, and therefore we will attack them and subjugate them in order to force them to adopt our values. The only way to prevent this is to accept relativism, which implies that nobody is really right or wrong.

It would be unfortunate if the only way to be good people and have a peaceful society was through deluding ourselves into accepting incoherent beliefs. However, this entertaining theory fails to comport with reality. A casual glance at history reveals that it was those Enlightenment natural law philosophers to whom Scheper-Hughes refers - namely John Locke and his followers - who were the most consistent and cogent defenders of democracy, universal human rights, and what was then called liberalism - John Locke and Thomas Jefferson were hardly totalitarian militarists. And the reason for this should be clear: war and persecution do not come about through rational reflection; they come about (as Robin Fox argues in "Anthropology's Auto-da-Fe") through fanaticism. Reason would tell us that peaceful coexistence is desirable; it is not logical in the least to go about constantly fighting and destroying things.

Contrariwise, moral relativism was resoundingly embraced by the Nazis. "There is no such thing as truth," argued Hitler, "either in the moral or in the scientific sense." And in a comment strikingly reminiscent of 1984, Goering declared, dismissing a criticism of Hitler's economic policies, "I tell you, if the Fuhrer wishes it then two times two are five." "As for me," states Goering, "I am *subjective*, I commit myself to *my people* and acknowledge nothing else on earth. I thank my Maker for having created me without what they call a 'sense of objectivity.'"<sup>10</sup> The Nazi ideology endorsed a slight variant on cultural relativism - racial relativism. They held that there are no objective values and that all values and beliefs are determined by one's race. There was a German morality, a British morality, and so on, and the Nazis were following German morality. This subjectivism was also part and parcel of Nazi anti-intellectualism and irrationalism - that is, Hitler and his followers condemned intellectuals who go about trying to reason things out.<sup>11</sup> Reich Minister Gurtner, in another Orwellian remark, explained that right is what society thinks is right:

For us, right does not mean the realization of a conceived and decreed law, but the conception of what the German people on its average moral basis thinks is right or wrong.<sup>12</sup>

The reasons for this acceptance of subjectivism and irrationalism are clear:

First, it would be absurd to think that you could have a totalitarian society in which people are always going around asking for reasons for things, trying to judge objectively, and questioning. People who believe that moral values are objective and can be determined through reason are going to attempt to do so, which is to say, to reason things out and demand rational justifications for state policies. This tendency is poison to a totalitarian regime. "Knowledge is ruin to my young men," said Hitler.<sup>13</sup>

Second, Hitler's theories and activities were so obviously irrational that there is no way that a seriously reasoned attempt at uncovering objective moral truth could possibly come out with anything like them. Such a project would be more likely

to come out with the theory of natural rights, according to which all intelligent beings have the right to life, liberty, property, and so on.

The Nazis knew that their enemies were individualists and their friends the advocates of 'culture.' "When I hear the word 'culture'," said Hanns Johst, President of the Reich Theater Chamber, in an immortal line, "I slip back the safety-catch of my revolver."<sup>14</sup>

#### Notes

1 O'Brien speaking to the captive hero and thought-criminal, Winston Smith. In George Orwell's *1984*. New York: Signet, 1984, p205.

2 Mangin, William. *It's All Relative*. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1988, p7.

3 *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*.

4 In my fine but unpublished paper, "Observations on Intuitionism, Formal Logic, and the Fallacy of Rationalism," available on request.

5 See his excellent article "Does Moral Philosophy Rest on a Mistake?" in *Moral Obligation*. Also in A.I. Melden, ed., *Ethical Theories: a Book of Readings*.

6 "The naturalistic fallacy" was first coined by G.E. Moore in *Principia Ethica*, 1903. According to Moore, the term stands for the mistake of confusing good with some other, natural property.

7 Introduction to *Death without Weeping*, p22.

8 pp25-6

9 Op. cit., p24.

10 These quotes are from Leonard Peikoff's *The Ominous Parallels*, in which he compares recent trends in America's intellectual climate with developments prior to and during Nazi rule in Germany, chapter 3.

11 Besides Peikoff, see also Harold Ofstad, *Our Contempt for Weakness*, pp64-72, for another description of Nazi subjectivist irrationalism.

12 Quoted in Rolf Tell, *Nazi Guide to Nazism*, p129. This remark is one of several from various Nazis about the need to judge law according to the will of the people.

13 Quoted in Peikoff, op. cit., p42.

14 Ibid.