

Cultural Relativism

JOHN J. TILLEY

Copyright 2001

This is a slightly revised version of “Cultural Relativism,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 22(2) (2000): 501–47. Partly because I saw no page proofs of that article, it went to press with some minor errors and misprints, a few of which affected the meaning of the sentences in which they occurred. (See the errata below.) I have corrected those errors and have made other small improvements in the present version. So I ask that this version be cited along with the published one—e.g., by including, at the end of the initial citation of the published version, the phrase “online version (2001), with minor corrections and changes, available at <<https://philpapers.org/archive/TILCR.pdf>>.”

Errata to the published version:

Pages 503-547: starting with note 7, any reference to Renteln is to Renteln (1990).

Page 506: in the two bullet points, read each instance of “judgment(s)” as “statement(s).”

Page 509: move note 22 two sentences forward.

Page 517: in the block quotation, remove the extraneous letter following each of the first two ellipses.

Page 523: in the first sentence, delete the first “my.”

Page 535: in line 3 of note 60, delete the word “Juris.”

Page 538, note 64: replace “in note 46” with “in note 47.”

Cultural Relativism¹

JOHN J. TILLEY

Copyright 2001

1. INTRODUCTION

We often hear that “morality is relative to culture” or that “right and wrong vary with cultural norms.” These are rough formulations of *cultural relativism*,² a theory with multiple charms, appearing rigorously scientific to some, fashionably postmodern to others. Not surprisingly, cultural relativism is on the upswing in many disciplines³ and is seen by many people as the last word in ethical theory. In what follows I challenge this state of affairs by refuting the chief arguments for cultural relativism.

In doing this I walk some oft-trodden paths,⁴ but I also break new ones. For instance, I take unusual pains to produce an adequate formulation of

¹From: *Human Rights Quarterly* 22(2) (2000): 501–47, with minor corrections/changes. I’m grateful to Rhoda Howard, Louis Pojman, Paul Warren and, especially, Michael Burke for helpful comments. I’m also grateful to Marcus George Singer, whose moral relativism seminar (in 1983) kindled my interest in this subject. Finally, I’m grateful to my students in P326, Ethical Theory, for useful questions and discussions.

²The terminology in this essay is not out of the ordinary, but nor is it universal. For instance, some authors use “ethical relativism” for what I call “cultural relativism,” reserving the latter term for the view that different cultures accept different moral principles. Also, the terms “agent relativism,” “transcendentalism,” “moral nihilism,” “moral liberalism,” and “Victorian morality,” all of which appear in this article, have more than one use in moral philosophy.

³Especially those disciplines concerned with international human rights. See, e.g., Alison Dundes Renteln, “The Unanswered Challenge of Relativism and the Consequences for Human Rights,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 7(4) (1985): 514–40; Alison Dundes Renteln, “Relativism and the Search for Human Rights,” *American Anthropologist* 90(1) (1988): 56–72; Alison Dundes Renteln, *International Human Rights: Universalism Versus Relativism* (London: Sage, 1990); Terry Nardin, “The Problem of Relativism in International Ethics,” *Millennium* 18(2) (1989): 149–61; Martha C. Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice: In Defense of Aristotelian Essentialism,” *Political Theory* 20(2) (1992): 202–46 (recounting conversations that reveal the prevalence of cultural relativism among academics); Sam Garkawe, “The Impact of the Doctrine of Cultural Relativism on the Australian Legal System,” *E Law – Murdoch University Electronic Journal of Law* 2(1) (1995), available in <<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw/issues/v2n1/garkawe.txt>>; Donald J. Puchala, “The Ethics of Globalism,” *Reports and Papers* 3 (1995), available in <http://www.acuns.org/_PDF/publications/Ethics_of_Globalism_Puchala.pdf> (recounting conference events that reveal the prevalence and influence of cultural relativism); and Elvin Hatch, “The Good Side of Relativism,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53(3) (1997): 371–81. Some valuable correctives to this trend are Nussbaum, *op. cit.*, 205–246; Puchala, *op. cit.*, 3–17; Rhoda E. Howard, “Cultural Absolutism and the Nostalgia for Community,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 15(2) (1993): 315–38; Ray Kiely, “Third Worldist Relativism: A New Form of Imperialism,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 25(2) (1995): 159–78; and Anne F. Bayefsky, “Cultural Sovereignty, Relativism, and International Human Rights: New Excuses for Old Strategies,” *Ratio Juris* 9(1) (1996): 42–59.

⁴Critical studies of cultural relativism are numerous. Useful ones include the “correctives” in note 3; also W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* (New York: Macmillan, 1937), chaps. 1–2, 10; Elgin Williams,

cultural relativism,⁵ and I distinguish that thesis from the relativism of present-day anthropologists, with which it is often conflated. In addition, I address not one or two, but eleven arguments for cultural relativism, many of which contribute to its popularity but receive scant attention from its critics. To elicit the failings of these arguments I deploy a host of pertinent but often neglected distinctions. In the end, cultural relativism is seen for what it is: for all its allure and popularity, it is intellectually destitute.

2. FORMULATING CULTURAL RELATIVISM

My first aim is to produce an adequate formulation of cultural relativism. This is not so easy. Relativists state their view in various ways, and those statements are neither precise nor equivalent.⁶ Also, there are two ways in which a judgment might be relative to a culture. First, its truth (or falsehood) might be relative to the culture. That is, the judgment might be true in a relative way rather than an ordinary, nonrelative way. Second, the judgment might be true in an ordinary way but be relative to a culture through a tacit reference to the culture. In the first case the relativity of the judgment derives from the relativity of moral *truth*. In the second the relativity derives from the *content* of the judgment. The two cases differ sharply, but this is not noticed, much less appreciated, in the classic sources for relativism.

“Anthropology for the Common Man,” *American Anthropologist* 49(1) (1947): 84–90; Frank E. Hartung, “Cultural Relativity and Moral Judgments,” *Philosophy of Science* 21(2) (1954): 118–26; Paul F. Schmidt, “Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism,” *Journal of Philosophy* 52(25) (1955): 780–91; David Bidney, “The Philosophical Presuppositions of Cultural Relativism and Cultural Absolutism,” in *Ethics and the Social Sciences*, ed. Leo Ward (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959), 51–76; Richard B. Brandt, *Ethical Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1959), chap. 11; T. L. McClintock, “The Argument for Ethical Relativism from the Diversity of Morals,” *Monist* 47(4) (1963): 528–44; Paul W. Taylor, *Principles of Ethics* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1975), chap. 2; William H. Shaw, “Relativism and Objectivity in Ethics,” in *Morality and Moral Controversies*, ed. John Arthur (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1981), 31–50; F. C. White, *Knowledge and Relativism* (Assen, The Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1983), chaps. 4–5; Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), pt. 1; Louis P. Pojman, *Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong*, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), chaps. 2–3. My discussion has benefited from these authors at many points. A related note: This article was finished in all essentials in mid-1997; hence it makes little use of items that have appeared since then. Among those items are the following, which I recommend highly: Elizabeth M. Zechenter, “In the Name of Culture: Cultural Relativism and the Abuse of the Individual,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 53(3) (1997): 319–47; Michael J. Perry, “Are Human Rights Universal? The Relativist Challenge and Related Matters,” *Human Rights Quarterly* 19(3) (1997): 461–509; Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); William Max Knorpp Jr., “What Relativism Isn’t,” *Philosophy* 73(284) (1998): 277–300; and John W. Cook, *Morality and Cultural Differences* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁵One of my aims is to avoid the errors listed in the Appendix.

⁶For a prime example see James F. Downs, *Cultures in Crisis*, 2d ed. (Beverly Hills, CA: Glencoe, 1975), chap. 2. Downs not only fails to pin down the moral theory he intends, but allows it to change from page to page and to remain entangled with nonmoral ones. For other examples see Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), 278; Ruth Benedict, “Ideologies in the Light of Comparative Data,” in *An Anthropologist at Work*, ed. Margaret Mead (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1959), 383–85, at 383f; and Melville J. Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism: Perspectives in Cultural Pluralism*, ed. Frances Herskovits (New York: Vintage, 1973), 14, 15, 32f, 93, 101.

Despite these difficulties we can formulate a view that strikes a balance among the following: precision, plausibility, significance as a moral theory, and faithfulness to the aims of leading cultural relativists.⁷

First some terminological points. Whenever I speak of one or more people, the people are *moral agents* as well as human beings.⁸ If I say that such-and-such is true of Western culture, the Westerners alluded to are moral agents. (Many human beings, e.g., infants, do not qualify as such.) Also, the words “people,” “agents,” and their cognates refer not just to *actual* human agents, but to *realistically imaginable* ones. Here the word “realistically” indicates that neither the people nor their lives have any grossly far-fetched features—for instance, features that are contrary to what we know about the biological nature of humans. The same goes for the word “cultures.” If I say that such-and-such is confined to a small set of cultures, I mean that such-and-such is confined to a small set of the cultures that are actual or realistically imaginable.⁹

Next, for simplicity let us interpret cultural relativism so that it pertains, not to all moral statements, but to an important set of them, distinguishable in part by their grammatical form. Let us view it as a thesis about *moral judgments*, restricting the latter term to statements of the form, “*X* is (is not) morally right (prima facie right, wrong, good, preferable to *Y*, etc.),” where *X* is an action, practice, or institution. (I apply this restriction solely to “moral judgment(s),” not to “moral statements,” “moral propositions,” and so on.) Let

⁷I have in mind Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*; Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*; William Graham Sumner, *Folkways* (Boston: Ginn, 1906); Ruth Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” *Journal of General Psychology* 10(2) (1934): 59–82; and Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Knopf, 1948). (Some would add Edward Westermarck to this list, but he is properly classified as a moral subjectivist, not as a cultural relativist.) Benedict’s work reflects the influence of Oswald Spengler, who defends cultural relativism in *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles F. Atkinson (New York: Knopf, 1932), vol. 1: 345f. A lesser known relativist, well worth consulting, is Clarence E. Ayres, *Holier Than Thou: The Way of the Righteous* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929). Additional endorsements of cultural relativism are easy to find. See, for example, Allen Wheelis, *The Quest for Identity* (New York: Norton, 1958), 94ff; Edmund R. Leach, *A Runaway World?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 48; and Paul Piccone, “Introduction,” *Telos* 106 (1996): 3–14, at 8. For recent defenses (as opposed to mere endorsements) of relativism see Renteln, *International Human Rights*, chap. 3; and Clifford Geertz, “Anti Anti-Relativism,” *American Anthropologist* 86(2) (1984): 263–78. Actually, “defenses” is not quite accurate. Geertz’s aim is not to support relativism, but to point out faults and excesses of anti-relativists. Renteln’s chief aim is to “correct the caricatured picture of relativism” and to uncover the implications of relativism for human rights issues. So it is not surprising that neither author adds to the stock of arguments used by Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits. A valuable history of cultural relativism is Elvin Hatch, *Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

⁸The point that they are human beings is not superfluous. Some philosophers use “people” interchangeably with “rational agents,” implying that nonhuman rational agents would count as people. I do not use “people” this broadly.

⁹The concept of a nonexistent yet realistically imaginable culture, although fuzzy, is not too fuzzy to be useful. History provides many (though not the only) examples of such cultures, just as science fiction provides many examples of “cultures” that fail to qualify. One reason for extending “cultures” to realistically imaginable cultures, not just to actual ones, is that it enables us to avoid Error 6 in the Appendix. Anyone out to detail some of the main features of realistically imaginable cultures or persons would profit from Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice,” 214–23.

us further restrict the term's meaning by excluding the following: statements that are tautologous or contradictory; statements that expressly reveal whether the object of evaluation accords with the norms (habits, etc.) of a culture; and statements that contain indexicals or explicit references to particular people, groups, or places. Statements *a* through *e* are moral judgments; *f* through *k* are not.¹⁰

- a.* Capital punishment is right.
- b.* Killing animals is not good.
- c.* Lying is prima facie wrong.
- d.* Adoption is morally preferable to abortion.
- e.* Paying one's debts is obligatory.
- f.* Oba's intentions are noble.
- g.* You ought to keep your promise.
- h.* Adri is virtuous.
- i.* Wrong acts are wrong.
- j.* The customs of the Hopi are morally superior to those of the Yanomamö.
- k.* Acts that accord with the norms of the agent's culture are right.

I emphasize that only for simplicity do I interpret cultural relativism so that it fails to concern *f* through *k*. Most relativists intend their thesis to pertain to many such statements. But we can avoid many complications, and do so without diminishing the plausibility of cultural relativism, if we leave such statements aside.

As a further preliminary, let's say that a moral judgment has unqualified validity, or that it's *just plain valid*, if and only if it has these features: first, it is true; and second, neither its truth nor its content is relativized to a specific person or group. If "Stealing is wrong" is just plain valid, then it's true that stealing is wrong, and we need not qualify this by adding "that is, true *relative to culture C* (group *D*, person *E*)." Also, the judgment makes no covert

¹⁰Three comments: First, in this article "right," "wrong," etc. mean "morally right," "morally wrong," etc. Second, some remarks pertinent to statements *i* and *j* are in the Appendix, and much is said about *k* in Section 4. Third, "*X* is prima facie wrong" means the same as "Other things being equal, *X* is wrong."

reference to a particular group or person. For example, it is neither equivalent to, nor elliptical for, “Stealing is wrong when done by those of culture *C*.”¹¹

We also can speak of judgments that are *valid for X*, where *X* is a person or group. A moral judgment is valid for *X* just in case one of two things obtains: either the judgment is just plain valid, or else it has these features: it is true, and although its truth or its content is tied to a specific set of people, *X* is within that set and thus unable to evade the judgment.¹² If “Lying is wrong” is valid for Europeans, no European can sidestep it by saying “But that judgment is shorthand for ‘Lying is wrong when *Africans* do it’” or “But only relative to *Asians* is it true that lying is wrong.” In short, the judgment pertains to thefts by Europeans, and is true for Europeans. No European can brush it aside.

A judgment is *universally valid* just in case it is valid for everyone. It is *locally valid* just in case it is valid for some, but not all, cultures. It is *culturally relative* just in case it has features that ensure that it’s at best locally valid, never universally so.

We now can formulate cultural relativism, followed by its chief rival:

- *Cultural Relativism*: Although for every culture some moral judgments are valid, no moral judgment is universally valid. Every moral judgment is culturally relative.¹³
- *Universalism*: Some moral judgments are universally valid.

Although most of this essay concerns cultural relativism, some of it concerns *agent relativism* and *appraiser relativism*, which are stated below. Thoroughness requires that we address these views because cultural relativists, including Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits, often say things that suggest them.¹⁴ But I hesitate to attribute either view to those authors. This is because both views are

¹¹This is not the only way for “Stealing is wrong” to make a covert reference (as I use that term) to *C*. It would do so if “wrong” were a relational term (like “tall”) and *C* were the relevant reference class.

¹²Two remarks: First, I am assuming that a moral judgment is valid for group *X* only if it is valid for each member of *X*. Second, as my wording indicates, I am deliberately ignoring the possibility that some moral judgments are relative to group *X*, but not to group *Y*, in their truth, and to *Y*, but not to *X*, in their content. This view lacks proponents, not to mention plausibility.

¹³Given the meaning of “culturally relative,” some brands of relativism face a curious problem. They assert that some moral judgments are valid for *no one*. But if “*X* is wrong” is valid for no one, it seems to follow that “*X* is not wrong” is valid for everyone, in which case cultural relativism is false. Having mentioned this problem I will put it aside, except to say that the relativists who face it may not be alone. A variation of it seems to plague *error theories* of moral judgment. (For such a theory see J. L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977], especially p. 35.) If we agree with error theorists that all moral judgments, including “Stealing is permissible,” are false, we seem to imply that “Stealing is not wrong” is true, in which case not all moral judgments are false.

¹⁴Sumner, *Folkways*, §§ 31, 65, 439; Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” 73; and Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 101. The terms “agent relativism” and “appraiser relativism,” by the way, are borrowed from David Lyons, “Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence,” *Ethics* 86(2) (1976): 107–21. (Lyons uses the terms “agent’s-group relativism” and “appraiser’s-group relativism.”)

very implausible. I show this in the fourth section of this article; in the fifth section I proceed to my main topic: arguments for cultural relativism.

- *Agent Relativism*: Moral statements that positively assess an action—for instance, “That was morally good” and “It would be morally right for Claire to assist Alf”—are true if and only if the action accords with the cultural norms (i.e., the socially approved habits) of the agent who performs the action. By the same token, moral statements that negatively assess an action are true if and only if the action conflicts with the cultural norms of the relevant agent.
- *Appraiser Relativism*: If a person makes a positive moral statement about an action or an action-type—for instance, by asserting “That was morally right” or “Cannibalism is morally OK”—her statement is true if and only if the action accords with the norms of her culture. If she makes a negative moral statement about the action, her statement is true if and only if the action conflicts with the norms of her culture.

3. CLARIFYING REMARKS

The views to be discussed require eight further comments. First, my formulation of cultural relativism contains the word “valid,” the explication of which contains the word “true.” Perhaps some will frown at this, maintaining that *truth* is a dated and stifling concept. But such frowns are hard to take seriously. To assert that truth is a dated concept is to put forward as *true* the statement “Truth is a dated concept.” Those who think otherwise are loading the word “true” with more meaning than it actually has. To assert a proposition is to advance it as true. So unless we are prepared to quit making assertions, we should not frown on the notion of truth. Perhaps we should frown on certain *theories* of truth, but that’s another point.

Second, throughout most of this article I speak as if universalism were the only alternative to cultural relativism. This is partly for simplicity and partly because the debate over cultural relativism is mainly between cultural relativists and universalists. It is not because cultural relativism and universalism are the only possibilities. One way to oppose cultural relativism without being a universalist is to defend *moral nihilism*, the view that every moral statement is either false or meaningless and hence valid for no one.¹⁵

Third, cultural relativism is not advanced by its proponents as a *relative* truth. Their view is not that cultural relativism is true relative to a particular

¹⁵A pristine example of what I mean by moral nihilism is the emotive theory defended by A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, 2d ed. (New York: Dover, 1946), chap. 6.

group, but that cultural relativism is true, period.¹⁶ We should read cultural relativism with this in mind, and thus distinguish it from more global forms of relativism that do not exempt the thesis “Every moral judgment is culturally relative” from being true in only a relative way. However, we cannot ignore these other forms of relativism. Unfortunately, cultural relativists sometimes use one of them when arguing their case. They invoke *total* relativism, the view that every statement is true or false relative to one of a myriad of incommensurable, but equally rational, frameworks of belief.¹⁷ I say “unfortunately” because the resulting argument fails. We will encounter it in a later section.

Fourth, we must sharply distinguish the theses in the previous section from the relativism of present-day anthropologists. Early in the twentieth century such a distinction may have been unnecessary, but now things are different. When anthropologists speak of “cultural relativism” they seldom have in mind an *ethical* view.¹⁸ They usually mean one of the following:¹⁹

- *Methodological Contextualism*: Every custom, belief, or action must be studied in the context of the culture in which it occurs. That is, it

¹⁶This is not only the standard way of interpreting cultural relativism, but the most charitable way. It also is borne out by the unqualified way in which cultural relativists state their thesis. See, e.g., Sumner, *Folkways*, §§ 31, 42, 44, 65, 439, 572; Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 101; and Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” 73. Also relevant are Renteln, *International Human Rights*, 68f; and Schmidt, “Some Criticisms of Cultural Relativism,” 781f.

¹⁷For instance, Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits seem to do this at times. (I say “seem” because they are not entirely clear about the thesis they intend.) See Sumner, *Folkways*, § 232; Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 2; and Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 15.

¹⁸And when they do have such a view in mind, we usually find them rejecting it. See, e.g., Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, chaps. 5, 7; H. Russell Bernard, *Research Methods in Cultural Anthropology* (London: Sage, 1988), 117; Henry H. Bagish, “Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist,” in *Anthropology 90/91*, ed. Elvio Angeloni (Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 1990), 30–37; Stanley Jeyaraja Tambiah, *Magic, Science, Religion, and the Scope of Rationality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 128f; Janine Hitchens, “Critical Implications of Franz Boas’ Theory and Methodology,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 19(2-3) (1994): 237–53, at 248f; Conrad P. Kottak, *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 45f; and James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy, “Culture and the Contemporary World,” in *Conformity and Conflict*, 9th ed., ed. James P. Spradley and David W. McCurdy (New York: Longman, 1997), 3–11, at 8. A second point: When contemporary anthropologists write about “cultural relativism” they sometimes choose words that suggest one of the theories in Section 2. But when their words are read in context, the view in question almost always turns out to be one of those below. This point may pertain to a few of the authors in note 19.

¹⁹These positions are not new in anthropology (Benedict and Herskovits held both), nor is the habit of calling them “cultural relativism.” What’s new—i.e., different from the first half of the twentieth century—is the habit of restricting that term to these positions, thereby excluding the moral theories in Section 2. For the first of the two positions see Richley H. Crapo, *Cultural Anthropology*, 3d ed. (Guilford, CT: Dushkin, 1993), 17, 38f; Michael C. Howard, *Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*, 4th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 5f, 14; Serena Nanda, *Cultural Anthropology*, 5th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), 17, 19; and F. Allan Hanson, “Racism and Relativism,” *Tikkun* 10(6) (1995): 63–66, at 66. For the second position see Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, 11; Bagish, “Confessions,” 33f; Marvin Harris, *Cultural Anthropology*, 3d ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 10f; and David H. P. Maybury-Lewis, “A Special Sort of Pleading: Anthropology at the Service of Ethnic Groups,” in *Talking About People: Readings in Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*, 2d ed., ed. William A. Haviland and Robert J. Gordon (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield, 1996), 16–24, at 17.

must be studied in light of the history and traditions, problems and opportunities, and total body of customs of the society in which it is found. Otherwise, we will gain little insight into other cultures.

- *Methodological Neutralism*: To understand other cultures, social scientists must suppress their moral convictions when studying those cultures. Although they cannot entirely free themselves from such convictions, they should try to put the convictions aside in the interest of accurate research.

These views entail none of the forms of relativism defined earlier.²⁰ For instance, they do not entail cultural relativism, for they imply nothing about moral validity. The general lesson here is that although cultural relativism has adherents in many academic disciplines, it is not the *gospel* in any of those disciplines, including anthropology. The view that relativism is an axiom of anthropology is either false or fifty years out of date.²¹

Fifth, if the difference between appraiser relativism and agent relativism is not clear, or if it is not clear just how sharp that difference is, an example will help. Suppose the norms of Ravi's culture differ from those of Ruth's. Suppose also that Ruth is doing something that accords with the norms of her culture but not with those of Ravi's. Ravi states that Ruth's deed is wrong. According to appraiser relativism, Ravi's statement is true because the deed he is evaluating conflicts with the norms of his culture. But according to agent relativism, Ravi's statement is false because the evaluated deed accords with the norms of the agent's culture, the agent being Ruth.

Sixth, agent relativism and appraiser relativism differ in many ways from cultural relativism. For one thing, each concerns a class of statements that differs from (but overlaps with) the class we have dubbed "moral judgments." (For instance, unlike cultural relativism, agent relativism and appraiser relativism each extend to the statement "That act is right.") Also, each is more specific than cultural relativism about several things, including the aspect of culture to which morality is connected and the nature of the connection. Each asserts a connection between morality and cultural *norms*, and maintains that the connection is as tight as possible.

The difference just mentioned has important consequences. Suppose that Claire buys some veal, her deed agreeing both with the norms of her culture and with those of Chen's. Later, Claire and Chen conclude that Claire's deed

²⁰This is emphasized by some of the social scientists who accept these views. Examples are Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, 11; Hanson, "Racism and Relativism," 66 col. 2; Howard, *Contemporary Cultural Anthropology*, 5f; and Maybury-Lewis, "A Special Sort of Pleading," 17.

²¹This dated view is common among philosophers. Unfortunately, it often blinds them to some worthwhile literature. I have in mind the many useful criticisms of cultural relativism that have been written by anthropologists. Three examples: Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, chaps. 4 & 5; Bidney, "Philosophical Presuppositions"; and David Bidney, "The Concept of Value in Modern Anthropology," in *Anthropology Today*, ed. A. L. Kroeber (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 682–99.

was wrong. (Perhaps they have become animal rights activists.) Agent relativism and appraiser relativism each imply that Claire and Chen have drawn false conclusions. But cultural relativism, as we have defined it, has no such implication. Cultural relativism does not exclude the possibility that although buying veal accords with the norms (customs, traditions) of Claire's culture, "Buying veal is wrong" is valid for her culture, whereas "Buying veal is right" is invalid.

A key point here is that cultural relativism does not assert an agreement between valid moral judgments and norms (traditions, etc.). Perhaps "Eating veal is wrong" is valid for a culture, even though eating veal accords with the norms of the culture. Another key point is that cultural relativism implies no *test* for moral validity. That is, it does not tell us how to check moral judgments for validity or how to identify the cultures for which the judgments are valid. Most relativists will flesh out their thesis to say that the scope of any moral judgment's validity matches the scope of various norms, meaning that the judgment is valid only for cultures that share those norms. And most will say that it's the agreement of the judgment with the norms that makes the judgment valid.²² But this is beside the point. The point is that cultural relativism *simpliciter* is simply a metaethical thesis that limits the scope of each moral judgment's validity. It is not a normative thesis that helps us identify valid moral judgments or their corresponding cultures.²³ (As some might put it, cultural relativism is merely a *schema* for normative theories of a particular type.) This does not make the thesis trivial. For one thing, if cultural relativism is true many normative theories stand refuted, for they presuppose universalism.

Seventh, universalism, like cultural relativism, is strictly metaethical. It does not tell us how to identify universally valid moral judgments. At various points I speak of this or that "version" of universalism, by which I mean a combination of universalism either with a belief that this or that moral judgment is universally valid, or with a proposal about how to check moral judgments for validity.²⁴ But universalism *simpliciter* differs from all of these "versions." From the bare fact that a person is a universalist we can infer nothing about the content of his moral beliefs—for example, that he opposes multiculturalism or affirmative action. We can infer merely that he thinks that

²²See, for example, Ayres, *Holier Than Thou*, 11, 15; Wheelis, *The Quest for Identity*, 94ff.

²³A *metaethical* theory aims to illuminate one or more features of moral language or thought, perhaps even to provide a comprehensive account of such language and thought. A *normative* ethical theory furnishes moral guidance by, say, providing a method for identifying valid moral judgments. In saying that cultural relativism is strictly metaethical I am deviating from the views of Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits, who intend their theory to be normative as well as metaethical. But I am doing so in a charitable way, a way that diminishes the number of objections to which they are open. Insofar as Sumner, Benedict, and Herskovits defend a normative theory, that theory is a brand of agent relativism or appraiser relativism, and hence open to the objections in Section 4. See the passages cited in notes 14 and 27.

²⁴Not everything I call a "version of universalism" counts as a full-blown normative theory, though many such theories are indeed versions of universalism.

some moral judgments are universally valid. Perhaps he has no detailed list in mind.

This point is especially relevant in later sections (e.g., sec. 6, part K). But it's worth noting early, for this reason: Some universalists have highly conservative agendas. They want to persuade us not only of universalism, but of specific moral judgments that discourage liberal causes. This leads some people to confuse universalism with conservatism. To prevent misunderstanding let me note that I am not writing as a conservative, particularly if "conservative" implies antipathy to cultural pluralism.

Eighth, cultural relativism is often defined as the view that "different cultures are subject to different moral standards" or that "the moral standards of one culture do not apply to others." But the terms "subject to," "standard," and "apply to" are left undefined, making the definitions in which they figure unclear. The terminology in Section 2 helps remove the unclarity, turning the previously murky expressions into handy ways of stating the relativist's key points. Let us say that culture *C* is "subject to" a moral standard that requires (permits, forbids) *X*, or that the standard "applies to" *C*, just in case the moral judgment "*X* is obligatory (right, wrong)" is valid for *C*. Cultural relativism can now be expressed as the view that although all cultures are subject to moral standards, there is no moral standard that applies to all cultures.

4. AGENT RELATIVISM AND APPRAISER RELATIVISM

This section addresses agent relativism and appraiser relativism.²⁵ These views have implausible implications, largely because they assert a skin tight connection between morality and cultural norms.

Imagine a culture in which the norms require the first-born of each family to be burned alive at the age of two. These norms did not evolve willy-nilly. They grew up, and remain current, owing to the belief that the frequency of plagues can be diminished only by burning the first-born of each family. This custom causes great suffering, but those who practice it see it as a necessary evil. Now suppose that a member of this culture devotes herself to the study of disease, and discovers that burning first-born children does nothing to reduce the frequency of plagues. According to agent relativism, this person should dismiss her discovery as *irrelevant* to the morality of burning first-born children. The rightness of a deed is determined by the *norms* of the agent's culture; it has nothing to do with the origin or rationale of those norms. Perhaps the norms derive from errors about the consequences of what the norms

²⁵Much of the material in this section is taken, with slight modifications, from two of my other papers: "Cultural Relativism, Universalism, and the Burden of Proof," *Millennium* 27(2) (1998): 275–97; and "The Problem for Normative Cultural Relativism," *Ratio Juris* 11(3) (1998): 272–90. The same goes for some other portions of this essay. For instance, much of Section 7, part F, appears in "The Problem for Normative Cultural Relativism," 281f.

prescribe, but according to agent relativism this makes no difference to the rightness or wrongness of violating those norms.

This implication of agent relativism is false. If a moral evaluation of a practice stems, however indirectly, from errors about the consequences of the practice, the correction of those errors is surely relevant to subsequent thinking about the morality of the practice.

A second implication of agent relativism is that we can resolve ethical disputes by taking a poll or in some other way uncovering the local norms. This implication is implausible. If we find two Alaskans arguing about whether it would be right for them to go herring fishing, it's useless to tell them that such fishing agrees with the norms of their culture. They already know that; their dispute concerns something else.

A third problem is that agent relativism makes trouble for the notion of moral reform. Imagine a culture in which the norms prescribe racial discrimination, and a member of that culture who tries to reform it by peacefully resisting the oppressive norms and inspiring others to do likewise. If agent relativism is true, this person is not a reformer but a wrongdoer, for his deeds conflict with the norms of his culture. The general problem is easy to see. The quintessential moral reformer is one who furthers the cause of morality by challenging practices that are entrenched in his culture. But according to agent relativism, to challenge such practices is not to further the cause of morality; it is to do just the opposite. Thus, paradoxically, to be a moral reformer is to fail to be a moral reformer.

Appraiser relativism is no more plausible than agent relativism. It implies, falsely, that Celia does not necessarily contradict herself if she says to Yoko, "When you say that abortion is morally right, what you say is perfectly true. Nevertheless, abortion is not morally right."²⁶ Perhaps Celia's culture differs from Yoko's, and abortion agrees with the norms of Yoko's culture but not with those of Celia's. If so, to accept appraiser relativism is to imply that Celia's comment to Yoko is not only logically flawless but true. The trouble, of course, is that Celia's comment is not logically flawless; it is plainly contradictory.

A second implausible consequence of appraiser relativism is that to pass moral criticism on the norms of one's own culture is always ridiculous. For what is it to pass such criticism on those norms if not to judge that many deeds that accord with them are wrong? But according to appraiser relativism, to judge those deeds as wrong is to judge falsely, given that the norms with which they accord are the norms of one's own culture.

Let's consider a third problem for appraiser relativism. Suppose the norms of Ali's culture permit polygyny, but the norms of Juan's culture forbid it. Now suppose that Ali and Juan each assert, at the same time and place, and in the

²⁶See Jonathan Harrison, *Our Knowledge of Right and Wrong* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1971), 230; see also pp. 120f.

same situation, “Polygyny, whenever and wherever it occurs, is morally right.” If appraiser relativism is true, Ali has uttered a truth and Juan has uttered a falsehood, which means they have made different assertions about polygyny. This is puzzling, to say the least.

Appraiser relativists have a reply, but it is not effective. Their reply is that “morally right” means “in accord with the norms of my culture.”²⁷ The latter phrase contains the indexical expression “my culture”; so there is nothing puzzling about the claim that when Juan and Ali say “Polygyny is morally right” they are asserting different things. Each speaker is tacitly referring to his own culture.

This reply is implausible. For if “morally right” were a stand-in for “in accord with the norms of my culture,” anyone who morally denounced a practice after granting that it agrees with the norms of her culture would contradict herself. If Jill said “Racism accords with the norms of my culture, but it’s not morally right” she would be guilty not only of a falsehood but of a contradiction. Clearly, though, Jill has uttered no contradiction. Thus, “morally right” is not a stand-in for “in accord with the norms of my culture.”

5. ARGUMENTS FOR CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism (hereafter “relativism” for short) is not as clearly flawed as the previous two views. It implies that morality is somehow a function of culture, but unlike agent relativism and appraiser relativism, it says nothing about the exact nature of the function or the aspects of culture to which morality is tied. So its proponents can argue, without obvious absurdity, that they can flesh out their view so that it avoids problems of the kind just discussed.²⁸

Even so, their thesis requires support, and as shown in the next few sections, it receives no support from the relativists’ arguments.²⁹ Some of these arguments are tempting, others invite the comment famously made by F. H. Bradley about an opponent’s thinking: “I am ashamed to have to examine such

²⁷For variants of this view see Sumner, *Folkways*, § 439; and Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal,” 73.

²⁸For a hint as to how they might proceed, see the second sentence in note 11. Frankly, I believe that a close scrutiny of cultural relativism would uncover some problems of the kind discussed in Section 4. I will not pursue this because I want to focus on the *arguments* for cultural relativism.

²⁹Most of these arguments fall into three categories. Those in the first category aim to show that relativism is confirmed by the study of diverse cultures. Those in the second aim to reveal desirable aspects of relativism or undesirable aspects of universalism. Those in the third aim to illustrate by example that what is wrong in one culture is not wrong in the next, or that widely different customs can be equally right. Presumably, we are to infer from the examples that relativism is true, no doubt because it so easily explains the illustrated point. Arguments of all three types appear in the classic texts of relativism, though often in only embryonic form. For instance, what I later dub the “nomad argument” and the “ethnocentrism argument” are suggested, respectively, by Sumner, *Folkways*, § 333; and Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 50. The “tolerance argument” is suggested by Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 37, 278; and by Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, 76, 78. For the “research argument” see Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 14f, 39, 51, 101; and Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, 78.

reasoning, but it is necessary to do so, since it is common enough.”³⁰ The appeal of the arguments stems from confusions, and once the confusions are cleared up—that is, once we make some distinctions—the arguments collapse. What follows are unadorned versions of the arguments. Further refinements, as well as the distinctions that undermine the arguments, come later.

A. The Triviality Argument

According to the first argument, universalism is tempting only if we focus on judgments that are so lacking in definite content that even if they were valid for everyone, nothing important would follow. When offering examples of universally valid moral judgments, universalists wisely avoid the judgment, “Kindness is right, *period*.” They offer “Kindness is *prima facie* right,” which indeed has the look of a universally valid truth. But the judgment tells us merely that *being an act of kindness* is a right-making feature of any act. How do we know when that feature is outweighed by wrong-making features, resulting in an act of kindness that is ultimately wrong rather than right? The judgment does not provide an answer; it leaves each culture to solve the problem its own way. Nor does the judgment clarify “kindness”; hence, different cultures will interpret the term differently. So even if the judgment is universally valid, nothing important follows.

B. The Polygyny Argument

The next argument begins with facts about different cultures. Some cultures practice polygyny, others monogamy, and still others polyandry. In some cultures modesty of dress is the norm; in others it is not. Also, although peyote is outlawed in many cultures, it has a traditional place in others. Such examples are numerous. What they share is a reference to customs which, no matter how odd they appear to some, are seen as natural by those who practice them. Can anyone say that only some of these customs are right, that all of the others are wrong? Can anyone reasonably think that from this vast array of accepted customs, only a few warrant the label “moral,” the others being immoral or evil? Surely not; hence we should grant that right and wrong vary with culture.

C. The Human Sacrifice Argument

The third argument resembles the second, but concerns a more “appalling” custom. That custom, let’s suppose, involves beheading people, often dozens at a time, as a form of religious sacrifice. In our culture this deed would be wrong, but just imagine an isolated culture that has practiced it for ages and sees it as

³⁰F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 115n.

mandated from heaven.³¹ The people of this culture have never had occasion to question the practice; also, they see it as their only way to avoid divine punishment.

Now imagine someone from our culture arriving on their shores and morally condemning them for their deeds. Surely this is ridiculous. It would not be ridiculous, however, if aimed at perpetrators of such deeds in our own culture. Clearly, good and evil are culturally variable.

D. The Nomad Argument

The fourth argument concerns a homicidal custom that derives, not from religious beliefs, but from living conditions. Consider a nomadic culture that mercifully kills those who are too old and feeble to walk long distances. The nomads cannot carry these people along with the group, yet migration from one food source to another is required for the group's survival. The only alternative to killing the old and weak is to abandon them to a slow death by starvation and exposure. For this reason, the custom is to kill these people in a painless way. Those who receive this treatment see it as kindness; they would feel wronged if treated differently.

Can anyone plausibly say that the custom described here is immoral? Surely not, yet the custom described, that of killing the old and weak, would be wrong if practiced by us. Obviously, right and wrong vary with culture.

E. The Research Argument

We now come to the most common argument for relativism. To state it simply, research shows that the morality of one culture differs radically from that of the next. The word "radically" is crucial. The point is that moralities differ *fundamentally*, not merely in what they prescribe about this or that practice. This has been documented at length through the work of anthropologists and shows that what is right for one culture is wrong for others.

F. The True-for-Them Argument

The sixth argument resembles the fifth, but is worth considering separately. According to this argument, a study of diverse cultures reveals that whatever is true for one culture is false for others. For example, although for us it is true that the earth is spherical, for the ancient Egyptians it was true that the earth is flat. This does not stop us from criticizing the Egyptians' views; even so, such criticism merely reflects our own standpoint, it does not show that *for the*

³¹The term "our culture" (and any term akin to it), both here and elsewhere in this article, need not refer to the *author's* culture. It can be interpreted to refer to most any culture the reader chooses, though in a few cases this may require minor adjustments in the relevant passage or argument.

Egyptians the earth was not flat. What goes for geological statements clearly goes for moral ones; so no moral judgment is universally valid.

G. The Fallibilism Argument

The next argument focuses not on the notion of truth, but on that of certainty. It begins with the plausible premise, often called *fallibilism*, that all knowledge is tentative, provisional. There are no beliefs of which we can be absolutely certain, no incorrigible truths on which our belief system can be founded. Therefore, when justifying our beliefs we must ultimately rely on the customs and traditions of our respective cultures. This applies to moral beliefs no less than to any others and results in a brand of cultural relativism. Thus, to reject cultural relativism is implausible. To do so is to accept the outdated, discredited view that absolute certainty is attainable.

H. The Empirical Outlook Argument

According to the eighth argument, to reject relativism in favor of universalism is to opt for the view that moral standards are absolute. But who in this scientific age can accept such a view! How can it be true that monogamy is not only morally right, but *absolutely* so? And if moral standards are absolute rather than relative, exactly what are they and from whence do they come? Are they mysterious entities that exist outside of time and space? Do we grasp them through mystical insight? Clearly, anyone with a modern, empirical outlook will reject such hypotheses and accept relativism.

I. The Ethnocentrism Argument

We can introduce the next argument by asking, Who's to judge? Universalists say that some moral judgments are valid for everyone, but when asked to state them they always list the rules of *their* culture. They label as "right" the habits of their own people and condemn as "wrong" the habits of others. In short, universalists are implicitly ethnocentric; they have an attitude of cultural superiority. But such an attitude is unjustified. The reasonable option is to accept relativism.

J. The Naiveté Argument

A further reason to accept relativism is that to accept its opposite, universalism, is to betray a childish naiveté about the source and influence of morality. Our morality derives, not from the apprehension of moral truths, but from enculturation. And no matter what its source, it has only a limited effect on behavior. Most human affairs are guided, not by moral principles, but by politics, and normally reflect the interests of those in power. This is especially true of what

appear to be disputes about moral precepts. As one author puts it, commenting on the principle of free speech:

People cling to [these] pieties because they do not wish to face . . . the alternative. That alternative is *politics*, the realization . . . that decisions about what is and is not protected in the realm of expression will rest not on principle or firm doctrine, but on the ability of some persons, to interpret—recharacterize or rewrite—principle and doctrine in ways that lead to the protection of speech they want heard and the regulation of speech they want silenced. . . . In short, the name of the game has always been politics. . . .³²

K. The Tolerance Argument

The final argument is this: Relativism, unlike other moral theories, has the following attractive feature: to accept it is to be tolerant of other cultures. Relativism implies that we cannot impose our morality on other cultures, which in turn implies that we must refrain from doing so. And to refrain from doing so is to be tolerant. Thus, if we accept relativism we are logically committed to a policy of tolerance.

6. NEGLECTED DISTINCTIONS

This section presents the distinctions relativists neglect, the distinctions that undermine the above arguments. The next section continues the discussion and application of the distinctions, and considers replies from the relativist.

A. Indefinite Judgments versus Empty Judgments

First, we must distinguish *indefinite* judgments, meaning those whose content is indefinite, from *empty* ones. A moral judgment is empty just in case it is both practically and philosophically unimportant, in which case we can grant it to be universally valid without granting anything interesting. “Kindness is *prima facie* right” is indefinite, but it is far from empty. It is indefinite because it does not settle the question whether this or that act is one of kindness, or whether, assuming an act to be one of kindness, the act is morally right. (This is not to say that these questions cannot be settled; merely that the judgment itself does not settle them.) But it is far from empty, for two reasons. Firstly, if it is universally valid something important follows, namely, that relativism is false, not only in letter but in spirit. For if “Kindness is *prima facie* right” is valid for everyone, there is nothing about moral concepts that prevents the judgments in which they figure from being universally valid. So perhaps *many* such judgments are universally valid, including many that are highly definite. Those

³²Stanley Fish, “There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech and It’s a Good Thing, Too,” in *Are You Politically Correct?: Debating America’s Cultural Standards*, ed. Francis J. Beckwith and Michael E. Bauman (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1993), 43–55, at 51.

who aim to identify such judgments can continue their work, ignoring any naysaying from relativists.

Secondly, the view that kindness is *prima facie* right does not lack practical importance. Some deeds clearly are acts of kindness; others clearly are not. Perhaps a gray area exists between acts of the first sort and acts of the second, but this is irrelevant. A concept with fuzzy boundaries is not a concept *without* boundaries. Furthermore, many kind deeds have no features that could plausibly count as wrong-making features. Thus, their evaluation requires no *weighing* of right-making qualities against wrong-making ones.³³ In sum, a judgment can be highly indefinite without being vacuous in a practical sense.

B. Morality versus Victorian Morality

We must also distinguish morality, meaning morality as it is usually conceived, from “Victorian morality.” The latter consists of a hodgepodge of taboos regarding such things as sexual behavior, styles of dress, marital customs, and the use of intoxicants. It includes such precepts as these: “Premarital sex is wrong”; “Wearing short skirts is immoral”; and “Smoking hashish is evil.” Clearly, the subjects addressed by Victorian morality constitute, at most, only a small portion of those addressed by morality. Morality centrally addresses, not the length of hemlines and the like, but actions by which we harm, kill or endanger people, violate their autonomy, or treat them unfairly. It addresses rape and torture, slavery and genocide, to name just a few things. Consequently, any thesis that purports to be about morality—meaning morality in general, not just a limited or marginal part of it—must address deeds of the sort just listed, not merely such things as sexual behavior. Otherwise, it rests on a contrived understanding of “morality.”³⁴

C. Liberalism versus Relativism

Third, we must distinguish relativism from moral *liberalism*, a common version of universalism.³⁵ Moral liberals hold that some moral requirements are universal, especially the requirement to respect one another and show due regard for the welfare, freedom, and cultural integrity of all people. In this way liberals differ from relativists. They also differ from moral conservatives, for they do not condemn premarital sex, homosexuality, the use of marijuana, and many

³³Even when this requirement exists, it seldom creates great difficulties. But I will let this pass.

³⁴“But who’s to say what ‘morality’ means! Maybe for *me* it means nothing more than Victorian morality.” Whatever the attractions of this response, relativists would be wise to avoid it. If relativism says nothing about the morality of rape, torture, and racism, if it implies nothing about whether “Slavery is wrong” and “Genocide is evil” are universally valid, it contributes nothing to moral theory.

³⁵Notes 2, 24, and 50 are relevant here. For examples of moral liberalism see Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, chap. 7; and Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, chaps. 3, 7, 8. Neither author makes the mistake mentioned later in this paragraph.

other things conservatives denounce. Such things, liberals contend, are in themselves neither wrong nor obligatory; hence they are morally permissible. And because they are morally permissible, each person or culture has considerable autonomy when it comes to adopting or rejecting them. Some liberals express this idea misleadingly, by saying that “morality is relative.” Having done so, they call themselves “relativists,” and then feel hesitant to reject any view labeled “relativism.” Predictably, we often find them avowing two incompatible views, relativism and liberalism.

Just as liberals often stray into relativism, relativists often stray into liberalism, despite the contradiction involved.³⁶ It is inconsistent to say, on the one hand, that no moral requirement is universal and, on the other, that everyone is morally required to respect other cultures. No matter how often we find relativism and liberalism conjoined, we should not see them as compatible. They are as contrary as any two views can be.

D. Moral Judgments versus Judgments of Blame

The fourth distinction is between moral judgments, as earlier defined, and judgments of *blame*. I use “blame” broadly, to mean “blame, rebuke, reproach, or reproof.” To the extent that judgments of blame evaluate something, they evaluate an agent, or an agent in relation to her actions. But moral judgments evaluate actions themselves. Hence there is a great difference between judgments of blame and moral judgments. One consequence is that to cite facts about judgments of blame—for instance, the fact that such judgments are inappropriate in many contexts—is neither to show, nor to come close to showing, that no moral judgment is universally valid. For example, even if we could prove that judgments of blame are always false or inappropriate, we would not threaten the claim that “Genocide is not good” is universally valid.³⁷ Whether that claim is universally valid is not settled by determining whether those who commit genocide are blameworthy.³⁸

³⁶See, e.g., Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 37, 278; Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 33, 93f; and Herskovits, *Man and His Works*, 76. For a pertinent and helpful discussion of Benedict’s work, see Williams, “Anthropology for the Common Man.”

³⁷Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 86f.

³⁸Likewise, whether “Genocide is not good” is universally valid is not settled by determining whether “You should not commit genocide” is true no matter who “you” designates. For this reason, Gilbert Harman’s thesis in “Moral Relativism Defended” (*Philosophical Review* 84[1] [1975]: 3–22) is irrelevant to the present topic (and not very contentious—see Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 90). Harman argues that “inner judgments,” meaning judgments that evaluate an agent in relation to an action (e.g., “You should not do that”), are relative to reasons with two features: they are endorsed by the person making the judgment; and they can motivate the evaluated agent. Harman’s argument does not tie inner judgments specifically to culture, nor does it address moral judgments as they are defined in this paper. In short, it does not support cultural relativism. For criticism of Harman’s thesis see B. C. Postow, “Moral Relativism Avoided,” *Personalist* 60(1) (1979): 95–100; David Copp, “Harman on Internalism, Relativism, and Logical Form,” *Ethics* 92(2) (1982): 227–42; John Tilley, “Inner Judgements and Moral Relativism,”

E. Situationism versus Relativism

Next, we must distinguish relativism from the commonplace view that whether a deed is right or wrong “depends on the situation” or is “relative to circumstances.” This view is compatible with universalism. Suppose we reject relativism because we see the following as universally valid: “Causing needless suffering is wrong.” Now suppose we are asked, “Is it wrong to detonate TNT?” Naturally, we will say that it depends on the situation. However, in deciding what the situation demands we will consult the principle we hold as universally valid: that causing needless suffering is wrong. It would be wrong to detonate TNT in a busy café, causing much needless suffering. It would not be wrong to do so in a rock quarry as a means of splitting rocks.

Similar remarks apply to other actions. Some acts, if performed by us, would cause needless suffering owing to the circumstances in which we live. In other cultures they might cause no suffering owing to circumstances that differ markedly from ours.³⁹ So it is plausible to say that in our culture, but not in the others, the acts are wrong. This is compatible with saying that “Causing needless suffering is wrong” is universally valid.

In sum, we must not confuse relativism with *situationism*,⁴⁰ the view that determinations of right and wrong must be sensitive to circumstances. (Likewise, we must not confuse universalism with the denial of situationism.) Situationism is an important truth, but it is neither a moral theory nor a contribution to moral theory. Nor is it anything new. It has been acknowledged for ages, and has been accommodated by moral outlooks of all kinds.⁴¹

Philosophia 18(2-3) (1988): 171–90; and Robert L. Arrington, *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 202–20.

³⁹It goes without saying that what we are dubbing “circumstances” are sometimes related to culture. For instance, what counts as a joke in one society might count as an insult in another, owing to cultural differences between the societies. This truism about circumstances lends no support to relativism. It is widely different from the view that no moral judgment is universally valid.

⁴⁰The usual term is “situational relativism.” “Situationism” is useful because “relativism” does not appear in it; so we risk no confusion with *cultural* relativism.

⁴¹Many people find this surprising. They have the vague idea that situationism is a discovery of the last hundred years or so. Some of them even believe that relativists deserve credit for the discovery. Lest these errors gain more currency, I will document the case against them with especial thoroughness. See Plato, *Republic* (360 B.C.), in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), bk. 1, 331c, at 580; Aristotle, *Ethica Nicomachea* (350 B.C.), in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), bk. 2, 1104a1–9, 1109b14–27, at 953, 964; Cicero, *The Offices* (44 B.C.), in *Cicero’s Offices*, trans. Thomas Cockman (London: Dent & Sons, 1949), 14f, 27, 120, 124f; St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (1273), trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947–48), vol. 1: I, q. 19, a. 6, ad. 1; I-II, q. 7, aa. 2, 3; q. 18, aa. 3, 4, 10, 11; q. 73, a. 7; q. 94, a. 4; John Locke, *Essays on the Law of Nature* (c. 1663; first published 1954), in *Locke: Political Essays*, ed. Mark Goldie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), essay 7, at 120–27; William Wollaston, *The Religion of Nature Delineated* (1724), in *British Moralists*, ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), vol. 1: §§ 287f, at 248f; Edward Bentham, *An Introduction to Moral Philosophy* (1745) (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), 27f; Catharine Trotter Cockburn, *The Works of Mrs. Catharine Cockburn*, ed. Thomas Birch (London, 1751), vol. 1: 431f; vol. 2: 73; David Fordyce, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754) (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1990), 47f, 107; Adam Ferguson, *Institutes of Moral Philosophy*, 2d ed. (1773) (New

F. Validity versus Acceptance

Next, we must distinguish *valid* moral judgments from *accepted* ones. A moral judgment is *accepted* by a culture just in case most members of the culture regard the judgment as valid, at least for their own culture. The fact that a judgment is *regarded* as valid does not ensure that it *is* valid; so acceptance does not ensure validity. Likewise, the fact that a judgment is valid does not ensure that people regard it as such; so validity does not ensure acceptance.

We easily overlook these points owing to our dual use of the word “morality.” We often speak of “the morality of the Dinka” or “the morality of the Inuit,” meaning the set of moral precepts the people *accept*. We are neither saying nor denying that the precepts are valid. On other occasions we say “Morality forbids cruelty” and “Morality requires that we respect our neighbors,” meaning that a set of *valid* moral principles forbids cruelty and disrespect. Given this dual use of “morality” it is easy to conflate accepted moral judgments with valid ones. It is easy to think that because the Inuit’s morality differs from the Dinka’s, the precepts that are valid for the first culture are not valid for the other. But such thinking is muddled. When we say that the Inuit’s morality differs from the Dinka’s we mean that the two cultures *accept* different moral precepts. This implies nothing about the validity of those precepts. Perhaps neither set of precepts is valid; perhaps both are.

G. Truth versus Justification

The next distinction is between truth and justification.⁴² Suppose I give Ruth a coin and she slips it into her pocket. Moments later, when she is looking the other way, I skillfully pick her pocket and remove the coin. Is it now *true* that the coin is in Ruth’s pocket? Clearly not. But is Ruth *justified* in believing that the coin is in her pocket? Of course she is. She put it there herself, and she has no evidence that it has been removed. The example shows that a belief can be justified without being true.

York: Garland, 1978), 163f; Richard Price, *A Review of the Principal Questions in Morals*, 3d ed. (1787), ed. D. D. Raphael (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), 164f, 175f; Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 6th ed. (1790), ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976), 174, 331f, 339f; Jeremy Bentham, *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, 2d ed. (1823), ed. Wilfrid Harrison (Oxford: Blackwell, 1948), chap. 7, sec. 21, at 194f; Dugald Stewart, *The Philosophy of the Active and Moral Powers of Man* (Boston: Wells and Lilly, 1828), vol. 2: 326; George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), ed. A. S. Byatt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), bk. 7, chap. 2, at 628; Adolf Wuttke, *Christian Ethics* (1864–65), trans. John P. Lacroix (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1873), vol. 2: 133–39; Thomas Rawson Birks, *First Principles of Moral Science* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 262f; Paul Janet, *The Theory of Morals* (1874), trans. Mary Chapman (New York: Scribner’s, 1883), 163f; Walter H. Hill, *Ethics*, 2d ed. (Baltimore: John Murphy, 1878), 62ff; and J. H. Muirhead, *The Elements of Ethics* (New York: Scribner’s, 1892), 197, 213 .

⁴²For useful discussions see Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, chap. 1; and Max Hocutt, “Some Truths about Truth,” *Behavior and Philosophy* 22(2) (1994): 1–5.

Some people hesitate to grant the distinction between truth and justification because they reason in one of the following five ways.

- (1) To think that “true” differs in meaning from “justified” is to grant, implausibly, the existence of a strange entity called “Truth.”
- (2) To think that truth differs from justification is to think there is an extralinguistic reality to which true statements correspond. In short, it is to grant the embarrassingly old-fashioned *correspondence theory of truth*.
- (3) To think that Ruth’s beliefs can be justified without being true is to think that Ruth can be mistaken. But who am *I* to say that Ruth is mistaken! What makes *me* so infallible that I can pass judgment on Ruth’s beliefs!
- (4) To think that truth differs from justification is to think there is a “cosmic” perspective, a “God’s-eye” point of view, from which truths can be distinguished from falsehoods. But no such perspective exists.
- (5) If I grant that beliefs can be justified without being true, I must grant that *my* beliefs can be justified without being true. So even the things I’m fully justified in believing—for instance, that the earth is spherical—might be false. But to grant that they might be false is to cease believing them (if only momentarily), and I find that I cannot sincerely do this. Thus, I am logically barred from granting that they might be false; hence I am barred from thinking that beliefs can be justified without being true.

All five arguments are unsound. To grant that truth differs from justification is neither to grant that truth is a *thing*, nor to accept the (anything but embarrassing) correspondence theory of truth.⁴³ Nor is it to think that we are infallible or that we can achieve a cosmic perspective (whatever that is). Nor, finally, is it to cease believing what we justifiably believe. To see all this, note that (A) through (F) are logically compatible.

- (A) Some justified beliefs, including Ruth’s belief about the coin, are not true.
- (B) There is no such *thing* as truth. To say that truth exists is merely to say that some statements are true. The word “merely” is appropriate because the assertion “‘Fire is hot’ is true” is equivalent to “Fire is

⁴³An accessible defense of the correspondence theory—or a correspondence theory—is in John R. Searle, *The Construction of Social Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1995), chap. 9. Also helpful is Hocutt, “Some Truths about Truth,” 37.

hot.” The first assertion carries no more metaphysical baggage than the second one does.

- (C) Truth is not a species of *correspondence*.
- (D) There is no *cosmic* perspective from which truths can be sifted from falsehoods.
- (E) The earth is spherical.
- (F) Although I justifiably believe (E), there is always a chance, however slim, that (E) is false. The same goes for my other justified beliefs (including (A) through (D)). In fact, it is safe to say that some of my justified beliefs are false, though I do not know exactly which ones.

The point that we must distinguish truth from justification amounts to this: we have good reason to accept (A). Because (A) is compatible with (B) and (C), to grant (A) is not to accept a bizarre metaphysic or a correspondence theory of truth. And because (A) is consistent with (D) through (F), to grant (A) is neither to cease believing that the earth is spherical, nor to claim infallibility or the advantage of a cosmic standpoint.

The distinction between justification and truth is often blurred by a common way of speaking. Rather than saying “Ruth is justified in thinking that the coin is in her pocket” many people say “It’s *true for Ruth* that the coin is in her pocket.” The second statement contains the word “true”; hence it leads some people to conflate justification with truth.

This is just one of the confusions spawned by the expression (G) “It’s true for *R* that *p*,” which is a common substitute for each of the following, more precise, statements:

- *R* is justified in believing that *p*.
- *R* believes that *p*.
- One of *R*’s sincere beliefs, a belief *R* expects others to respect, is that *p*. (For example, “It’s true for me that abortion is right” is a common substitute for “One of my sincere beliefs, a belief I expect you to respect, is that abortion is right.”)
- It’s true that *p*-for-*R*. (For example, “It’s true for me that Chili is too hot” means “It’s true that Chili is too hot for me” [which in turn means “Chili is too hot to suit me”]).

The thought behind (G) is almost always a variant of one of the four just listed.⁴⁴ Thus, we should distrust any argument in which (G) is a premise, especially if it concludes with any claim about the *truth* of *p*—for instance, the claim that *p* is a relative truth. Not one of the four items for which (G) is a surrogate implies that *p* is true in any way. For example, although “It’s true that Chili is too hot for me” implies the truth of “Chili is too hot to suit me,” it implies nothing about the truth of “Chili is too hot, period.”

H. Fallibilism versus Relativism

Next, we must distinguish relativism from fallibilism. (Likewise, we must distinguish universalism from the denial of fallibilism.) Fallibilism, the view that all knowledge is provisional, that complete certainty is unattainable, implies that we cannot be absolutely certain of the validity of any moral precept. This does not support relativism, for it does not imply that the validity of which we cannot be absolutely certain is confined to just one or a few cultures. To put this another way, universalism is about the *scope* of a moral principle’s validity; it is not about the *certainty* that attends (or does not attend) moral principles. Thus, to show that certainty is impossible is not to refute universalism. The debate between relativists and universalists arises *within* the fallibilist camp, not merely beyond its borders.⁴⁵

Another difference between fallibilism and relativism is that fallibilism *per se* is not the least bit “cultural.” Fallibilism implies that a specific theory of epistemic justification, namely foundationalism, is false.⁴⁶ This is not to imply that the correct view of justification, whatever it is, ties justification to cultures. Certainly it is not to imply that justification is so thoroughly a function of cultural norms, habits, and so on that whatever is justifiably believed in one culture cannot converge with what is justifiably believed in others. If such

⁴⁴I might have overlooked the fourth one had I not heard Dennis Stampe mention it. The example—about the chili—is his.

⁴⁵Indeed, fallibilists who reject relativism are numerous. Two examples are Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, pt. 1; and David O. Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). A second point: The footnoted sentence suggests that just as fallibilists can be universalists, nonfallibilists can be cultural relativists. This is indeed the case. Nonfallibilism, in its classic form (known as *foundationalism*), asserts that some beliefs are incorrigible and that others are justified insofar as they are, or can be, reliably derived from the incorrigible ones. This thesis comports with the view that every moral truth tacitly refers to, and in that sense is “relative to,” a specific culture. In short, a moral belief can be founded on incorrigible truths and at the same time be indexed to, or tacitly about, a particular culture. (Sumner and Herskovits can be interpreted along these lines, though it would take some work to show this.) Thus, the debate over fallibilism cannot settle the debate over relativism, and *vice versa*. We must keep these issues distinct.

⁴⁶Foundationalism is defined in note 45. Alternatives to it include *coherentism* and *minimal* (or *fallibilist*) *foundationalism*. Each of these views incorporates fallibilism; neither entails cultural relativism or anything close to it. Both views are discussed in Robert Audi, *The Structure of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Coherentism is also discussed by Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, chap. 5.

convergence is impossible, this will have to be established on grounds entirely different from fallibilism.

I. Universalism versus Absolutism

The next distinction is between universalism and moral *absolutism*. To clarify the latter we must first distinguish moral *rules* from moral *principles* (both of which must be distinguished from moral *verdicts*). Although the boundary between rules and principles is fuzzy, and often there is room for debate about whether we have a rule or a principle, we can contrast the two as follows.⁴⁷ Moral principles are more general and more basic than moral rules—more general in that they apply to a wider class of actions; more basic in that they are used to justify moral rules, whereas the converse is not true. “Armed robbery is wrong” is a moral rule; “Causing needless unhappiness is wrong” is a moral principle. The second statement applies to an immense variety of actions and is commonly used to justify the first (by working in combination with the premise that armed robbery usually causes needless unhappiness). The first judgment concerns a much narrower class of actions and is not used to justify the second.

Now to clarify moral absolutism. According to that view, many ordinary moral rules are not only universally valid but *indefeasible*: they cannot be overridden by other moral considerations, even in extreme circumstances. The words “ordinary” and “rules” are important. The absolutist’s point is not that moral *principles* are indefeasible, but that we can find many indefeasible truths even among moral *rules*. Also, we can find plenty of them among *ordinary* moral rules—the rules we learned from our parents and schoolteachers. Such rules include “Stealing is wrong,” “Honesty is right,” “Law-breaking is unethical,” and “Paying one’s debts is obligatory.” According to absolutists many such rules are indefeasible as they stand; there is no need either to alter the act-descriptions—for instance, by replacing “stealing” with “stealing merely for the sake of stealing”—or to insert “normally” or “prima facie” before the words “wrong,” “right,” and so on.⁴⁸

Universalism does not imply absolutism. Most universalists reject absolutism, maintaining that ordinary moral rules, when valid, are also defeasible.⁴⁹ A

⁴⁷For a more detailed discussion see Marcus George Singer, *Generalization in Ethics* (New York: Atheneum, 1971), chap. 5. Also relevant are Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, chap. 4; and Nicholas Rescher, *Objectivity: The Obligations of Impersonal Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), 136–44. My treatment of rules, principles, and verdicts is fairly traditional and perhaps oversimplified. For a more complicated picture see Arrington, *Rationalism, Realism, and Relativism*, chap. 1. The complications undermine none of the main results of this section.

⁴⁸My definition of absolutism, specifically my insertion of “ordinary” in front of “moral rules,” reflects the influence of Marcus George Singer, “The Ideal of a Rational Morality,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 60(1) (1986): 15–38, at 28.

⁴⁹Five examples: Pojman, *Ethics*, 47; Rescher, *Objectivity*, 164; Singer, *Generalization in Ethics*, 123–33; Friedrich Paulsen, *A System of Ethics*, trans. Frank Thilly (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1899), 233ff, 360–63; and Kwasi Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*

plausible way to flesh out this idea is to say that such rules are elliptical for statements that concern what is *usually* right or wrong. On this view, “Paying one’s debts is obligatory” is short for “Paying one’s debts is usually obligatory” or “Paying one’s debts is obligatory in the situations you and I (the audience and speaker) normally face.” The latter precepts, even if universally valid, do not imply that people should pay their debts come what may.

J. Universalism versus Transcendentalism

A further distinction is between universalism and moral *transcendentalism*. The latter is the view that rightness and wrongness have no relation to human needs or happiness. In its most extreme form, it implies that moral facts are unrelated not only to the needs and happiness of people, but to the world people inhabit. To be a universalist is not necessarily, or even usually, to be a transcendentalist. Utilitarians, for instance, see the following as universally valid: “Acts that produce at least as much happiness as the situation permits are right; acts that fail to do so are wrong.”⁵⁰ Clearly, this “principle of utility” does not divorce moral rightness from human happiness, much less from the world people inhabit.

K. Universalism versus Ethnocentrism

Next, we must distinguish universalism from ethnocentrism. The ethnocentric person uncritically accepts the prevailing views of his culture and sees cultures with contrary views as ignorant or backward. The universalist, on the other hand, thinks merely that some moral standards apply to all cultures. He is not bound to the idea that these universal standards, whatever they are, dovetail with the accepted views of *his* culture. Perhaps he is skeptical of those views. And even if he is not, perhaps he knows that moral beliefs are hard to justify and that intelligent, well-meaning people can hold different moral opinions. Knowing this, he is likely to respect the moral views of others, to see them as anything but ignorant or backward.

L. Universalism versus Naiveté

The next distinction is between universalism and *moral naiveté*. By the latter I mean either an underestimation of the degree to which moral beliefs are influenced by enculturation, or an overestimation of the degree to which moral

(Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 65f. See also Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, 193f; Taylor, *Principles of Ethics*, 26–29; and Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 174. An objection may come to mind here: namely, that when relativists identify universalism with absolutism they are not using “absolutism” the way I do. I address this objection in Section 7, part H.

⁵⁰In this paper I use utilitarianism (meaning *act* utilitarianism) and liberalism, both of which are forms of universalism, to illustrate various points. This is because both views are plausible and familiar. Whether they are *true* is an independent issue, an issue on which the general points of this essay do not hinge. For an illustration of this claim see note 65 and the accompanying text.

concerns underlie human conduct. Universalism neither entails nor fosters such naiveté. It implies nothing about the source of moral beliefs or about what motivates people to act. It says that some moral judgments are universally valid, but “universally valid” means nothing akin to “highly influential” or “accepted independently of enculturation.”

M. Moral Projection, Moral Coercion, and Moral Victimization

Finally, we must distinguish three meanings of the statement “We cannot impose our morality on other cultures”:

- (1) We cannot *project* our morality onto other cultures, meaning this: we cannot reliably conclude, merely from the fact that “X is right” is valid for our culture, that “X is right” is valid for other cultures.
- (2) We should not *morally coerce* other cultures. That is, we should not force the people of other cultures to comply with a moral demand simply because it is a demand to which the people of *our* culture are subject.
- (3) We should not *morally victimize* other cultures.

What is it to morally victimize others? It is to harm innocent people as a result of our moral views. Consider the Crimean Tatars of the seventeenth century. They thought that it was morally permissible to capture and enslave Russians, so they made annual raids on these people and sold them as slaves. The Russians were not merely victims of the Tatars, but victims of the Tatars’ morality.

Relativism is specifically about the scope of moral validity; so although it rules out projecting our morality onto others it does not rule out morally victimizing or morally coercing them. Consider again the Tatars. Suppose they accept relativism and conclude that because of cultural differences between themselves and Russians, the judgment “Conducting raids to enslave people is right,” although valid for Tatars, is unlikely to be valid for Russians. This is merely to grant a point about the limits of a judgment’s validity; it does not compel the Tatars, either logically or morally, to refrain from their raids. It is consistent for the Tatars to accept relativism and grant that they cannot project their morality onto Russians, while insisting that they can, and should, raid and enslave Russians.

N. Summary

In sum, when examining arguments for cultural relativism we must distinguish:

1. indefinite judgments from empty ones;

2. morality from Victorian morality;
3. relativism from moral liberalism;
4. moral judgments from judgments of blame;
5. relativism from situationism;
6. validity from acceptance;
7. truth from justification;
8. relativism from fallibilism;
9. universalism from absolutism;
10. universalism from transcendentalism;
11. universalism from ethnocentrism;
12. universalism from moral naiveté; and
13. moral projection from moral coercion and moral victimization.

These distinctions are not nit-picking, nor are they pertinent solely to the topic of relativism. They are essential to any edifying discussion of ethics. But as the next section reveals, cultural relativists neglect them.

7. THE FAILURE OF THE RELATIVIST'S ARGUMENTS

Let's continue our discussion by returning to the relativist's arguments. By the end of this section it will be evident that all eleven arguments fail, largely because they ignore the distinctions in the preceding section.

A. The Failure of the Triviality Argument

The triviality argument fails because it confuses indefinite judgments with empty ones. As said earlier, "Kindness is *prima facie* right" is indeed indefinite, but it is far from empty. The argument harbors a second error as well, for we can easily make universalism tempting without focusing on indefinite judgments. The following are far from indefinite, but they surely make universalism tempting: "Torturing children for the fun of hearing them scream is wrong." "Annihilating a culture because its customs seem odd is not good." "Starting a nuclear war merely to demonstrate military might is immoral." It's hard to believe that these judgments lack universal validity. No wonder relativists steer clear of them when arguing their case.

Perhaps relativists will complain that the effectiveness of the examples stems from act-descriptions that refer to *motives*. This calls for two replies.

First, there is nothing underhanded about such descriptions. They are a common way of producing highly definite moral judgments. Second, relativists should be wary about granting “effectiveness” to the examples. If they mean that the examples are indeed universally valid they have abandoned their thesis, for they have admitted that some moral judgments are valid for everyone. This admission contradicts relativism no matter what act-descriptions appear in the judgments. Also, it implies that there is nothing about moral predicates that prevents the judgments in which they occur from being valid for all cultures. So it’s likely that many such judgments are universally valid, including many that say nothing about motives.

Some relativists (though not the diehard ones) are likely to make a second complaint. They will exclaim: “But we don’t deny that such judgments are universally valid! The whole point of our thesis is that cruelty and oppression are universally wrong, that respect and tolerance are universally right!” But if this is indeed their “whole point,” they have nothing to contribute to moral theory. If relativism is not an alternative to universalism, if it is merely a set of familiar remarks that most any brand of universalism can accommodate, it lacks the philosophical importance its defenders claim for it.⁵¹ To the extent that it has that importance it conflicts with universalism, which means that it *does* deny, implicitly at least, that the example judgments are universally valid.

B. The Failure of the Polygyny Argument

The polygyny argument fails also. To see this, imagine a person who believes that polygyny and polyandry are universally wrong. Does the argument do anything to refute this belief? Of course not. It merely *assumes* that the reader will lack that belief and agree that polygyny and polyandry are right in some cultures.

But even granting that polygyny, polyandry, and so forth are right in some cultures, the polygyny argument is unpersuasive if we distinguish morality from Victorian morality. That is, the argument is persuasive only if we think of morality as a set of precepts about marital customs, habits of dress, and the like. Once we recall that morality concerns such things as slavery and genocide, the argument loses appeal. Anyone who doubts this need only return to the argument and replace “peyote” with “slavery,” and substitute “racism,” “imperialism” and “genocide” for “monogamy,” “polygyny” and “polyandry.” The revised argument is not tempting in the least.

If the polygyny argument is so easily made unpersuasive, no doubt a logical flaw lurks somewhere behind the rhetorical one. It is not hard to find. Upon reading the argument and granting its premise about the rightness of polygyny, monogamy, and so on, we are expected to reject universalism in favor of relativism. The trouble is this: we can grant that the listed customs are

⁵¹See Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 14; Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 278.

right for their respective cultures but then plausibly accept one of many versions of universalism, an example of which is *liberalism*. According to moral liberals, polygyny *qua* polygyny is neither wrong nor obligatory; the same goes for monogamy and polyandry. So of course it can be right, meaning morally permissible, for one culture to practice polygyny, another polyandry, and so on. To make the point another way, the polygyny argument fails unless the rightness of the customs it mentions can be explained only by granting relativism. However, the rightness of the customs is easily explained on the assumption of moral liberalism. That assumption also explains why the polygyny argument loses appeal when we replace “peyote” with “slavery,” “monogamy” with “racism,” and so forth. According to liberalism, slavery and racism are at sharp odds with the moral requirement to treat people with respect.

C. The Failure of the Human Sacrifice Argument

The human sacrifice argument ignores the difference between judgments of blame and moral judgments. It focuses on our reluctance to condemn, i.e., blame, the people in the imaginary culture. We have good reasons for this reluctance, but they are not tied to any kind of moral relativism. To state them briefly, a person is blameworthy for a deed only if the deed was done intentionally or negligently, and either with a belief that the deed was wrong or with information and abilities that should have led to such a belief. The deed of those in the isolated culture does not meet these conditions. So, naturally, we are reluctant to assign blame.

But this is a small point; the key point is that judgments of blame differ so much from moral judgments that any argument that trades on the inappropriateness of blame fails to support relativism. To repeat an earlier example, even if we could prove that judgments of blame are always false or out of place, this would not threaten the claim that “Genocide is not good” is universally valid.

D. The Failure of the Nomad Argument

The nomad argument is slightly better than the previous two arguments, for it concerns neither Victorian morality nor judgments of blame. Instead, it trades on the plausibility of this statement: (1) Killing the old and weak is right for the nomads but wrong for us.

But why is (1) so plausible?⁵² The answer is found in situationism. More exactly, the following judgment is universally valid, and it permits killing the

⁵²Some will contend that (1) is *not* plausible, that mercy killing is always wrong. We need not dispute their point. If it is true, the nomad argument fails owing to a false premise. If it is not true, the nomad argument fails for the reasons I am about to state.

old and weak in the nomads' situation, but not in ours: (2) An act that prevents intense suffering, and produces no avoidable ill results, is morally right.

In short, the plausibility of (1) derives not from relativism but from a universally valid truth applied to different circumstances. Or at least this is true: the nomad argument does nothing to threaten the hypothesis that (2) is universally valid, for the plausibility of (1) is easily explained on that very hypothesis: that (2) is universally valid. So the nomad argument fails. Like the other arguments for relativism, it is tempting only if we ignore a distinction, in this case the distinction between relativism and situationism.

E. The Failure of the Research Argument

The research argument fails for two reasons. First, the premise that different cultures accept radically different moralities is questionable. There is evidence that at the level of general principles the moral views of the world's cultures overlap significantly.⁵³ Second, even if different cultures accepted different moral principles, nothing would follow about the validity of those principles. Acceptance is one thing, validity is another; hence, a judgment can be universally valid without being universally accepted.

It will not do to retort, "But who's to say there's any moral validity!" or "But who's to say which judgments are valid!" Such questions are beside the point.⁵⁴ The point is that acceptance and validity are different properties. The claim that no moral principle is universally accepted does not imply that no moral principle is universally valid. This is a purely logical point; it does not presuppose a view about which moral principles are valid, or even that any such principles are valid.

Nor will it do to say that we have misunderstood the premise of the research argument. We have interpreted that premise to be about *accepted* moral principles, not about valid ones. This is necessary if the premise is to count as an empirical thesis. To read it as the claim that *valid* moral principles vary with culture is to make it something that anthropological research can neither confirm nor refute, which is to make the argument in which it figures only nominally a "research" argument. Worse yet, it is to make the argument question-begging.

Perhaps relativists will reply that we can change the research argument so that it avoids the above problems. First, we can change its premise so that it

⁵³For discussions, summaries, and pieces of this evidence, see the following authors and the many others they cite: Brandt, *Ethical Theory*, 285–88; W. H. Davis, "Cultural Relativity in Ethics," *Southern Humanities Review* 9(1) (1975): 51–62; and Frances V. Harbour, "Basic Moral Values: A Shared Core," *Ethics and International Affairs* 9 (1995): 155–70. Also relevant are Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, chap. 6; and William Edward Hartpole Lecky, *History of European Morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (1869) (New York: Braziller, 1955), vol. 1: 91–110.

⁵⁴Also, relativists would be amiss to ask the first question, for their thesis asserts that some moral judgments are valid.

concerns *rules* rather than principles. Second, we can say that although relativism is not entailed by the new premise, it provides the *best explanation* of the diversity to which the premise refers.

The problem with this reply is that we can easily explain the diversity of accepted rules without embracing relativism. The conditions in which people live and interact differ from one society to the next. So we should expect any universally valid principle—for instance, “Causing pointless suffering is wrong”—to spawn many different rules.⁵⁵

In fact, even if different societies accepted different moral *principles* we would have no reason to accept relativism. Moral questions are complicated, both conceptually and empirically. They involve intricate arguments and hairsplitting distinctions, and are entangled with difficult empirical issues. In addition, they trigger biases and emotions that affect our thinking. So even if some moral principles are universally valid we should *expect* to find different people accepting different ones.⁵⁶ Also, we should expect the differences to correlate, at least roughly, with differences in culture. Biases, nonmoral beliefs, and emotional responses, all of which influence moral thinking, are culturally influenced.

I can think of a plausible objection to this point, but it fails to support relativism. It runs as follows. To say that different cultures accept entirely different moral principles is to imply that some cultures accept none of the moral principles we do. Those principles include “Deliberately causing pointless misery is wrong” and “Helping a critically injured neighbor is *prima facie* right.” So some cultures do not accept these principles, but they do accept principles that qualify as *moral* principles—this is what we imply if we say that different cultures accept entirely different moral principles. The trouble is this: If someone who means what we mean by “deliberately causing pointless misery” and “helping a critically injured neighbor” rejects the two principles just stated, we have reason to think that he does not mean what we mean by “wrong” and “right.” (For what is it to understand those terms if not to think, among other things, that deliberately causing pointless misery is wrong?) But if he does not mean what we mean by those terms, how did we determine that he accepts principles that are *moral* principles? We normally identify a person’s moral principles by identifying those of his principles that contain the predicates “right” and “wrong,” where the latter are used much the way we use them. (Or else we look for principles that contain *equivalents* of those

⁵⁵We should expect this for other reasons as well. For pertinent and useful remarks see Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, chap. 10; Lecky, *History of European Morals*, vol. 1: 91–110; Morris Ginsberg, *On The Diversity of Morals* (London: William Heinemann, 1956), 101–110; Ronald D. Milo, “Moral Deadlock,” *Philosophy* 61(238) (1986): 453–71; and Judith Jarvis Thomson, “The No Reason Thesis,” in *Foundations of Moral and Political Philosophy*, ed. Ellen Frankel Paul *et. al.* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 1–21, at 15–18.

⁵⁶Assuming, that is, that it’s *possible* for different people to accept different ones. See the next paragraph in the text.

predicates, identifying them according to similarities in usage.) If he uses them in a radically different way, we do not count the principles in which they occur as moral ones, unless we are using “moral” in a bizarre sense.

If this reply is forceful it works against the research argument, for it strengthens and extends the earlier point that moral tenets do not vary radically around the world. It strengthens that point by casting doubt on the case against it. What some researchers see as radical differences in accepted moralities are most likely only *verbal* differences, not moral ones.⁵⁷ It also extends the earlier point to cover rules as well as principles, because “Helping a critically injured neighbor is *prima facie* right” is a moral *rule*, despite anything said in the previous paragraph.

F. The Failure of the True-for-Them Argument

The true-for-them argument confuses justification with truth. The source of the confusion is the premise that although it is true for us that the earth is spherical, it was true for the ancient Egyptians that the earth is flat. This premise is unobjectionable only if it serves as a stand-in for one of the following:

- We think the earth is spherical, but the ancient Egyptians thought the earth to be flat.
- Although we are justified in believing the earth to be spherical, the ancient Egyptians were justified in believing the earth to be flat.

However, if the premise is a stand-in for one of these sentences, it neither illustrates nor supports any view about the variability of *truth*. It indeed supports the claim that “whatever is true for one culture is false for others,” but only if that claim means something like this: Whatever is *believed* by one culture is doubted by others.

A likely reply is that the true-for-them argument cannot be dismissed so easily. Its claim that whatever is true for one culture is false for others is a crude statement of a view which, when properly formulated, clearly rules out universalism. The view in question is this:

- *Total Relativism*: Every truth is a *local* truth, meaning that it’s true for, or within, one of a myriad of incommensurable, but equally rational, frameworks of belief. So no true assertion, moral or

⁵⁷For more on this point, which to my knowledge no relativist has adequately addressed, see Stout, *Ethics After Babel*, 19–21; Rescher, *Objectivity*, chap. 9; Martin E. Lean, “Aren’t Moral Judgments ‘Factual’?” in *Readings in Ethical Theory*, 2d ed., ed. Wilfrid Sellars and John Hospers (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1970), 369–84, at 382ff; David Cooper, “Moral Relativism,” *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 97–108; and J. L. A. Garcia, “Relativism and Moral Divergence,” *Metaphilosophy* 19(3-4) (1988): 264–81, at 275–80.

nonmoral, has any rational purchase on those who do not share the framework to which the assertion is relative.⁵⁸

From this view it follows that no moral judgment is universally valid; so universalism stands refuted.

The problems with this brand of argument are well known.⁵⁹ Total relativism refutes nothing, because it applies to all assertions, including itself and any conclusions drawn from it. Thus, it implies that the following views cannot command the assent of anyone outside of the relevant frameworks:

- (1) Total relativism is true.
- (2) If total relativism is true, no moral judgment is universally valid.
- (3) No moral judgment is universally valid.

Consequently, total relativism does not threaten universalism.⁶⁰

Note, by the way, that statement (3) is not redundant. If total relativism is true, then relative to some frameworks (3) is false even if (1) and (2) are true. Relative to those frameworks it is false that if p entails q , and p is true, then q is true. We must be careful here, of course. Given total relativism, nothing said in this paragraph, including the claim that it says something, is true for all frameworks. Or is it? It all depends on our framework—unless, of course, our framework is one that makes it false that it all depends on our framework. But watch out. If total relativism is true the preceding caveat is not true for all frameworks. Nor, for that matter, is the one just stated. Or is it? It all depends . . .

No doubt these remarks are perplexing. The problem is not with the remarks but with total relativism. To reflect on that thesis is to lose our grip on it, which means that it's not fully intelligible.

⁵⁸Some people assume that total relativism has been established by the individual or combined work of various "postmodern" thinkers—e.g., Stanley Fish, Jacques Derrida, and Richard Rorty. This assumption is made by Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy, *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992). These authors accept total relativism but never state it clearly. For a brief but sound criticism of their endorsement and use of that thesis, a criticism that applies to many other postmodernists, see Francis J. Beckwith, "A Critique of Political Correctness," in *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*, 3d ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1996), 582–88. Three other brief but forceful works on this topic are Richard D. Mohr, "The Perils of Postmodernism," *Harvard Gay and Lesbian Review* 2(4) (1995): 9–13; Thomas Nagel, "The Sleep of Reason," *New Republic*, 12 October, 1998, 32–38; and Margarita Rosa Levin, "A Defense of Objectivity," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 2d ed., ed. Louis P. Pojman (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 631–42.

⁵⁹See Plato, *Theaetetus*, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, 875–77 (170a–171c). For recent discussions see Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1987); James F. Harris, *Against Relativism* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1992); John Preston, "On Some Objections to Relativism," *Ratio* 5(1) (1992): 57–73; and Harold Zellner, "Is Relativism Self-Defeating?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 20(1) (1995): 287–95.

⁶⁰Nor will it do to exempt total relativism from what it says about other judgments. If one judgment is exempt from it perhaps many are, including many moral ones.

But let's return to my first claim about total relativism. That claim, again, is that if total relativism is true, statements (1) through (3) cannot command the assent of anyone outside of the relevant frameworks; hence, total relativism fails to threaten universalism. Suppose the relativist contends that my claim stands refuted because every assertion, including mine, is at best a *relative* truth. Then insofar as his contention has force, it refutes itself, in which case it has no force.

Suppose, on the other hand, that he claims that our belief-framework is no different from his, and that relative to that framework, (3) is true. We can point out that we have seen no evidence for this claim. More important, according to his thesis any such evidence would be genuine *evidence* for only one framework. And for all we know, that framework—call it *F*—differs from ours and from most others, including the one relative to which we are mistaken in thinking that *F* differs from ours, and the framework relative to which we are similarly mistaken about the framework just mentioned—the one relative to which we are mistaken in thinking that *F* differs from ours.

Suppose, finally, that the total relativist claims that although universalism is an option for those beyond the framework to which (3) is relative, those who share that framework cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism. We can reply that, given total relativism, his claim is relative to a specific framework. And for all we know, that framework differs both from ours and from the one to which (3) is relative. Perhaps for the latter frameworks, it's false that those who share the framework to which (3) is relative cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism. Worth adding is that any evidence to the contrary is relative to a particular framework, which very likely differs not only from ours and the one to which (3) is relative, but from the framework relative to which we are mistaken in saying what we just said—namely, that for our framework and the one to which (3) is relative, it's false that those who share the framework to which (3) is relative cannot be faulted for rejecting universalism.

Once again our discussion has become perplexing. Even so it confirms something, namely, the earlier point that total relativism cannot disprove anything, including universalism. To use total relativism for that purpose is neither to refute nor to support anything; it is merely to become mired in (literally) endless complications. Frustrated with this, some total relativists will respond as follows: "We are not in the business of refuting or supporting things! We dismiss such activity as futile, and merely *invite* you to share the mood, the style, the perspective expressed by our thesis." The problem with this response is that it's useless to those we are addressing, namely, cultural relativists who wish to use total relativism in *support* of their position. Also, we have no reason to accept, or even to entertain, the invitation extended here. Those rebuffed by this statement should think twice about disputing it. To give reasons to accept an invitation is to enter the business of *supporting* things.

G. The Failure of the Fallibilism Argument

The fallibilism argument presupposes, falsely, that fallibilism entails relativism. This is enough to render it unsound. However, lest it retain an air of credibility let us note not only that fallibilism fails to support relativism but that fallibilism is no more *congenial* to relativism than it is to universalism. Anything fallibilism implies about human beliefs—for instance, about the confidence we place in them—applies to all human beliefs, including the relativist’s. For instance, its implication that certainty is unattainable applies to the following beliefs no less than to any others: “I am a member of a culture”; “There is more than one culture in the world”; “Different cultures have different customs”; and “Cultural relativism is plausible.” It follows that if a lack of certainty necessitated a lack of confidence, fallibilism would rule out confidence both in relativism and in the assumptions on which relativism rests. Also, if a lack of certainty meant that epistemic justification is culturally relative, cultural relativism could not be justifiably held by all cultures.

These remarks do much to forestall an objection to my claim that fallibilism and relativism differ. The objection is that fallibilism is similar in spirit, even if not in letter, to relativism. Although fallibilism puts no limits on the scope of any precept’s validity, it puts substantial limits on the confidence we can place in our moral beliefs. That such limits exist is something relativists have long insisted upon; thus, to grant fallibilism is to make a large concession to relativism.

This objection is mistaken in two ways. First, cultural relativists see nothing wrong with moral confidence, provided the beliefs in which it inheres are valid. Ruth Benedict would see nothing out of line about a Zuñi’s confident belief that for the Zuñi premarital sex is morally permissible.⁶¹ She would indeed see something out of line about a Zuñi’s confident belief that “Premarital sex is morally permissible” is valid for everyone. But this is because Benedict deems the latter belief *false*, not because she sees moral confidence as inappropriate in all cases.⁶²

Second (and at the price of some repetition), fallibilism, as it pertains to moral beliefs, implies merely that such beliefs are “tentative” or “provisional” in the special sense fallibilists give those terms. It implies that moral beliefs are *corrigible*, or *in principle revisable*, and as such are in the same boat with the following beliefs (all of which, according to fallibilism, are in principle revisable): “1=1.” “I exist.” “Others besides myself exist.” “My birth preceded my reading of *Folkways*.” “There is more than one culture in the world.” “Relativists and universalists use language when defending their views.”

⁶¹Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 126. I am not saying (nor am I denying) that Benedict thinks certainty is attainable. Confidence and certainty are two different things. (See note 63.)

⁶²Benedict does some confident moralizing in *Patterns of Culture*, 32, 37, 247–50.

Does anyone, including any relativist, lack confidence in these beliefs? Of course not. Nor is there any need to, even if we reject foundationalism. Foundationalism is neither the only plausible account of justification, nor the only one at home with the commonsense view that some beliefs warrant considerable confidence.⁶³ So the rejection of foundationalism does not put “substantial limits” on the confidence we can place in our beliefs. If it be said that special difficulties attend confidence in *moral* beliefs, my reply is that this needs to be *shown*; it does not follow from fallibilism. If it *is* shown, it will apply to all moral beliefs, including the ones relativists are eager to vindicate—namely, those that aspire to merely “local,” or culturally specific, validity. Hence it will advance the relativist’s cause not a whit.

H. The Failure of the Empirical Outlook Argument

The empirical outlook argument confounds universalism with absolutism; also with transcendentalism.⁶⁴ We can see its weakness by asking if it refutes utilitarianism, a common version of universalism. It does not.⁶⁵ The principle of utility does not tie rightness to anything transcendent—for instance, to mysterious facts that we grasp through mystical insight. Nor does it make any moral rules exceptionless. Utilitarians hold that all moral rules are defeasible. The only exceptionless moral truth is the principle of utility.

A possible reply is that we have distorted what relativists mean by “absolutism.” We must take this reply seriously because “moral absolutism” sometimes refers, not to the view that most ordinary moral rules are exceptionless, but to one of the following positions: (a) valid moral principles have their source in an external authority; (b) a truly “moral” person ignores the consequences of her deeds, or at least their consequences to herself; and (c) some moral truths are not only universally valid but derived from self-evident premises.

This reply fails to rescue the empirical outlook argument. Few versions of universalism imply (a), (b), or (c). For instance, utilitarianism implies (a) only if we use “external authority” in a contrived way. And as already pointed out,

⁶³Two such accounts are mentioned in note 46. The claim that confidence is at home with nonfoundationalism will seem paradoxical if we conflate confidence with philosophical certainty. The greatest confidence we can have in a belief is the confidence produced, or rather constituted by, the absence of sincere doubt. The absence of such doubt requires no *certainty* of the kind foundationalism deems possible. An excellent source on this subject is Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992), vol. 1, especially essay 7: “The Fixation of Belief.” Included in this volume is Peirce’s 1868 article, “Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man.” This is a classic critique of foundationalism.

⁶⁴For the kind of confusion that gives rise to the empirical outlook argument, see Choi & Murphy, *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness*, 41f.

⁶⁵Nor does it refute most other versions of universalism, e.g., those proposed by Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice,” 212–46; Pojman, *Ethics*, chap. 3; Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, chap. 7; Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, chap. 7; Rescher, *Objectivity*, chaps. 9, 10; and Singer, *Generalization in Ethics*, chaps. 1–5.

universalism does not imply a foundationalist view of the kind in (c). Universalism is fully at home with nonfoundational (e.g., coherentist) methods of justification.

Perhaps some relativists will say that we have *again* distorted their argument. What they mean by “absolutism” is simply any view according to which *some* (nonempty) moral truths, be they rules, principles, or whatever, are exceptionless. This reply will not do. One problem with it is that many brands of *relativism* would make some moral truths exceptionless. To say that a moral judgment is valid for only some cultures is not to say that the judgment is defeasible. Perhaps it is indefeasible wherever it is valid.

Another problem with the reply is that it deprives the charge of absolutism of any power to discredit the views so charged. Nothing is absurd about the view that *some* moral judgments are exceptionless. Two examples (neither of them empty) are “Deliberately causing pointless misery is wrong” and “Respecting other cultures is *prima facie* right.” These judgments are exceptionless (or plausibly thought to be so) partly owing to the terms “deliberately,” “pointless,” and “*prima facie*.” For instance, apparent exceptions to the first judgment will fall outside of the extension of “*deliberately* causing pointless misery” (or “*deliberately* causing *pointless* misery”) and thus fail to be genuine exceptions.

I. The Failure of the Ethnocentrism Argument

The trouble with ethnocentrism argument is simple: to grant universalism is not to be ethnocentric. In fact, it’s consistent with universalism to advance the following as universally valid: “Ethnocentrism is immoral.” So the ethnocentrism argument fails. The same goes for arguments that substitute “imperialistic,” “authoritarian,” or “antipluralistic” for “ethnocentric.” For example, although universalism implies that some moral requirements are the same for all of us, it does not imply that we all have a moral requirement *to be the same*, nor that we have any moral requirement that discourages cultural diversity. Most likely, one of our main requirements is to *respect* such diversity and with it cultural integrity).⁶⁶ So universalism is compatible with cultural pluralism.⁶⁷

Relativists are likely to revise the ethnocentrism argument so that it avoids our criticism. According to the new argument, even if universalists are not

⁶⁶Whether respecting cultural integrity involves condoning *all* that is customary within a culture is another question. And whether disapproving of a custom requires *interfering* with it is still another question. Discussion of these issues becomes muddled if they are not distinguished, and even more muddled if we mistakenly think that the injunction to respect cultural integrity requires cultural relativism for its support. Not only does the injunction to respect cultural integrity stand in no need of relativism, it finds relativism a troublesome bedfellow. According to cultural relativism, the judgment “Showing respect for cultural integrity is morally right” is not valid for all cultures.

⁶⁷For more on how universalism makes room for pluralism, see Nussbaum, “Human Functioning and Social Justice,” 224f; Perry, “Are Human Rights Universal?” 471–75; Hatch, *Culture and Morality*, chap. 7; and Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, chaps. 3, 6.

ethnocentric in the usual sense, any list of precepts they produce is bound to be culturally biased. This is ensured by the well established thesis of *cultural determinism*, according to which all of our beliefs, concepts, and perceptions are culturally conditioned to such an extent that unbiased thoughts, choices, and inferences are impossible.⁶⁸

The weakness of this argument resides in the word “biased.” The fact that a thesis is culturally biased discredits the thesis only if “biased” means roughly the same as “distorted” or “mistaken.”⁶⁹ But if it has that meaning, two problems arise. First, cultural determinism is not confirmed by any evidence marshaled for it, because according to cultural determinism, that evidence is not *evidence* at all, but a batch of mistakes or distortions. Second, the relativist’s new argument fails to make relativism more plausible than universalism. Its main premise, cultural determinism, implies that every product of the human mind is culturally biased. So every such product is discredited, including cultural relativism and cultural determinism.

In short, the relativist’s new argument rests on a premise which, if interpreted so that it can do the work assigned to it, discredits both itself and relativism. (Of course, if it discredits itself we can dismiss it as false, in which case it discredits nothing. Such are the puzzles spawned by self-discrediting premises.) His problem is similar to one he faced earlier, when he claimed that every truth is merely a local truth. His present argument rests on a similar claim, one that thwarts his aims just as surely as the earlier one did.

Perhaps the relativist will respond by revising cultural determinism so that it concerns only *normative* moral theories. He then can use it against such theories without threatening either relativism or cultural determinism.⁷⁰ This tactic fails. For one thing, metaethical theories are no less biased than normative ones, in any sense of “biased” that supports the view that normative theories are inescapably biased. Ironically, this is especially true of the metaethical thesis of relativism, which owes much of its popularity to historically specific “biases,” among them the anti-Victorian attitude of early twentieth-century intellectuals.⁷¹

⁶⁸Sumner, *Folkways*, § 232; Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 2f; Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 15–20, 56, 58, 84f.

⁶⁹Suppose, for instance, that a thesis counts as biased if questions, interests, or assumptions shared by only some of the world’s cultures contributed to its genesis. Then no doubt is cast on the thesis by showing it to be biased. The Pythagorean theorem is biased in this sense, but it’s not implausible on that account.

⁷⁰Renteln seems to advocate this strategy in *International Human Rights*, 69, 71, 74ff.

⁷¹On this topic Hatch’s *Culture and Morality* is illuminating. See chaps. 2 and 3, especially p. 50. See also Bidney, “The Concept of Value in Modern Anthropology,” secs. 5, 6; and Carl N. Degler, *In Search of Human Nature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), chaps. 3, 8.

J. The Failure of the Naiveté Argument

The naiveté argument is another failure, for it confounds universalism with moral naiveté.⁷² The belief that some moral judgments are universally valid is neither logically nor causally related to *any* view—naive, cynical, or whatever—about human motivation or about the development of moral beliefs. Frankly, it is surprising that some people accept the naiveté argument, given how weak it is. For whatever reason, some people associate relativism with the tough-minded, sophisticated person of the world, and associate universalism with the naive, overly-optimistic boy next door. Both associations are groundless.

A possible reply is that if beliefs are influenced by enculturation, the universalist's *metaethical* beliefs are so influenced. To the extent that she knows this she will reject them. To continue holding them is to betray a naiveté about the effects of enculturation.

This reply differs little from the “cultural determinism” argument and fails for the same reasons. If the fact that human beliefs are influenced by enculturation discredits those beliefs, the relativist's belief in relativism is discredited.

Suppose the relativist protests by saying (correctly) that although his knowledge of the effects of enculturation justifies a close look at his beliefs and a careful scrutiny of the arguments on which they are based, it does not necessarily *discredit* his beliefs. Then he must grant the same point about the universalist's beliefs, in which case he has no grounds for saying that insofar as the universalist knows of the effects of enculturation, she will reject universalism.

K. The Failure of the Tolerance Argument⁷³

The tolerance argument trades on the ambiguity of the statement “We cannot impose our morality on other cultures.” Let's consider the argument step by step:

- (1) If relativism is true, we cannot impose our morality on other cultures.
- (2) So we must refrain from imposing our morality on other cultures.
- (3) To refrain from imposing our morality on others is to be tolerant of others.
- (4) Therefore, relativism requires us to be tolerant of other cultures.

⁷²For another angle on the confusion in the naiveté argument, see Beckwith, “A Critique of Political Correctness,” 587.

⁷³I discuss this argument more fully, along with some empirical research that may seem, but in fact fails, to buttress it, in John J. Tilley, “Moral Arguments for Cultural Relativism,” *Netherlands Quarterly of Human Rights* 17(1) (1999): 31–41, at 36–41.

To make premise (1) true, we must read the second part of it to have the first of the three meanings discussed earlier. That is, we must read that part to mean “we cannot project our morality onto other cultures.” As pointed out in Section 6, part M, relativism is specifically about the limits of moral validity; so although it rules out projecting our morality onto others, it does not rule out morally coercing or morally victimizing others. So premise (1) is false unless it concerns moral projection rather than moral coercion or victimization. The same goes for (2), which is meant as a corollary of (1).

When considering (3), however, we should note that *tolerance* has nothing to do with failing or succeeding to state valid moral judgments. It involves refraining from various *actions*—actions that interfere with the lives of other people. Thus, even if we do not project our morality onto others we can easily be intolerant of others by morally coercing or morally victimizing them. Therefore, to maintain, plausibly, that to refrain from imposing our morality on others is to be tolerant of others, we must use “imposing our morality on others” to mean “morally coercing or morally victimizing others.”

So the tolerance argument is fallacious. If we interpret its premises charitably the first two have to do with projecting our morality onto others, but the third has to do with morally coercing and morally victimizing others. The result is an argument that does nothing to support its conclusion.

A predictable reply is that although relativism does not ensure tolerance, it remains preferable to universalism because unlike the latter, it does not ensure *intolerance*. This reply is mistaken because universalism does not rule out tolerance. In fact, most universalists see the following as valid for everyone: “A high degree of tolerance, including tolerance of other cultures, is morally desirable.”

Some relativists will be skeptical of this and will argue as follows: To be a universalist is to think that some moral standards are universal, meaning that everyone is subject to them. Call the acts that conflict with those standards *x*, *y*, and *z*. Now, if we believe that *x*, *y*, and *z* conflict with moral standards to which everyone is subject, we surely are committed to the view that we must interfere with any culture that does *x*, *y*, and *z*. But to interfere in this way is to be intolerant. Thus, if we accept universalism, we are committed to being intolerant of other cultures, specifically those cultures that do *x*, *y*, and *z*.

The argument fails owing to its second premise, which is false. The fact that *x* conflicts with a universal moral standard does not entail that we should interfere with *x*. Whether we should interfere with a practice depends on many things other than its moral status. For example, it depends on how harmful the practice is and on how much harm we might produce by interfering with it.

8. A REPLY FROM THE RELATIVIST

Relativists have a final reply to our criticisms. They maintain that no one has decisively established intuitionism, Kantianism, contractarianism, or *any* moral

theory that presupposes universalism. Faced with this, we have no choice but to embrace relativism.

This reply is flawed in four ways. First, it rests on the assumption that we must reject any thesis for which we have no decisive proof. To my knowledge, no one has decisively proven this assumption; so the assumption refutes itself.

Second, although relativists deny that (a) some moral judgments are universally valid, most of them believe, tacitly anyway, that (b) some moral *statements* are universally valid, including these: “To behave according to the traditions of one’s culture is *prima facie* right”; and “Each culture should be respected by others, provided it reciprocates in kind.”⁷⁴

Relativists say that we should reject (a) unless we see a proof for it. But what goes for (a) surely goes for (b), and to the extent that (a) is without proof, so is (b). Indeed, I can think of no plausible argument for (a) that differs notably from those advanced for (b). So unless relativists are willing to reject (b) they should think twice about their objection to (a).

Third, the reply treats relativism as a *default* position, a position we are to adopt without proof, provided the arguments for universalism fail. But why should relativism have this status? If we reject universalism because we find the arguments for it wanting, why should we then adopt relativism? Why not choose *nihilism*, the view that no moral judgment is valid for anyone?

Even we limit our options to relativism and universalism, relativism is not a default position. For it is no more obvious or commonsensical than universalism. Any appearance to the contrary stems from confounding relativism with liberalism, situationism, or one of the other defensible views discussed earlier. Nor are the *arguments* for relativism in any way obvious or commonsensical. So relativism has no privileged status in moral theory. It is simply *one more theory*, no less in need of support than any other. And every attempt to support it has failed.

Fourth, the relativist provides no *evidence* that no version of universalism has been proven. He provides no evidence because he thinks his point is obvious. He observes that no form of universalism is unanimously accepted and takes this as proof that no form of universalism enjoys adequate support.

His reasoning backfires. If a lack of consensus signaled a lack of adequate support (it doesn’t, of course), few theories would be as poorly supported as relativism. There is no consensus, either among scholars or among people in general, that relativism is true. Nor is this consensus likely to form, given the weakness of the relativist’s arguments. Furthermore, we find no consensus among relativists about how best to defend their thesis (some prefer the tolerance argument, others the research argument, and so on) or even about how to define it.

⁷⁴See, e.g., Downs, *Cultures in Crisis*, chap. 2; Benedict, *Patterns of Culture*, 37, 278; Herskovits, *Cultural Relativism*, 15, 33, 93f, 101; Leach, *A Runaway World?*, chap. 4.

9. CONCLUSION

The preceding sections show that the arguments for relativism fail and that the relativist's rescue efforts are no better. Alternative arguments come to mind, but they are not so much arguments as assumptions standing in need of arguments. For example, some might claim that morality reduces to mores, that moral precepts differ little from legal ones, or that we need only be reflective to see that every moral judgment tacitly refers to a limited group. Not one of these claims is plausible. The third one, for instance, is surely false. When I consider what I mean by "Causing needless harm is wrong," I find that I mean just that—that causing needless harm is wrong. I am making a point about causing needless harm, without regard to *who* causes it. I am not making a point about a limited group. This is not to deny that *some* moral judgments are about specific groups. When the nomads described in Section 5, part D, say that killing the old and weak is right, no doubt they mean the old and weak of *their* culture. But such examples fail to rescue the claim we are examining. That claim refers to *all* moral judgments, as indeed it must if it is to have any chance of supporting relativism.

The upshot is that those of us who favor universalism over relativism can go on doing so, for there is nothing in the relativist's arguments to incline us the other way. This result is important. For most of us, to deny that we accept universalism—tentatively accept it, anyway—would be insincere.⁷⁵ This is especially true when we consider the following. First, relativism derives no support from liberalism, situationism, or any of the other things with which relativists confuse it. Second, universalism differs sharply from absolutism, ethnocentrism, and the other questionable views to which relativists try to tie it. Third, the rejection of universalism implies that *not one* of the following (under)statements is universally valid:

Tolerating cultural diversity is *prima facie* right.

Ethnic cleansing is not so good.

Torturing children for the fun of hearing them scream is wrong.

Avoiding extreme racism and xenophobia is morally OK.

Annihilating a culture because its customs seem odd is not right.

⁷⁵Nor is this a matter of blind faith. Plausible arguments for universalism are easier to produce than relativists suppose. (What's not so easy to produce are plausible arguments for theories that propose a simple, universal *algorithm* for moral decisions. Relativists often confuse the arguments for such algorithms with arguments for universalism.) For a brief one see Wiredu, *Cultural Universals and Particulars*, 29. For more elaborate ones in the same spirit see White, *Knowledge and Relativism*, chaps. 4, 5; and G. J. Warnock, *The Object of Morality* (London: Methuen, 1971).

Launching a nuclear war over a minor tariff dispute is morally uncalled-for.

Imperialist domination of other nations is ethically inappropriate.

Walking on one's feet (as opposed, say, to hand-walking) is *prima facie* permissible.

Deliberate, massive poisoning of rivers and oceans is *prima facie* wrong.

Few people can believe—*sincerely* believe—that not one of these judgments is universally valid. For most of us, then, universalism is the only sincere option until we see a compelling case against it. Cultural relativists have made no such case; they have produced not one sound argument. We must conclude that for all their efforts, and for all the popularity of their position, their thesis remains destitute of support.

APPENDIX: ERRORS IN FORMULATING CULTURAL RELATIVISM

My aim in Section 2 was to formulate relativism fairly and to avoid seven common errors:

Error 1: formulating relativism so that it is intolerably unclear. This is usually done by using terms that cry out for definition and then failing to provide the definitions. An example: defining relativism as the view that “there are no transculturally valid moral standards” and then failing to clarify “valid” and “standards.”

Error 2: formulating relativism so that the notion of *relative truth* is essential to it. This is an error because some relativists locate their relativism in the *content* of moral judgments, not in the notion of truth. They regard moral judgments as true (or false) in a nonrelative way, but they also see every such judgment as tacitly referring to a culture.

Error 3: formulating relativism so that the relativity of moral judgments is ensured by their *content*. This is the opposite of Error 2. It's an error because some relativists locate their relativism, not in the content of moral judgments, but in the notion of moral truth. They contend that every moral truth is true in a *relative* way. The claim that the relativity of moral judgments is ensured by their content should be seen, not as a component of relativism, but as just one way of fleshing out that thesis. The same goes for the claim that moral judgments are true in only a relative way.

Error 4: formulating relativism so that the following claim is essential to it: “Valid cross-cultural moral comparisons are impossible.” This claim should be seen as an alleged *consequence* of relativism, not as a component of it. When relativists make their claim about the invalidity of cross-cultural

comparisons, they base it (whether correctly or not) on a distinctive metaethical view. It's that view which forms the core of their theory.

Error 5: formulating relativism as a view about moral judgments *simpliciter* without restricting the meaning of “moral judgment.” This is an error because few or no relativists extend their thesis to the following statements (among others), which surely are moral judgments in the usual sense: “Wrong acts are wrong” (a tautology, but a moral judgment nonetheless). “Polyandry is right when practiced by the western Pahari.” “It’s prima facie right to behave according to the traditions of one’s culture.” The typical relativist sees none of these judgments as “relative” in any way. For instance, she sees all three as *just plain true*—true for you, true for me, true for everyone. The second judgment is indeed *about* a specific culture, but this does not restrict its *truth* to that culture.

Error 6: formulating relativism so that the following view would not be a brand of it: “Some moral judgments are valid for all existing cultures, but for every such judgment we can easily imagine cultures for which the judgment would not be valid.” This thesis implies that the pancultural validity of any moral judgment *M* is somehow a function of the norms, laws, habits, customs, ideals, attitudes, opinions, or traditions of the cultures now existing. (I am assuming that cultures are individuated according to the things just listed.) If the habits, customs, etc. of one of those cultures were to change significantly, resulting in a *new* culture resembling one of the imaginary ones spoken of in the above thesis, then *M* would cease to be valid for that culture, and hence cease to be *panculturally* valid. A thesis with this implication should be classified as a form of relativism.⁷⁶

Error 7: formulating relativism so that an injunction to be tolerant is one of its components. The injunction to be tolerant should be seen as an alleged implication of relativism, not as something essential to it.⁷⁷ Surely Benedict and Herskovits could retract their calls for tolerance without ceasing to be relativists.

Department of Philosophy
IU School of Liberal Arts
Indiana University–Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI)
425 University Blvd.
Indianapolis, IN 46202–5140, USA
E-mail: jtilley@iupui.edu

⁷⁶Renteln takes care to avoid the mistake discussed here. See Renteln, *International Human Rights*, chap. 3.

⁷⁷This is emphasized in Renteln, *International Human Rights*, 73f.