Commentary on Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, Samuel Bowles, Colin Camerer, Ernst Fehr, Herbert Gintis, Richard McElreath, Michael Alvard, Abigail Barr, Jean Ensminger, Natalie Smith Henrich, Kim Hill, Francisco Gil-White, Michael Gurven, Frank W. Marlowe, John Q. Patton and David Tracer.

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Moral Realism and Cross-Cultural Normative Diversity

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Abstract: We discuss the implications of the findings reported in the target article for moral theory, and argue that they represent a clear and genuine case of fundamental moral disagreement. As such, they support a moderate form of moral anti-realism, the position that for some moral issues, there is no fact of the matter about what is right and wrong.

While previous evidence suggested that fairness norms vary little across cultures (Cameron, 1999), Henrich and colleagues' important article summarizes a large body of evidence that in small-scale societies, fairness norms vary tremendously (see also Henrich et al., 2004). Certainly, neither the evidence nor its interpretation are completely beyond dispute. However, rather than quibbling about specific details of Henrich and colleagues' work, we will draw out the implications of their findings for moral theory: we believe that these findings support a traditional argument against moral realism, namely *the argument from disagreement*.

Moral realism is, roughly, the view that there is a fact of the matter about what is right and about what is wrong, about what ought morally to be done and what ought not to be done, and so on. *Moral anti-realism* denies moral realism. We focus on a *moderate version* of moral anti-realism, that is, roughly, on the view that for at least *some* moral issues, there is no fact of the matter about what is right and what is wrong (Brink, 1989; for an introduction, see Smith, 1993).

One of the strongest reasons to reject moral realism comes from the *existence and resilience of moral disagreements*. For almost any moral issue, it is possible to find people who hold opposing moral views. By itself, of course, this does not entail that in such cases, there is no fact of the matter. After all, for any non-moral issue, it is possible to find people who hold opposing views. Though most agree that the earth is round, some believe that it is flat. This disagreement, however, does not entail – nor even suggest – that there is no fact of the matter about the shape of the earth. For, once provided with all the relevant empirical evidence, rational people will end up agreeing that the earth is not flat.

According to moderate moral anti-realism, however, some moral disagreements are different: They may persist even after all the relevant facts have been agreed upon and taken into account, and all errors in reasoning have been corrected. Such moral disagreements are *fundamental* rather than superficial. Now, if there exist some moral disagreements that persist in the face of both correct reasoning and agreement on the relevant facts, then there seems to be no rational way to resolve such disagreements. The existence of such abiding standoffs supports moderate moral anti-realism, which holds

there are no rational solutions to these moral disagreements because for these moral issues, *there are no moral facts* (e.g., Brandt, 1959; Mackie, 1977; Harman, 1977).

We are sympathetic to this argument. However, it has been attacked on various fronts. For the sake of space, we focus on perhaps the most common reply. Moral realists often claim that moral disagreements are not truly fundamental, but instead ultimately rest on disagreements about nonmoral facts. Were this the case, all rational people should ultimately agree about moral issues once agreement is reached on all relevant nonmoral facts. Thus, one leading moral realist, the philosopher Richard Boyd, writes (1988, p. 213): "(…) careful philosophical examination will reveal, I believe, that agreement on nonmoral issues would eliminate *almost all* disagreement about the sorts of moral issues which arise in ordinary moral practice." Indeed, we concede that clear examples of genuine fundamental moral disagreements—i.e. moral disagreements that do not rest on factual disagreements—are difficult to come by. However, in our view, Henrich and colleagues' findings constitute *just such* a clear and genuine example. They provide clear cases of cross-cultural moral differences, specifically about *fairness*, that are difficult to account for in terms of differences in beliefs about nonmoral facts.

Henrich and colleagues have gathered an impressive body of evidence that behaviors in one-shot ultimatum games (UG), dictator games (DG) and public good games (PGG) vary substantially across small-scale societies (Figure 2, p. 8; Figure 3, p. 10; Table 3, p. 11; Henrich et al., 2004). Decisions in UG, DG and PGG are influenced by various factors, including personal interest, strategic considerations, risk aversion and fairness norms. Analysis can sometimes pull these factors apart. Thus, Henrich and colleagues show (p. 11-14; Figure 4) that the cross-cultural diversity in behavior cannot be entirely explained in terms of strategic considerations (beliefs about how to maximize one's personal interest given one's beliefs about others' expectations) or culturally-variable risk aversion. Rather, across these 15 small-scale societies, subjects distribute windfall gains differently because they hold different views about fairness, specifically about how to fairly distribute such windfall gains. Henrich et al. note that this conclusion is consistent with ethnographic evidence (p. 23-24). Thus, differences in attitudes about fairness—a core element of morality (e.g., Rawls, 1971)—underlie the cross-cultural behavioral differences described by Henrich et al.

In response, moral realists like Boyd might reply that members of the cultural groups under consideration believe that different distributions in the UG, the DG or the PGG are fair because they have different factual beliefs about the nature of the situation. If they shared the same beliefs about the nature of the situation, they would also agree on which distributions are fair. This reply is unconvincing, however. UG, DG, and PGG are simple experimental situations, much simpler than real-life decision-making situations. In the 15 small-scale societies, the principles of these experiments are explained to subjects and subjects are also given ample practice in playing the games. Finally, their understanding of the experiments is probed (p. 15-16). Across cultures, then, subjects are provided with the same relevant, simple facts. It is thus unclear which factual disagreement could explain the cross-cultural moral disagreement in these simplified situations.

The upshot for the debate between moral anti-realists and moral realists, at the very least, is that moral realists can no longer simply assert or assume that moral disagreements always rest on disagreements about nonmoral facts (for further considerations, see Doris and Stich, forthcoming, section 4). Henrich and colleagues' findings lend substantial support to the moderate anti-realist claim that at least in some cases, moral disagreement is indeed fundamental.

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