Taking Moral Relativism Seriously

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‘Relativism’—a term used to scare children and others into conformity

I do not know whether this is true in Sweden. In the U.S., “moral relativism” is overwhelmingly a term of scorn or derision, used to put one’s opponent immediately on the defensive: “you sound like a relativist—explain yourself!” or “you are a relativist—shame on you!” The prosecutor usually takes on the persona of the lone voice of reason beating back the howling dogs of spineless, trendy relativists. As it turns out, the ones who get accused of relativism are usually the ones who reject the prosecutor’s fundamental moral beliefs. Social conservatives accuse liberals of moral relativism for defending reproductive, gay and lesbian rights. Some liberals in turn accuse multiculturalists of moral relativism for not defending the universality of human rights. The rhetoric portrays these crimes as falling but a few slippery steps short of collaboration with the Nazis or more lately the terrorists. The only ones who don’t get to play this game of accusation are the ones who actually accept the label of moral relativists, but curiously enough, there are very few people willing to do so. If they are a howling pack, they do not come when their name is called!

American philosophy, and I suspect this is true in at least some other philosophical communities, engages in the same sort of game in a more genteel fashion.

The aim of most philosophical discussions of relativism is to establish
its manifest falsity, where the view is defined in such a way as to make it an easy target and seldom reveals what really motivates people who are attracted to it. Introductory textbooks in ethics frequently portray the view as an extreme variety of subjectivism (or conventionalism)—a person's (or group's) accepting that something is right makes it right for that person (or group). Such a discussion usually comes early in the standard textbook—to get it out of the way so that the “serious” philosophy can start. The argumentative strategy is almost always negative in attacking the arguments on behalf of the view or purports to show some incoherence in it. The role of the howling pack of relativists is often awarded to confused students in Introduction to Philosophy classes, or more recently, to trendy literary theorists, preferably French in nationality.

People typically use the term ‘relativism’ as a substitute for confronting hard questions. Rhetorical use of the term imposes on the audience a dichotomy: either accept relativism, defined in the most extreme way possible, or accept absolutism or universalism. I use the terms ‘absolutism’ and ‘universalism’ for two different kinds of views about moral truth. Moral universalism is the view that there is a single true morality for all societies and times. Moral absolutism is universalism plus the view that the core of the single true morality is a set of general principles or rules, all of which hold true without exception. What is more basically at issue is universalism, and I am here concerned with the opposition between universalism and relativism.

I am among the handful of philosophers who are willing to be associated with relativism. [slide 3] The version I defend constitutes an alternative to universalism and
to relativism as these views are usually defined. I call it pluralistic relativism. [slide 4]

My alternative agrees with one implication of relativism as it is usually defined: [1st item on slide 4] that there is no single true morality. However, [2nd item on slide 4] it recognizes significant limits on what can count as a true morality. There is a plurality of true moralities, but that plurality does not include all moralities. [3rd item on slide 4]

This theory occupies the territory between universalism—the view that there is a single true morality—and the easy target typically defined as relativism—the view that any morality is as good as any other. Moral relativism needs to be taken seriously because its power is not based on confusion or mistakes but on hard questions raised by the existence of moral difference and disagreement—questions that universalists generally try to dodge.

[slide 5] The argument from disagreement

I begin with a description of what I take to be the most common line of thought leading to relativism: the argument from disagreement. The premise of this argument is often called “descriptive relativism” [1st item on slide 5] because it holds that as a descriptive matter of fact people fundamentally disagree over moral matters. Fundamental disagreements are ones that cannot be explained by saying that they are simply different applications of shared values. Values are applied by way of beliefs about the nature of the situation at hand. People may apply shared values differently because their beliefs about their situations differ, and in such cases, there is no fundamental disagreement.
Consider one of the standard examples: [2nd item on slide 5] the tribe in Hudson Bay of North America that once had the practice in which children ritually killed their elderly parents. The European explorers who encountered this tribe reacted with horror and incomprehension. However, the tribe had to make its life in a particularly harsh and unforgiving climate, such that the elderly and infirm will die painful, lingering deaths. Perhaps the tribe’s practice developed in order to spare the elderly and infirm such deaths. The European explorers belonged to a society that did not have to make its life under such harsh conditions. Some argue that no fundamental difference of value exists here and that benevolence toward parents is a value shared by both groups, applied in dramatically different fashion because of the difference in their situations. Not all dramatic or striking differences in moral belief are clear cases of fundamental moral disagreement.

Consider a more plausible candidate for fundamental differences in value. [3rd item on slide 5] There are ways of life associated with the modern industrialized West that centrally value individual rights to liberty and to other goods, where these rights are attributed to individuals on the basis of a moral worth they have independently of their membership in any community. By contrast, there are ways of life associated with ‘traditional cultures’ that centrally value a shared life of relationships in community, where the ones fulfillment as a human being is seen to lie primarily in satisfying one’s responsibilities within a community.
The intended contrast between autonomy-oriented and community-oriented cultures needs to be drawn carefully. Both kinds of cultures could be said to recognize rights, in a broad sense of ‘rights’, if an individual is recognized as legitimately entitled to claim certain goods or liberties as her entitlement. In a community-oriented culture, for instance, one can be said to possess rights in this generic sense on the grounds that the good of the community is served by affording individuals certain protected spheres of action (I have argued elsewhere that Confucianism provides such a ground for rights to speech and dissent; it serves the community if individuals can criticize potential abuses of power or plain mistakes, for example). In an autonomy-oriented culture as defined here there is a different kind of basis for individual entitlements. This basis is the assumption of a substantial domain of legitimate personal interests held by the individual that may conflict with the public collective interests of the community. In autonomy-oriented cultures, rights constitute constraints or limits on the extent that the individual’s personal interests may be sacrificed for the sake of public or collective goods.

It must be stressed that individuals in community-oriented cultures possess protections against exploitation, since communities themselves are held up to standards of what good relationships are, and good relationships are often conceived in terms of mutual care and respect. The underlying ideal, however, is of human beings in relationship to one another. In community-oriented cultures, it is typically assumed that an individual’s most fundamental interests consist in standing in good relationships to others. For the sake of advancing or protecting that ideal, protections for the individual’s
interests, when these interests conflict with the formation and maintenance of the desired relationships, may have a scope narrower than they have in autonomy-oriented cultures. On the other hand, the community must recognize that its well-being is dependent on fulfilling the most vital interests of its members. The ideal is one of harmonization of group and individual interests.

Sometimes a fundamental contrast in values takes the subtle form of differences in relative emphasis or priority given to values that the cultures in question share. [slide 6] For example, since community-oriented cultures are generally older than modern autonomy-oriented cultures, it is not unusual for a culture to have a mixture of autonomy-oriented and community-oriented themes. It also is not unusual for one type of theme to be more dominant than the other. The U.S. is an example of a society with both themes. The democratic political tradition receives autonomy-oriented interpretations, e.g., civil liberties are owed to the individual as an individual and are claimed against the larger society as protections against intrusive measures to advance the public interest. It also receives community-oriented interpretations, e.g., the civil liberties can be conceived as empowering protections enabling the individual to contribute to the governance of her society as an end in itself. Liberties under this interpretation are those among those goods enabling people to be and perform as good citizens. However, the autonomy-oriented themes are more dominant. Japan is a society in which both themes are present and in which the democratic tradition receives both autonomy-oriented and community-
oriented traditions, but the latter are dominant compared to, say, the U.S.  [1st item under slide 6]

For example, Kenneth Winston has observed that police and prosecutors in Japan have the power to hold a suspect for interrogation for extended periods, in some instances up to twenty-three days, before filing charges. The exclusion of confessions obtained under such circumstances is very rare and virtually unheard of in cases where a guilty person would go free as a result. Such practices are at odds with the right to silence embodied in the new constitution adopted by Japan after World War 2, a constitution largely written by U.S. occupation forces.  [2nd item slide 6] The actual powers granted to police and prosecutors reflect social norms that make confession the morally expected form of conduct, a moral duty owed to other citizens and an expectation shared by the public at large as well as police, prosecutors and judges. Indeed, as John Haley observes, the vast majority of accused criminals in Japan confess, display repentance, negotiate for their victims’ pardon and submit to the mercy of the authorities.  

To recognize fundamental differences in the way suggested here does not require seeing them as differences between world views or values that have nothing in common with each other. It is not infrequently assumed, by some friends and by many enemies of descriptive cultural relativism, that the doctrine must take this extreme form. Perhaps the thought of these friends is that one cannot judge a set of values that are totally different from one’s own. But the enemies of relativism can say that one cannot properly understand others who hold values totally different values. Reinforcing this criticism is
the plausible view that to an inevitable extent, one must use oneself as a model in trying to understand others, even as one extends one’s imagination and analogize from one’s own experience to understand people who live under and are shaped by very different circumstances.\(^3\) I reject the extreme form of cultural relativism and hold rather that a common root of what could be called “fundamental” value difference is that different priorities are set between important values when they come into conflict. One can understand that the moral codes of others confront familiar tensions between values that one recognizes as important, but one does not have to understand these others as setting the same priorities in the face of these tensions.

In other words, [3rd item slide 6] the sort of agreement it takes to understand others is compatible with understanding them to be different in significant ways. Understanding other moral codes and the ways of life in which they are embedded is not to see them as alien and incomprehensible but in some respects familiar and in other respects constituting a challenge to more familiar codes and ways of life. Part of the way we can understand difference is that human beings are complex and ambivalent beings who are able to see that other codes and ways of life may just as reasonably be adopted by other decent and informed human beings. It is possible to recognize significant overlaps of value between cultures and yet avoid collapsing them all into one. Neither sameness nor difference should obscure the other from view.
The conclusion of the argument from disagreement—metaethical relativism [slide 7]

Supposing that something like this version of descriptive relativism is true—that there are significant fundamental moral differences in belief that are at the same time compatible with significant overlaps in belief among individuals, groups, and societies, what then is supposed to follow from that? Metaethical relativism presupposes that there are at least some fundamental cultural differences, and goes on to hold in its most extreme forms that any and all worldviews and moral codes are true or justified. The more modest versions are not so sweepingly egalitarian. Rather, they hold that there are pluralities of true or justified views or codes, allowing that some views or codes do not meet the threshold for truth or justifiability. [1st item slide 7]

The most direct argument for metaethical relativism in one or other of these forms is a simple appeal to descriptive relativism. Where the differences between groups are fundamental and cannot be adjudicated by reference to some value or mode of reasoning shared by the groups, how can we say that either group is more justified than the other? How can it be claimed that one group is in possession of more of the truth?

[2nd item slide 7] The standard objection to this argument is that the fact of mere difference in belief does not imply that the opposing beliefs are equally true or even equally justified. One does not conclude that truth is relative in science merely because there is disagreement among scientists. Why, therefore, conclude relativity of truth in moral views merely from disagreement among them? How could one deny that there is a
world that is the way it is, regardless of how we think it is? Similarly, the fact of diversity
in moral belief is no disproof of the possibility that there are some beliefs that are truer or
more justified than the rest.

Relativists have taken two different paths in response to the standard objection.

[slide 8] The first is to dispute the coherence or relevance of an independently existing
world. Such general relativism expresses skepticism about the meaningfulness of talking
about a truth that is independent of the theories and justificatory practices of one’s
community. The second path taken by some relativists, including me, is to defend a
domain-specific relativism, usually in the form holding that scientific discourse or even
commonsense discourse about the physical world possesses an objectivity that moral
discourse lacks. Defenders of such a morality-specific relativism may argue that scientific
disagreement is disagreement over the structure of an independently existing world and
results from speculative inferences or hypotheses based on inadequate evidence. On the
other hand, they may argue, moral disagreements cannot be treated in the same way.

Consider the difference between autonomy-oriented and community-oriented
cultures. If informed and intelligent people who have had experience with both kinds of
cultures cannot agree which, if any culture, is more mistaken than the other, the question
is whether it is plausible to suppose the existence of some independently-existing factual
matter that is the subject of the cultural difference. What makes this difference
challenging to those who hold in a single true or most justified moral code is that vibrant
cultures of both kinds have existed that have answered to arguably deep human needs.
Indeed, there seems an inevitable tension between the project of realizing the good of community, in which interdependence and relationship to others is taken as a central element of human fulfillment, and the project of realizing the good of individual autonomy, in which interests that do not necessarily harmonize with relationship and community are protected. Given the difficulty of combining these fundamental goods in such a way that either of the values is fully realized, it may appear reasonable to emphasize one or the other, and to view autonomy-oriented and community-oriented cultures as equally viable paths.

There is a moment in the film *A Great Wall* with which I personally identify and that illustrates the kind of ambivalence one might experience about two diverging cultural paths. In this fictional film, a Chinese American takes his family to Beijing to visit his sister and her family. The two young people, his son and her daughter, cross the cultural divide between the families most easily, and the young woman learns the American concept of privacy, which she applies with indignation to her mother’s opening and reading her mail before handing it to her. The mother reacts with incomprehension: why should she need permission to learn what is going on with her daughter? In a small and intimate way, this incident illustrates a conception of personal autonomy coming into collision with a conception of life as social relationship and shared fate. My parents certainly raised me more in accordance with the second, but I find that my wife and I have moved inexorably towards the first in raising our own daughter. For various reasons, I would not have it another way, at least in the U.S. and given who we, our
family, have become, but I can see what is lost as well as what is gained. [3rd item slide 9]

It is possible, then, for reflective persons to feel ambivalent about moral disagreements in such a way as to call into question whether there is a single right answer to some fundamental value conflicts. This “moral ambivalence,” as I call it, places a special burden of explanation on theorists of morality, and I think this does suggest that at least some fundamental forms of moral disagreement call for a different form of explanation than, say, disagreement over the physical structure of the world. I am not inclined to be a relativist about the latter kind of question because I do not feel a similar ambivalence about conflicts between different physical theories of the world. Even though two different theories of the world might at a given time be supported equally by the existing evidence, I am not tempted to say that there is no single right answer about the way the world is.

Domain-specific moral relativists may further argue that explaining the way that observational evidence supports a scientific theory requires one to suppose the existence of physical facts independent of human thought and invention. [slide 10 and 1st item] Gilbert Harman, another self-professed relativist, argues that no such moral facts are needed to explain the moral judgments that people make. One needs to posit the existence of subatomic particles to explain observations of vapor trails in a cloud chamber. To explain moral judgments, he has argued, one needs only to posit certain psychological dispositions and sensibilities (e.g., sympathetic sensitivity to suffering that is adaptive.
from an evolutionary perspective for creatures who must cooperate to survive and reproduce).

I believe Harman would grant, however, that a satisfying explanation of moral judgments cannot refer only to psychological dispositions and sensibilities. Moral judgment does not just express certain feelings such as empathy, but also involves norms that govern action and also these very feelings. We typically praise those with sympathetic tendencies and condemn the unfeeling and uncaring. A more satisfying explanation in my own theory identifies a complex role for morality in the biological and cultural evolution of humanity.

This kind of explanation is a “naturalistic” explanation of morality in the following sense: [2nd item slide 10] first, it seeks to understand the role of morality in human life by drawing on the human sciences; and second, it refuses to take moral judgments, even ones we are strongly inclined to believe as true, as corresponding to some part of the fabric of the universe, independent of human needs, feelings, and will. Moral ambivalence can weigh in favor of adopting a naturalistic approach because it pushes us for some explanation beyond commonsense moral judgments for the unease that reflective and intelligent people can feel in the face of fundamental value conflicts. This unease leads to the thought that moral judgments are not quite about the world in the same way as judgments about the way the world is structured. This leads to the idea of morality as invented. The idea thus gains some support from moral ambivalence, but seems to have an independent force to the extent that many of us have come to view the
universe as “disenchanted,” as having no resonance one way or another with moral values. No moral threads are woven into whatever fabric it has. Let me give you a brief introductory sketch to what this sort of naturalizing explanation should look like.

**Naturalizing morality [3rd item slide 10]**

Alongside their instincts for self-preservation, human beings developed capacities of care for kin, willingness to engage in mutually beneficial practices of cooperation with others if they show a similar willingness, special cognitive abilities to detect others who are prone to violate the agreements and norms that make cooperative practices possible, a willingness to punish such “cheaters” even when the expenditure of resources to punish cannot be justified on the grounds of pure self-interest, and some degree of altruistic concern for non-related others. Human beings developed all these capacities because they were fitness enhancing, a conclusion that much of the latest work in evolutionary theory supports.\(^4\) While human beings certainly evolved as strongly self-interested creatures, they also evolved motivational capacities that allowed them to form cooperative bonds with each other.

**[slide 11 and 1st item]** At the same time, they evolved capacities to guide their own behavior through culture, and much of that culture consists of the cooperative practices that their genetically based traits suit them for. **[2nd item slide 11]** Such practices need not have grown out of any sophisticated or self-conscious reflection. Some interesting work in game theory shows that people can evolve cooperative practices they can pass down from generation to generation simply from observing what others are
doing and adjusting their actions accordingly.\textsuperscript{5} \[3^{\text{rd}} \text{item slide 11}\] As practices get

passed on from generation to generation, however, they may be articulated. Norms could

be spelled out as to who is properly participating in them as opposed to those who were

not. Since practices tend to vary over time and with the identities of the particular people

performing them, questions were raised and sometimes answered as to what were

acceptable forms of these practices. The articulation of the difference between

acceptable and unacceptable practices perhaps led to the articulation of more general

values and norms that we have come to know as morality.

\[\text{slide 12}\] My own explanation of moral judgment, therefore, would start from a

“functional” conception of morality. That is, \[1^{\text{st}} \text{item slide 12}\] morality is a social

invention that evolved to promote beneficial social cooperation, not simply through

requiring behavior that is cooperative and considerate of the interests of others, but also

through encouraging, strengthening, and directing the sorts of feelings and desires that

make people promising partners in social cooperation.\textsuperscript{6} \[2^{\text{nd}} \text{item slide 12}\] A virtue of

the functional conception is that it helps to organize and systematize many of the most

central moral beliefs that appear across culture and historical periods: beliefs that specify

the conditions for permissibly killing or conducting aggression against other human

beings, beliefs about the right to assign and distribute the basic resources needed to

sustain life, and beliefs that require reciprocation of good for good. There is a lot of

variation in how these beliefs are filled in with specific content and in the nature of the

particular restrictions and distributions, but a common end these beliefs serve is the
regulation and promotion of social cooperation. The functional conception has two other virtues: it generates support for the conclusion that not all moralities are equally true or justified; but it also generates support for the conclusion that there is no single true or most justified morality. It supports, therefore, [3rd item slide 12] what is most legitimate in the widespread fulminations against relativism I have mentioned at the beginning—the conviction that surely not anything goes where morality is concerned—but at the same time honors the phenomenon of moral ambivalence. Let me explain, beginning with the limits that it places on moral relativism.

**Examples of constraints on morality based on the functional conception**

[slide 13]

The functional conception of morality, when combined with a plausible portrait of human nature, generates significant constraints on what shape an adequate morality can take. In this talk I will focus on a constraint that the strength of self-interest in human nature places on the content of morality. Human nature is significantly plastic but at the same time determinate enough so as to make for better and worse ways of regulating cooperative activity. It contains very strong tendencies to prefer the satisfaction of self-interests when in conflict with interests of others, at least when self-interests are of roughly equal importance to those of the others. The claim here is not that self-interest is the only human motivation, just that it is a very strong one that constrains the form that can be taken by successful cooperative activity.
Consider that some form of reciprocity is a norm for all cultures we know, where reciprocity is conceived as a fitting and proportional return of good for good. Its universality suggests that preference for one's own interests plays a significant role in human cooperative activity. Reciprocation for the help that any human being needs, if it is a general feature of social interaction, reinforces helping behavior. The fact that it is a powerful element in sustaining the help we need suggests the strength of self-interest as a human motivation. And as Lawrence Becker has observed, not reciprocating, if it were a general feature of social interaction, would quite likely extinguish helping behavior. It is not just that reciprocation from the person one helps generally reinforces one’s helping that person. It is also that one’s ceasing to help in response to that person’s failure to reciprocate generally acts as a negative reinforcement against such failure. One’s cessation serves as a kind of “punishment” for failure to reciprocate. [1st item slide 13]

Some prominent functionalist accounts of morality claim that the primary purpose for which morality is invented is to counteract the destructive effects of self-interest (e.g., Hobbes) or the limitations on our sympathies for others (Warnock, Mackie). I think that an understanding of the need for a norm of reciprocity implies a more complex functional picture. Moral norms need to take into account the strength of self-interest in order to accommodate that motivation and to encourage its integration with motivations that more directly lead to acting on behalf of others. [2nd item slide 13] Effective moralities, then, do not merely restrain actions from self-interest or encourage the development of opposing motivations, though they do these things. Effective moralities provide outlets
for the expression of self-interest that can be consistent with the expression of other-directed motivations.

Self-interested motivation can clearly have undermining effects on social cooperation when it motivates noncooperation and aggression against others. However, in the right circumstances self-interest can support, rather than oppose, other-interested motivations. Jane Mansbridge has suggested that while other-interested motivations such as those stemming from empathy do exist in most individuals, they do not have infinite value. Herbert Gintis’ portrait of *Homo reciprocans* suggests the same qualification. If the costs of benefiting others are very high, many will simply decline to pay.¹⁰ Arrangements that generate some self-interested return to other-interested behavior can create an “ecological niche,” Mansbridge suggests, that helps to sustain that behavior. By making that behavior less costly, these arrangements can increase the degree to which individuals feel they can afford to indulge their concerns for others.¹¹ Rather than saying that an effective morality should always constrain self-concern and reinforce other-concern, it should often attempt to accomplish a productive balance or reconciliation between those types of concern.

Moral norms requiring reciprocity play a crucial role in such reconciliation, and that is why they are universal elements of adequate moralities. The need to reconcile self and other concern appears first in family relationships. [3rd item slide 13] Across widely different cultures there are duties to respect and to honor parents and others whose roles involve raising and nurturing the young. Performance of such duties constitutes a kind of
return of good for good, though what is returned, of course, is not always the same kind of good that what was originally given. Sometimes the return is similar to the original good, as in the case of children’s care of aged parents. But most other times, the return is a good that is fitting to the nature of the relationship to those who have cared and nurtured: obedience and receptiveness to what is taught, for example. However much some of us may value independence in our children, there are times when we greatly treasure their simply doing what we ask them to do, and if they do, or express gratitude for what we have given them, that helps us to continue to give them the care we owe to them. Perfectly selfless parents might not need such reinforcement, but profoundly ambivalent beings might not be able to do without it.

Consider now another constraint on moralities that derives from the interpersonal function, the strong self-interested component of human motivation, and a widely shared feature of the concept of morality. [slide 14 and 1st item] As a system for promoting cooperation, morality works through a large degree of voluntary acceptance of its norms and the reasons it provides to act in this or that way. If conformance to its norms and reasons depended solely on the threat of force or coercion, the costs would detract greatly from the benefits of social cooperation itself. It makes sense that human beings evolved a system for regulating and promoting cooperation that governs in this way. A further step in the evolution of morality also makes sense for creatures who explain and justify their actions to one another: voluntary acceptance of moral norms came to be seen as based on their justifiability to those governed by them. [2nd item slide 14] Hence another
constraint on moralities is that justification for following the norms and reasons of an adequate morality cannot crucially depend on falsehoods. In particular, when moral norms and reasons call for the subordination of the interests of some to the interests of others, the justification of such norms and reasons cannot crucially depend on falsehoods.

This constraint gains much of its bite when it is recognized that justification of subordinating norms and reasons typically takes the form of arguments that the interests of the subordinated are being satisfactorily addressed even as they are being subordinated to the interests of others. Such arguments typically function to secure the acquiescence of the subordinated to their status. Some instances of acquiescence are morally justified. Others are not. Human beings have a long and tragic record of having accepted cruel subordination. But when they have accepted it as morally required, they did so on the basis of justifications that purport in some way to satisfactorily address their interests. Subordination is often justified by reference to the necessity of a kind of paternalism: some people must be taken care of by other people. [3rd item slide 14] And this paternalism is justified by false characterizations of the capacities of the subordinated, such as their capacities for practical reasoning or self-control (as Aristotle claimed about women and slaves, and as Americans did in trying to justify the practice of slavery). Other kinds of justification for subordination may rest on metaphysical claims. The caste system in India, for example, rests on the claim that one's place in the social order is necessitated by karma, by one's deeds in a past life. This sort of justification averts the
need to satisfactorily address the interests of the subordinated by making subordination a kind of metaphysical and moral necessity.

**Why the functional conception allows for a plurality of true or most justified moralities [slide 15]**

[1st item slide 15] The kinds of constraints imposed on adequate moralities by the functional conception do not narrow the range of such moralities to just one. The possibility of setting different priorities among values corresponds to different ways of promoting social cooperation and regulating interpersonal conflict of interest.

Asian societies, despite extensive interaction with the West, its cultures, and institutions, still show in surveys a markedly greater concern for social harmony and correspondingly lesser concern for personal freedom than Western societies. It does seem likely that a moral emphasis on individual rights will gradually grow within many Asian societies, partly because of the globalization of American-style capitalism and its culture of consumerist individualism, and if so there will be some hard choices as to how to balance and prioritize that emphasis with the more traditional emphasis on relationship and community. I suspect that many Asian cultures will remain distinctive in the emphasis they give to communal values and the needs they address, even as they incorporate Western political and economic forms and even some of the language and concerns of individual rights. At the same time, there will have to be reflection and debate over how the value framework of rights is to be balanced against communal values. Numerous forms of balance in different parts of Asia (different forms of
community balanced in different ways against individualistic values), not necessarily like anything that appeared in Western traditions, will be the result. And why does there need to be a single correct balance? [2nd item slide 15]

Traditions centered on the value of community are often criticized for upholding hierarchical forms of community that subordinate and dominate women. An external criticism of such traditions typically invokes rights. [3rd item slide 15] However, there is a different, internal basis for advocating the value of equality in a community-centered tradition. It can be argued that the subordination of women detracts from the common moral ends of that society, that it unnecessarily restricts the ways in which women can make a contribution to those ends, and that it deprives them of the dignity that would come from making a contribution. It is possible to criticize justifications of gender subordination through debunking of the supposed innate differences between men and women that make men more suitable to “command,” as Aristotle put it, or superior in rationality, as Kant put it. Neither a rights-oriented nor a community-oriented morality has any special monopoly on this sort of critique.

Certain versions of rights and communally-oriented moralities, then, are equally true or justified from the standpoint of a functional conception of morality. [slide 16] A fully contentful and action-guiding morality must go beyond satisfying these constraints, however, precisely because [1st item slide 16] the constraints allow too many conflicting ways of organizing social cooperation—ways that no society could leave purely optional for the individual to choose. This is true partly because, as I emphasized earlier, [2nd
**item slide 16**] Morality operate by shaping human motivation, feeling and desire, and not just action (they help to shape us as agents suited for *certain kinds* of social cooperation).

**[slide 17]** Moralities must therefore contain criteria for judging right and wrong motivation and action that go beyond the universal constraints, e.g., that an action must be consistent with protection of an individual’s private interests even if these interests conflict with group interests in the case of rights-oriented moralities. **[1st item slide 17]** Such local rather than universal criteria for right and wrong action enter into the meaning of moral terms of moral language users, and the result is that different people may be using the terms with different though overlapping meanings and truth conditions. Thus people in rights-oriented and communally-oriented cultures might be saying equally true things at the same time that they prescribe different actions (e.g., observe the right to silence or to privacy versus fulfilling one’s responsibilities to fellow citizens or expressing appropriate interest in the affairs of another person with whom one’s fate is bound up). **[2nd item slide 17]** On the level of truth, advocates of different moralities may be saying equally true things about somewhat different though overlapping subjects, but on the level of practical guidance, they are saying incompatible things. This level of practice guidance is also a level of the meaning of moral terms, and on this level of prescribing a certain conception of social cooperation, people can be talking about the same subject.\(^{13}\) The fact that conflict persists on the level of practical guidance creates practical challenges for those who adopt the form of relativism I have defended.
**Challenges posed by relativism [slide 18 and 1st item]**

One worry often expressed about the practical effects of adopting relativism is that we would lose confidence in our commitments to our own ethical ways of life. However, the fact that there are other ways as worthy of appreciation as one’s own way of life should not necessarily undermine one’s confidence in one’s commitment to one’s own way. To recognize other ways of life as worthy of appreciation is not to denigrate the worth of one’s own way.

A more pressing worry, in my view, arises from the naturalistic conception of morality I have associated with my version of relativism. [2nd item slide 18] I have said that a function of morality is to reconcile the potential tensions between self-interest and the demands of social cooperation. Perhaps a morality can accomplish this function only at the cost of imposing on the individual a “second best” alternative to what would have been a fully flourishing life for the individual. The fact that a morality may successfully reconcile self and other interest to promote social cooperation does not necessarily mean that the individual will regard her happiness as lying in conformance to morality. A lot depends on a society’s actual institutions and practices that may increase or reduce the tension between self and other interest. Economic and political institutions in the U.S., I believe, often reward socially destructive behavior. This line of thought, however, helps us to identify the proper object of concern. It is not the idea of morality *per se*, but the design of the particular moralities we have and the social institutions and practices that
might foreclose the possibility that individual fulfillment can be consistent with satisfying moral demands.

Another frequent worry about relativism is that we would become confused about how to act toward others with conflicting moralities if we have to acknowledge their moralities as true or justified as our own. This sort of concern, I believe, is most salient in for those who value autonomy highly. One implication of valuing the autonomy of others is a reluctance to intervene in their affairs if one cannot explain and justify to them why one is doing so. [slide 19 and 1st item] Therefore relativism and the value of autonomy combined could yield a reason not to interfere with others or to find some sort of compromise in the case of conflict with them over whose values should hold sway in a common public realm. This is not a problem with relativism. [2nd item slide 19] It can be an ethically appropriate response. Furthermore, relativism need not lead to moral paralysis. The reason not to intervene may be overridden at times, because our moralities contain other values than the value of being able to explain and justify why we intervene in the affairs of others. One may simply judge in the end that these other values are too important to compromise on, at least on a given occasion. A conservative on abortion may accept legal permission of abortion of a pregnancy due to incest or rape, but be unwilling to accept any sort of compromise on the legality of abortion under other conditions. A defender of reproductive rights may accept restrictions on abortion such as the provision of neutral counseling to women contemplating abortion, but she may be unwilling to accept restrictions on abortions during the middle trimester of pregnancy.
Such compromises need not be at all unprincipled, but rather reflect the difficult work of balancing conflicts of morality within one’s own morality, since respect for reasonable differences, respect for women’s reproductive rights, and respect for life or potential personhood might all be part of a person’s morality and do not necessarily harmonize under all circumstances. This is to point out, however, that the moral work of deciding how best to live with others with whom one has serious moral differences is essentially the work of deciding how to balance conflicts of values within one’s own morality.


An interpretive principle inspired by this idea is the so-called principle of charity, articulated first by W.V.O. Quine and then by Donald Davidson: interpreting others requires the assumption that there are large areas of agreement in belief and desire with them.


Suppose, for example, that there are no traffic lights at an intersection. Two drivers meet at the intersection at the same time, going different directions. One sees the other on her right, while the other sees the former on her left. Suppose that drivers on the right start going first, and that others see that they are doing so. Everyone might see that things go better if people behave consistently according to such a norm, even if no one explicitly agrees to the norm. Of course, such a norm or other is now taught in driving schools and handbooks, but the point is to illustrate how the norm could come about in the first place. For a rigorous discussion of such results, see Bryan Skyrms, *Evolution of the Social Contract* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
This does not mean that directly facilitating social cooperation is the only function of morality. Some moral norms take the form of character ideals and conceptions of the good life specifying what is worthwhile for the individual to become and to pursue. This intra-personal function of morality comprehends what has been called the “ethical,” as opposed to what might be called the “narrowly moral.” Morality in the broader sense used here comprehends the ethical. This part of morality helps human beings to structure their lives together in a larger sense, i.e., not just for the sake of coordinating with each other but also for the sake of coordination within themselves.

Of course, the specific forms of reciprocity, and what is counted as fitting and proportional, vary widely.


David Hitchcock, for example, conducted a 1994 survey of the value preferences of officials, business people, scholars and professionals from the United States and eight East Asian societies. He found that a strong majority of Asian respondents preferred an 'orderly society' and 'harmony', which were

13 On this matter, I agree with prescriptivists such as R.M. Hare and more recently, expressivists such as Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard, who present analyses of the meaning of moral terms intended to reveal what the terms are used to do or the attitudes they express. I differ in presenting both a truth conditional dimension of meaning and the level that offers practical guidance to the audience.