CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

BASIC ETHICAL THEORIES

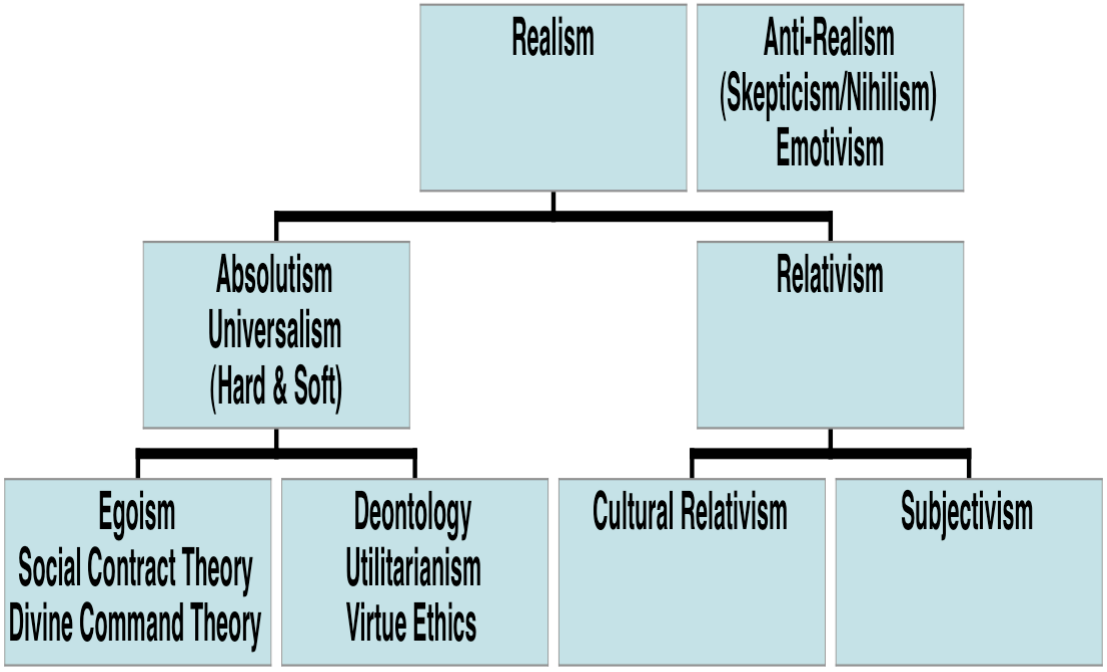
Ethics is *the study of morality, including an analysis of the concepts of good and evil, right and wrong, justice and injustice, duty, responsibility, character, and successful living*. In this book, we will discuss whether morality is relative to culture or to the individual, the relationship between religion and morality, theories about what makes particular actions right or wrong, and the concept of morality as the character traits that would be possessed by an ideal person. We will also consider the challenge of moral skepticism and whether moral truths are real or knowable.

Before we begin, a brief note about the terms "ethical" and "moral" is in order. These terms are nearly if not entirely synonymous in philosophy, so I will freely move between the two terms as if there were no difference between them. As a matter of fact, a somewhat archaic name for ethics is "moral philosophy." Lexographers and linguists may point out differences in the popular usage of these terms. For instance, the term *moralist* has acquired the negative connotation of a person who pontificates about the faults of others, perhaps while at the same time blind to his own, whereas *ethicist* describes someone who does academic or public policy work involving ethical theory and has no such negative connotations. But if you think of the way you use these terms in everyday life, I think you'll see that these are, at best, subtle nuances.

This chapter will give a brief survey of basic ethical theories and show how they are related to one another. Then, in subsequent chapters, we will look at each individually in some depth through important historical works in philosophy and literature. Basic ethical theories fall into categories and subcategories. Just as under the general category of *animal*, there insects, birds reptiles, mammals, etc., and then under *mammals* there are humans, monkeys, cats, dogs, etc., and among *dogs* there are poodles, bulldogs, greyhounds, etc., so do ethical theories fall into categories and subcategories. Ethical theories are either **realist** or **anti-realist**. Realist theories are either **absolutist** or **relativist**, and relativists are either **cultural relativists** or individual relativists, usually known as **subjectivists**. The bulk of our discussion will be about the **absolutist** or **universalist** theories of **divine command theory**, **egoism**, **social contract theory**, **utilitarianism**, **deontology** and **virtue ethics**. We will also briefly discuss a distinction between **hard and soft** forms of absolutism/universalism. The chart on the next page shows the relationship of these theories to one another.

The most basic question one can ask about morality is whether it exists at all or possesses any legitimacy. **Anti-realism,** also known as **skepticism** or **nihilism**, maintains that ethics is in some way false or illusory, being an interesting fact of human nature or social evolution, but something without binding force or claim on the individual's behavior. Some nihilists regard morality as nothing more than a conspiracy of the weak to control the powerful among us.

Basic Ethical Theories



Anti-realist theories don't have many additional subcategories since the theory essentially says that there is no such thing as ethics. Anti-realists only differ, then, in why people *believe* in morality or what moral statements *mean* if they don't refer to anything real. **Emotivism** or **non-cognitivism** is a special version of anti-realism or nihilism that says that moral statements are merely expressions of subjective feelings, attitudes and preferences with no factual content. Saying "The war in Iraq is immoral" isn't an *objective* statement about the war, like "The war in Iraq began in 2003," but rather a *subjective* expression of *disapproval* on the part of the speaker. This disapproval amounts to nothing more than *negative emotional associations* in the speaker's mind, a report of subjective feelings, not objective fact.

In contrast to anti-realism, **realism** maintains that morality expresses objective truths about the world and is a valid and legitimate enterprise. It holds that certain things are right and wrong, good and evil, and that morality does lay claim on what we do and how we should live. **Absolutism** or universalism says that there are some objective, universal moral truths that apply regardless of culture or conscience. Recently, the concept of **soft universalism** has been introduced in an attempt to create a more culturally inclusive absolutism. Since an in-depth discussion of this here would muddy the distinction between absolutism and relativism, I am going to postpone our discussion of it until the next chapter.

While absolutism holds that there are some universal truths that apply to everyone, **relativism** holds that morality is relative to culture or conscience. **Cultural relativism** maintains that acts are right or wrong are defined by what the majority of a given society believes or practices. **Subjectivism**, on the other hand, maintains that morality is relative to conscience or an individual's moral code, even if it conflicts with his or her society. It is important to remember that relativism, whether cultural relativism or subjectivism, is *still a form of realism*. Although relativism denies that there are any universal or absolute moral truths, it still believes that there are legitimate moral rules but only *for* particular societies or individuals. If the majority of my society believes that, say, binge drinking is wrong, then it's just as wrong for me under relativism as it would be if absolutism were true and there were a universal moral rule against binge drinking. If my individual moral code or conscience tells me that I should give more to charity, then I am just as obligated to give to charity as I would be if there were a universal moral rule requiring me to give more.

The remainder of the theories we will be studying are subcategories of absolutism or universalism. **Divine command theory** asserts that the right act is that which is in accord with the will of God. **Egoism** believes that the right act is that which furthers an individual self-interest. **Social contract theory** maintains that there is an implied contract between the individual and the community or State which serves his enlightened self-interest. In other words, the right act is the legal act. **Utilitarianism** holds that the right act is that which maximizes happiness (not just for oneself but for the total amount of happiness in the world). Note that the **utility** in utilitarianism is a technical

world that means *pleasure and the absence of pain*, not merely what's practical or useful. Thus, utilitarianism says that morality is ultimately about producing the most *net pleasure* possible. **Deontology** maintains that the right act is that which respects absolute moral truths, which have no exceptions. Deontologists disagree stringently about the moral importance of happiness and believe morality is about doing your duty and adhering to principle, whatever the consequences. If doing so creates any happiness, it is mere icing on the cake and has nothing whatsoever to do with morality itself.

Virtue ethics suggests that instead of basing morality on defining the conditions under which an act is right or wrong, we should base it on the good qualities of character (virtues) of an ideal individual which make him successful in life. These virtues can be taught to children through good upbringing but must eventually be learned through experience and unquantifiable moral judgment. **Nietzschean ethics**, based on the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche, defines the right act as that which embodies the **Will to Power**, the life-force in all of us that seeks to grow and dominate its environment. The **Overman** embodies the will to power and exhibits this in virtues such as physical health and vitality, creativity, optimism, joy, intelligence and ambition. Friedrich Nietzsche's views on ethics are hard to categorize, but I believe are best interpreted as a form of virtue ethics. However, his views on traditional morality and its origins are very unlike the traditional virtue theory found in ancient Greek philosophy and therefore demand special analysis.

It is important to remember that each of these theories is *comprehensive* or all-encompassing in its scope. That is, each theory gives an analysis of what morality is and what makes an action right or wrong and cannot be combined with competing theories. This means that one theory cannot be true in one instance and another theory true in another instance. Acts themselves aren't utilitarian or egoist, but rather *if* utilitarianism is true, *then* certain acts will be right or wrong, and *if* egoism is true, than certain *other* acts will be right and wrong. Note, however, that many of these theories will agree about many things, differing only on *the reasons why* they are right or wrong. For example, an **egoist** and a **utilitarian** might agree that having children you cannot afford is wrong. For the egoist, it is wrong because *it is not in your interest* to do so—it has a negative effect on your individual welfare. For the utilitarian, it is wrong because of the negative effect on both you *and society*, as it is one of the main causes of poverty and lack of social mobility in developed nations, and fatherless households produce children who are more likely to commit crimes, join gangs, abuse drugs and have various kinds of other social and emotional problems. So, according to utilitarianism, it is the effect on *the general welfare or happiness of society* that makes it wrong to have children you cannot afford—including, but not limited to, any reduction of happiness in your own life.

It is also sometimes unclear what things are right or wrong according to a particular theory. For example, suppose we agree that utilitarianism is true and that the right act is that which maximizing happiness. We may still disagree about how to go about it or

which things maximize happiness. For example, some people think that radically cutting the size and scope of government and increasing individual freedom and autonomy would be one of the most effective means to increasing human happiness. Others believe that this would lead to disastrous consequences, and that, quite to the contrary, we should increase the size and scope of government as well as the forcible redistribution of income in order to fund more social services for the poor and middle class. The fact that people can proceed from a common theoretical foundation and arrive at vastly different conclusions raises serious questions about the possibility of genuine moral knowledge and, by extension, political knowledge. These issues will be addressed in depth the end of the book.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. You've been given a brief introduction to the various theories we'll be considering this term. What questions do you have about them or how they are related to one another or categorized on the chart?

2. Give an example of one of these theories being used to justify an act as right or to condemn it as wrong. Your example could be from history, literature, a movie or television program, current events, or completely made up by you.

3. At this early stage of the game, which theory looks the most promising to you as an account of morality? Why?

4. On the last previous page, it is suggested that the egoist and the utilitarian will agree that having children you cannot afford is wrong but for different reasons, either your individual well-being (egoism) or the general welfare or happiness of society (utilitarianism). On a more in-depth analysis, will the justification of the utilitarian work for the egoist, and vice versa?

5. Come up with an example or two of an ethical choice where two theories would tell you to do *the same thing* but for *different reasons*. Explain how each theory justifies the choice.

6. Come up with some examples of ethical choices where two theories might recommend different courses of action. Explain why they differ in the advice they would give you.

CHAPTER 2
MORAL RELATIVISM

OF CANNIBALS
Miguel de Montaigne
Translated by Charles Cotton

I long had a man in my house that lived ten or twelve years in the New World, discovered in these latter days, and in that part of it where Villegaignon landed,–[At Brazil, in 1557.]–which he called Antarctic France. This discovery of so vast a country seems to be of very great consideration. I cannot be sure, that hereafter there may not be another, so many wiser men than we having been deceived in this. I am afraid our eyes are bigger than our bellies, and that we have more curiosity than capacity; for we grasp at all, but catch nothing but wind…

This man that I had was a plain ignorant fellow, and therefore the more likely to tell truth: for your better-bred sort of men are much more curious in their observation, 'tis true, and discover a great deal more; but then they gloss upon it, and to give the greater weight to what they deliver, and allure your belief, they cannot forbear a little to alter the story; they never represent things to you simply as they are, but rather as they appeared to them, or as they would have them appear to you, and to gain the reputation of men of judgment, and the better to induce your faith, are willing to help out the business with something more than is really true, of their own invention. Now in this case, we should either have a man of irreproachable veracity, or so simple that he has not wherewithal to contrive, and to give a colour of truth to false relations, and who can have no ends in forging an untruth. Such a one was mine; and besides, he has at divers times brought to me several seamen and merchants who at the same time went the same voyage. I shall therefore content myself with his information, without inquiring what the cosmographers say to the business…

I find that there is nothing barbarous and savage in this nation, by anything that I can gather, excepting, that every one gives the title of barbarism to everything that is not in use in his own country. As, indeed, we have no other level of truth and reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the place wherein we live: there is always the perfect religion, there the perfect government, there the most exact and accomplished usage of all things. They are savages at the same rate that we say fruits are wild, which nature produces of herself and by her own ordinary progress; whereas, in truth, we ought rather to call those wild whose natures we have changed by our artifice and diverted from the common order. In those, the genuine, most useful, and natural virtues and properties are vigorous and sprightly, which we have helped to degenerate in these, by accommodating them to the pleasure of our own corrupted palate. And yet for all this, our taste confesses a flavour and delicacy excellent even to emulation of the best of ours, in several fruits wherein those countries abound without art or culture. Neither is it reasonable that art should gain the pre-eminence of our great and powerful mother nature. We have so surcharged her with the additional ornaments and graces we have added to the beauty and riches of her own works by our inventions, that we have almost smothered her; yet in other places, where she shines in her own

purity and proper lustre, she marvellously baffles and disgraces all our vain and frivolous attempts:

"Et veniunt hederae sponte sua melius; Surgit et in solis formosior arbutus antris; Et volucres nulls dulcius arte canunt."

["The ivy grows best spontaneously, the arbutus best in shady caves; and the wild notes of birds are sweeter than art can teach. –"Propertius, i. 2, 10.]

Our utmost endeavours cannot arrive at so much as to imitate the nest of the least of birds, its contexture, beauty, and convenience: not so much as the web of a poor spider.

All things, says Plato,–[Laws , 10.]–are produced either by nature, by fortune, or by art; the greatest and most beautiful by the one or the other of the former, the least and the most imperfect by the last.

These nations then seem to me to be so far barbarous, as having received but very little form and fashion from art and human invention, and consequently to be not much remote from their original simplicity. The laws of nature, however, govern them still, not as yet much vitiated with any mixture of ours: but 'tis in such purity, that I am sometimes troubled we were not sooner acquainted with these people, and that they were not discovered in those better times, when there were men much more able to judge of them than we are. I am sorry that Lycurgus and Plato had no knowledge of them; for to my apprehension, what we now see in those nations, does not only surpass all the pictures with which the poets have adorned the golden age, and all their inventions in feigning a happy state of man, but, moreover, the fancy and even the wish and desire of philosophy itself; so native and so pure a simplicity, as we by experience see to be in them, could never enter into their imagination, nor could they ever believe that human society could have been maintained with so little artifice and human patchwork. I should tell Plato that it is a nation wherein there is no manner of traffic, no knowledge of letters, no science of numbers, no name of magistrate or political superiority; no use of service, riches or poverty, no contracts, no successions, no dividends, no properties, no employments, but those of leisure, no respect of kindred, but common, no clothing, no agriculture, no metal, no use of corn or wine; the very words that signify lying, treachery, dissimulation, avarice, envy, detraction, pardon, never heard of…

As to the rest, they live in a country very pleasant and temperate, so that, as my witnesses inform me, 'tis rare to hear of a sick person, and they moreover assure me, that they never saw any of the natives, either paralytic, bleareyed, toothless, or crooked with age. The situation of their country is along the sea-shore, enclosed on the other side towards the land, with great and high mountains, having about a hundred leagues in breadth between. They have great store of fish and flesh, that have no resemblance to those of ours: which they eat without any other cookery, than plain boiling, roasting, and broiling. The first that rode a horse thither, though in several other voyages he had contracted an acquaintance and familiarity with them, put them into so terrible a fright, with his centaur appearance, that they killed him with their arrows before they could come to discover who he was.

Their buildings are very long, and of capacity to hold two or three hundred people, made of the barks of tall trees, reared with one end upon the ground, and leaning to and supporting one another at the top, like some of our barns, of which the covering hangs down to the very ground, and serves for the side walls. They have wood so hard, that they cut with it, and make their swords of it, and their grills of it to broil their meat. Their beds are of cotton, hung swinging from the roof, like our seamen's hammocks, every man his own, for the wives lie apart from their husbands. They rise with the sun, and so soon as they are up, eat for all day, for they have no more meals but that; they do not then drink, as Suidas reports of some other people of the East that never drank at their meals; but drink very often all day after, and sometimes to a rousing pitch. Their drink is made of a certain root, and is of the colour of our claret, and they never drink it but lukewarm. It will not keep above two or three days; it has a somewhat sharp, brisk taste, is nothing heady, but very comfortable to the stomach; laxative to strangers, but a very pleasant beverage to such as are accustomed to it. They make use, instead of bread, of a certain white compound, like coriander seeds; I have tasted of it; the taste is sweet and a little flat. The whole day is spent in dancing. Their young men go a-hunting after wild beasts with bows and arrows; one part of their women are employed in preparing their drink the while, which is their chief employment. One of their old men, in the morning before they fall to eating, preaches to the whole family, walking from the one end of the house to the other, and several times repeating the same sentence, till he has finished the round, for their houses are at least a hundred yards long. Valour towards their enemies and love towards their wives, are the two heads of his discourse, never failing in the close, to put them in mind, that 'tis their wives who provide them their drink warm and well seasoned. The fashion of their beds, ropes, swords, and of the wooden bracelets they tie about their wrists, when they go to fight, and of the great canes, bored hollow at one end, by the sound of which they keep the cadence of their dances, are to be seen in several places, and amongst others, at my house. They shave all over, and much more neatly than we, without other razor than one of wood or stone. They believe in the immortality of the soul, and that those who have merited well of the gods are lodged in that part of heaven where the sun rises, and the accursed in the west.

They have I know not what kind of priests and prophets, who very rarely present themselves to the people, having their abode in the mountains. At their arrival, there is a great feast, and solemn assembly of many villages: each house, as I have described, makes a village, and they are about a French league distant from one another. This prophet declaims to them in public, exhorting them to virtue and their duty: but all their ethics are comprised in these two articles, resolution in war, and affection to their wives. He also prophesies to them events to come, and the issues they are to expect from their enterprises, and prompts them to or diverts them from war: but let him look to't; for if he fail in his divination, and anything happen otherwise than he has foretold, he is cut into a thousand pieces, if he be caught, and condemned for a false prophet: for that reason, if any of them has been mistaken, he is no more heard of.

Divination is a gift of God, and therefore to abuse it, ought to be a punishable imposture. Amongst the Scythians, where their diviners failed in the promised effect, they were laid, bound hand and foot, upon carts loaded with firs and bavins, and drawn by oxen, on which they were burned to death.–[Herodotus, iv. 69.]–Such as only meddle with things subject to the conduct of human capacity, are excusable in doing the best they can: but those other fellows that come to delude us with assurances of an extraordinary faculty, beyond our understanding, ought they not to be punished, when they do not make good the effect of their promise, and for the temerity of their imposture?

They have continual war with the nations that live further within the mainland, beyond their mountains, to which they go naked, and without other arms than their bows and wooden swords, fashioned at one end like the head of our javelins. The obstinacy of their battles is wonderful, and they never end without great effusion of blood: for as to running away, they know not what it is. Every one for a trophy brings home the head of an enemy he has killed, which he fixes over the door of his house. After having a long time treated their prisoners very well, and given them all the regales they can think of, he to whom the prisoner belongs, invites a great assembly of his friends. They being come, he ties a rope to one of the arms of the prisoner, of which, at a distance, out of his reach, he holds the one end himself, and gives to the friend he loves best the other arm to hold after the same manner; which being. done, they two, in the presence of all the assembly, despatch him with their swords. After that, they roast him, eat him amongst them, and send some chops to their absent friends. They do not do this, as some think, for nourishment, as the Scythians anciently did, but as a representation of an extreme revenge; as will appear by this: that having observed the Portuguese, who were in league with their enemies, to inflict another sort of death upon any of them they took prisoners, which was to set them up to the girdle in the earth, to shoot at the remaining part till it was stuck full of arrows, and then to hang them, they thought those people of the other world (as being men who had sown the knowledge of a great many vices amongst their neighbours, and who were much greater masters in all sorts of mischief than they) did not exercise this sort of revenge without a meaning, and that it must needs be more painful than theirs, they began to leave their old way, and to follow this. I am not sorry that we should here take notice of the barbarous horror of so cruel an action, but that, seeing so clearly into their faults, we should be so blind to our own. I conceive there is more barbarity in eating a man alive, than when he is dead; in tearing a body limb from limb by racks and torments, that is yet in perfect sense; in roasting it by degrees; in causing it to be bitten and worried by dogs and swine (as we have not only read, but lately seen, not amongst inveterate and mortal enemies, but among neighbours and fellow-citizens, and, which is worse, under colour of piety and religion), than to roast and eat him after he is dead.

Chrysippus and Zeno, the two heads of the Stoic sect, were of opinion that there was no hurt in making use of our dead carcasses, in what way soever for our

necessity, and in feeding upon them too;–[Diogenes Laertius, vii. 188.]–as our own ancestors, who being besieged by Caesar in the city Alexia, resolved to sustain the famine of the siege with the bodies of their old men, women, and other persons who were incapable of bearing arms.

"Vascones, ut fama est, alimentis talibus usi Produxere animas."

["'Tis said the Gascons with such meats appeased their hunger." –Juvenal, Sat., xv. 93.]

And the physicians make no bones of employing it to all sorts of use, either to apply it outwardly; or to give it inwardly for the health of the patient. But there never was any opinion so irregular, as to excuse treachery, disloyalty, tyranny, and cruelty, which are our familiar vices. We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them. Their wars are throughout noble and generous, and carry as much excuse and fair pretence, as that human malady is capable of; having with them no other foundation than the sole jealousy of valour. Their disputes are not for the conquest of new lands, for these they already possess are so fruitful by nature, as to supply them without labour or concern, with all things necessary, in such abundance that they have no need to enlarge their borders. And they are, moreover, happy in this, that they only covet so much as their natural necessities require: all beyond that is superfluous to them: men of the same age call one another generally brothers, those who are younger, children; and the old men are fathers to all. These leave to their heirs in common the full possession of goods, without any manner of division, or other title than what nature bestows upon her creatures, in bringing them into the world. If their neighbours pass over the mountains to assault them, and obtain a victory, all the victors gain by it is glory only, and the advantage of having proved themselves the better in valour and virtue: for they never meddle with the goods of the conquered, but presently return into their own country, where they have no want of anything necessary, nor of this greatest of all goods, to know happily how to enjoy their condition and to be content. And those in turn do the same; they demand of their prisoners no other ransom, than acknowledgment that they are overcome: but there is not one found in an age, who will not rather choose to die than make such a confession, or either by word or look recede from the entire grandeur of an invincible courage. There is not a man amongst them who had not rather be killed and eaten, than so much as to open his mouth to entreat he may not. They use them with all liberality and freedom, to the end their lives may be so much the dearer to them; but frequently entertain them with menaces of their approaching death, of the torments they are to suffer, of the preparations making in order to it, of the mangling their limbs, and of the feast that is to be made, where their carcass is to be the only dish. All which they do, to no other end, but only to extort some gentle or submissive word from them, or to frighten them so as to make them run away, to obtain this advantage that they were terrified, and that their constancy was shaken; and indeed, if rightly taken, it is in this point only that a true victory consists:

"Victoria nulla est,
Quam quae confessor animo quoque subjugat hostes."

["No victory is complete, which the conquered do not admit to be so.–" Claudius, De Sexto Consulatu Honorii , v. 248.]…

…these prisoners are so far from discovering the least weakness, for all the terrors that can be represented to them, that, on the contrary, during the two or three months they are kept, they always appear with a cheerful countenance; importune their masters to make haste to bring them to the test, defy, rail at them, and reproach them with cowardice, and the number of battles they have lost against those of their country. I have a song made by one of these prisoners, wherein he bids them "come all, and dine upon him, and welcome, for they shall withal eat their own fathers and grandfathers, whose flesh has served to feed and nourish him. These muscles," says he, "this flesh and these veins, are your own: poor silly souls as you are, you little think that the substance of your ancestors' limbs is here yet; notice what you eat, and you will find in it the taste of your own flesh:" in which song there is to be observed an invention that nothing relishes of the barbarian. Those that paint these people dying after this manner, represent the prisoner spitting in the faces of his executioners and making wry mouths at them. And 'tis most certain, that to the very last gasp, they never cease to brave and defy them both in word and gesture. In plain truth, these men are very savage in comparison of us; of necessity, they must either be absolutely so or else we are savages; for there is a vast difference betwixt their manners and ours.

The men there have several wives, and so much the greater number, by how much they have the greater reputation for valour. And it is one very remarkable feature in their marriages, that the same jealousy our wives have to hinder and divert us from the friendship and familiarity of other women, those employ to promote their husbands' desires, and to procure them many spouses; for being above all things solicitous of their husbands' honour, 'tis their chiefest care to seek out, and to bring in the most companions they can, forasmuch as it is a testimony of the husband's virtue. Most of our ladies will cry out, that 'tis monstrous; whereas in truth it is not so, but a truly matrimonial virtue, and of the highest form. In the Bible, Sarah, with Leah and Rachel, the two wives of Jacob, gave the most beautiful of their handmaids to their husbands; Livia preferred the passions of Augustus to her own interest; –[Suetonius, Life of Augustus , c. 71.]– and the wife of King Deiotarus, Stratonice, did not only give up a fair young maid that served her to her husband's embraces, but moreover carefully brought up the children he had by her, and assisted them in the succession to their father's crown.

Three of these people, not foreseeing how dear their knowledge of the corruptions of this part of the world will one day cost their happiness and repose, and that the effect of this commerce will be their ruin, as I presuppose it is in a very fair way (miserable men to suffer themselves to be deluded with desire of novelty and to have left the serenity of their own heaven to come so far to gaze at ours!), were at Rouen at the time that

the late King Charles IX. was there. The king himself talked to them a good while, and they were made to see our fashions, our pomp, and the form of a great city. After which, some one asked their opinion, and would know of them, what of all the things they had seen, they found most to be admired? To which they made answer, three things, of which I have forgotten the third, and am troubled at it, but two I yet remember. They said, that in the first place they thought it very strange that so many tall men, wearing beards, strong, and well armed, who were about the king ('tis like they meant the Swiss of the guard), should submit to obey a child, and that they did not rather choose out one amongst themselves to command. Secondly (they have a way of speaking in their language to call men the half of one another), that they had observed that there were amongst us men full and crammed with all manner of commodities, whilst, in the meantime, their halves were begging at their doors, lean and half- starved with hunger and poverty; and they thought it strange that these necessitous halves were able to suffer so great an inequality and injustice, and that they did not take the others by the throats, or set fire to their houses.

I talked to one of them a great while together, but I had so ill an interpreter, and one who was so perplexed by his own ignorance to apprehend my meaning, that I could get nothing out of him of any moment: Asking him what advantage he reaped from the superiority he had amongst his own people (for he was a captain, and our mariners called him king), he told me, to march at the head of them to war. Demanding of him further how many men he had to follow him, he showed me a space of ground, to signify as many as could march in such a compass, which might be four or five thousand men; and putting the question to him whether or no his authority expired with the war, he told me this remained: that when he went to visit the villages of his dependence, they planed him paths through the thick of their woods, by which he might pass at his ease. All this is not too bad – but what's the purpose? They don't wear breeches."

[I've slightly modified the translation of this last line, which is somewhat obscure in Cotton's original translation. Montaigne's point is that having the brush cleared where you walk doesn't seem like such a big deal until you consider that the cannibals don't wear pants and would otherwise have their legs scratched by the jungle growth. – J.B.]

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Make a list of the cultural differences between Europeans and the cannibal culture he discusses. What did the cannibals think of the Europeans during their visit? What would you imagine most Europeans thought of the cannibals? What does Montaigne think of them?

2. Montaigne is often interpreted as a cultural relativist. Is this interpretation accurate? Why or why not? Under what other theory might he be classified?

3. What are some cultural practices in our own culture that may seem abhorrent to members of other cultures?

4. Given that everyone is habituated to their own culture and likely to accept

most of the practices or taboos they grew up with, how does one obtain objective knowledge about right and wrong, good and evil? Or would you have to conclude that morality is relative to culture or objective but unknowable?

5. Is cannibalism objectively wrong, wrong only if you are not a member of culture that practices it, or is it merely a widely held cultural taboo, corresponding to no underlying moral reality?

LETTER FROM
A BIRMINGHAM JAIL
Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
April 16, 1963

MY DEAR FELLOW CLERGYMEN:

While confined here in the Birmingham City Jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities "unwise and untimely." Seldom, if ever, do I pause to answer criticism of my work and ideas. If I sought to answer all the criticisms that cross my desk, my secretaries would be engaged in little else in the course of the day, and I would have no time for constructive work. But since I feel that you are men of genuine goodwill and your criticisms are sincerely set forth, I would like to answer your statement in what I hope will be patient and reasonable terms…

We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights. The nations of Asia and Africa are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence, and we still creep at horse and buggy pace toward the gaining of a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. I guess it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize and even kill your black brothers and sisters with impunity; when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothering in an airtight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward white people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos: "Daddy, why do white people treat colored people so mean?"; when you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"; when your first name becomes "nigger," your middle name becomes "boy" (however old you are) and your last name becomes "John," and your wife and mother are never given the respected title "Mrs."; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that you are a Negro, living constantly at tip-toe stance never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over, and men are no longer willing to be plunged into an abyss of despair. I hope, sirs, you can understand our legitimate and unavoidable impatience.

You express a great deal of anxiety over our willingness to break laws. This is certainly a legitimate concern. Since we so diligently urge people to obey the

Supreme Court's decision of 1954 outlawing segregation in the public schools, it is rather strange and paradoxical to find us consciously breaking laws. One may well ask: "How can you advocate breaking some laws and obeying others?" The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are *just* and there are *unjust* laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of Saint Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority, and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes and "I-it" relationship for an "I-thou" relationship, and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn't segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.

Let us turn to a more concrete example of just and unjust laws. An unjust law is a code that a majority inflicts on a minority that is not binding on itself. This is difference made legal. On the other hand a just law is a code that a majority compels a minority to follow that it is willing to follow itself. This is sameness made legal.

Let me give another explanation. An unjust law is a code inflicted upon a minority which that minority had no part in enacting or creating because they did not have the unhampered right to vote. Who can say that the legislature of Alabama which set up the segregation laws was democratically elected? Throughout the state of Alabama all types of conniving methods are used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters and there are some counties without a single Negro registered to vote despite the fact that the Negro constitutes a majority of the population. Can any law set up in such a state be considered democratically structured?

These are just a few examples of unjust and just laws. There are some instances when a law is just on its face and unjust in its application. For instance, I was arrested Friday on a charge of parading without a permit. Now there is nothing wrong with an ordinance which requires a permit for a parade, but when the ordinance is used to preserve segregation and to deny citizens the First-Amendment privilege of peaceful assembly and peaceful protest, then it becomes unjust.

I hope you can see the distinction I am trying to point out. In no sense do I advocate evading or defying the law as

the rabid segregationist would do. This would lead to anarchy. One who breaks an unjust law must do it *openly, lovingly,* (not hatefully as the white mothers did in New Orleans when they were seen on television screaming "nigger, nigger, nigger") and with a willingness to accept the penalty. I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.

Of course, there is nothing new about this kind of civil disobedience. It was seen sublimely in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego to obey the laws of Nebuchadnezzar because a higher moral law was involved. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of chopping blocks, before submitting to certain unjust laws of the Roman empire. To a degree academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience.

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." It was "illegal" to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. But I am sure that if I had lived in Germany during that time I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers even though it was illegal. If I lived in a Communist country today where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I believe I would openly advocate disobeying these anti-religious laws. I must make two honest confessions to you, my Christian and Jewish brothers.

First, I must confess that over the last few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I can't agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically feels he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait until a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection.

I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice, and that when they fail to do this they become dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress. I had hoped that the white moderate would understand that the present tension in the South is merely a necessary phase of the transition from an obnoxious negative peace, where the Negro passively accepted his unjust plight, to a substance-filled positive peace, where all men will respect the dignity and worth of human personality. Actually, we who engage in nonviolent direct action are not the creators of tension. We merely bring to the surface the hidden tension that is already alive.

We bring it out in the open where it can be seen and dealt with. Like a boil that can never be cured as long as it is covered up but must be opened with all its pus-flowing ugliness to the natural medicines of air and light, injustice must likewise be exposed, with all of the tension its exposing creates, to the light of human conscience and the air of national opinion before it can be cured.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is Martin Luther King's argument against cultural relativism? What does he propose in its place? Do you agree with his reasoning?

2. According to cultural relativism, if racism were accepted by the majority of a society, would that make it right for that society? If Martin Luther King represented a minority of Americans during the civil rights era, what would relativism say about his views or actions at the time? What would relativism say about the rightness of them today?

MORAL RELATIVISM

Moral relativism is a form of moral realism which says that morality is a legitimate enterprise and that there are actual moral dimensions or qualities in the world (i.e., morality isn't just a "useful fiction"), but that morality is not universal. Nothing is right or wrong in itself; instead, we always have to ask, "Right or wrong *for whom*?" Relativists differ on what the standard of measure for moral rules should be. **Cultural relativists** say it should be what the majority of a society believes or practices. **Subjectivists** (individual relativists) say that the standard should be each individual's moral code, regardless of what his society thinks of it. It's important to remember, however, that each of these views are realist views, in that they believe there are moral truths that are binding on us; they only deny that such truths are universal or absolute. These truths are objective but differ either from culture to culture, in the case of cultural relativism, or from person to person, as in the case of subjectivism.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism has the advantage of preserving some of our common sense beliefs about morality and social norms, such as the idea that the individual is responsible to his or her community and that there are some rules for operating in polite society that are binding on everyone within that society. At the same time, it recognizes that human beings living in different areas have developed different ways of doing things and that none are necessarily better than the others. When one travels abroad or studies different cultures, one notices that what is considered justified or taboo differs from culture to culture and that different groups of people value different things. For example, Western Europe and Scandinavia have a more socialist system of government, providing a lot of free or low-cost services but having a high rate of taxation. The United States offers fewer government services but has lower rates of taxation and allows individuals more economic freedom. In Europe, people work less and have longer vacations; in the U.S., people work longer and have shorter or no vacations but have larger houses, more air conditioning, automobiles and other luxuries. In Mexico and South America, people are not as wealthy as people in either North America or Europe but have a much more relaxed pace of life with less stress and fewer heart attacks.

To make another comparison, in Asian countries, one's family and community come first. The individual must often subordinate his or her wishes to the group. People often work at the same job from birth to death and have a binding relationship and loyalty with their employer and lasting relationships with those in the town in which they live. They often live and work in the same place for most of their life. In the United States, the individual and his rights (and sometimes responsibilities) are primary. People tend to move around a lot to go to a good school or to find a better job. It is considered a good thing to give to one's community or to maintain a good relationship with one's family, but these are often subordinated to concerns about career or one's own "nuclear" family. After high school, many children leave home for college, find a job and never return. When their parents become

unable to care for themselves, it is common for them to be put into a facility staffed by professional care-givers, sometimes with financial assistance from the children, but often paid through the parents' own private insurance or savings or the support of the government.

In contrast, extended families in Asia live together, and children more often than "strangers" care for their aged parents. One would be far less likely to date or marry a person with whom one's parents disapproved. Delinquent or deviant behavior is often taken care of informally by the community instead of by a professional police force or social workers. On the other hand, the strong social ties constrain individual freedom in a way that would seem oppressive to most Westerners. In some areas in China and India, marriages are still arranged by parents. Those who break social taboos are shunned by their community, and one lacks the anonymity, privacy and independence one enjoys even in a small city in America. Freedom of religion and freedom of speech are virtually non-existent or strongly curtailed in many Asian countries. The State controls the news media, and pornography operates underground and is heavily prosecuted. Thus, along with a greater sense of community comes a greater obligation for conformity. "The nail that sticks up gets pounded down," as the old Chinese proverb goes.

A cultural relativist would argue that Asia and the West have developed different ways of doing things, neither of which are better or worse than the other. And while the idea of a marriage arranged by one's parents might seem absurd to someone raised in the West, the idea putting one's parents in an "old folks home" might seem equally absurd to someone raised in the East. Each culture is a law unto itself, cultural relativism would say, and no culture should judge or try to change any other. They point out the inappropriateness and negative consequences of British, French and Spanish colonialism and the attempt to force Western European values and religion on the indigenous peoples of their conquered territories. Cultural relativists claim that because no culture is "right" or "wrong" in an absolute sense, we ought to have tolerance for cultures other than our own.

OBJECTIONS TO CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism might seem to work well in some cases, but when examining other cases of beliefs or practices accepted by the majority of a society, serious questions begin to emerge. Is whatever a large enough group of people believes or does always right? Should the majority always rule? And the majority of *whom*—how do you draw cultural boundaries in a world that is not neatly partitioned into homogenous groups of like-minded individuals? Consider the following objections:

(1) Corrupt cultures or heinous cultural practices.

Suppose the majority of people in the pre-Civil War United States believed in slavery. If a cultural relativist is going to be consistent, what should she say about the practice? She would have to say that since a majority of people believed in it, it was right for them to practice it. Assume that the majority of people in Germany during the 30s and 40s supported Hitler and his policies. If a

cultural relativist is going to remain consistent, what should she say about Germans who hid Jews from Nazi soldiers during the Holocaust? Again, it seems that she would have to say that those who hid Jews were immoral. This conflicts with our intuitions about what morality is all about. Morality isn't just a set of rules, but it has to do with things like justice, human rights, compassion and kindness, promoting happiness or reducing suffering, and so on. The idea that the moral standard of the Nazi regime, with its values of militarism, racism and genocide, is no better or worse on the whole than any other culture is absurd. The idea that treating people as property and putting them to forced labor, with no concern for their value or autonomy or suffering, was right merely because it was believed to be so by the majority is similarly absurd. Other examples of corrupt cultures or heinous cultural practices abound, from the Barbarian hoards that engaged in invasion, looting, murdering, raping and pillaging, such as the Mongol hoards or Vikings raiders, to the Aztecs who eviscerated alive tens of thousands of people on their stone altars to feed their blood-thirsty gods. Heinous cultural practices in cultures that, as a whole, may not be considered corrupt include such practices as female genital mutilation, where the clitoris of a pre-adolescent girl is cut off to reduce her sexual desire (predicated on the misogynistic view that women are "sluts and whores," when, in reality, it is men who are naturally more promiscuous). Another such practice, still occasionally practiced in parts of rural India, is that of suttee, the obligation of a widow to be cremated alive on her husband's funeral pyre. Before the British colonial period, the practice was widespread. Women who did not do this were shunned and reduced to becoming homeless beggars or prostitutes. Again, this would seem to be predicated on a misogynistic view of women as having no intrinsic worth.

Of course, various examples of genocide would also seem to qualify, such as Hitler's "final solution," which killed six million Jews, at first by firing squad and hastily dug trenches, and later in methodically constructed gas chambers and incinerators in the death camps such at Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka and elsewhere. We can add others such as the lesser known murder of one million Armenians by the Turks in World War I, the Jews' own ancient genocidal war of conquest against the Canaanites, attempts to wipe out Native American populations by American settlers, North Vietnam's Pol Pot's massacre of millions after America withdrew from Southeast Asia, and Saddam Hussein's attempt to wipe out Kurdish populations in Northern Iraq, including the use of chemical warfare agents. Even today, light-skinned Northern Sudanese Muslims are still waging a genocidal campaign against the darker-complected Animist and Christian Sudanese to the South, wiping out entire villages and selling women and children into slavery.

So, aren't militarism, racism, sexism, religious discrimination and slavery bad or wrong, even if the majority of a particular culture supports them? If so, then relativism is false.

(2) Moral progress is impossible under cultural relativism.

The idea of moral progress, that things have gotten better and that we should work towards producing a more just

society is an incoherent notion under cultural relativism. Under cultural relativism, you can't have a "better" or "worse" set of social rules, only different social rules. The only sense in which a society could become better is if there were more agreement on or compliance with some set of rules, whatever it happened to be. But most people think we have improved society in, say, the last 300 years in the Western Hemisphere. We've gone from slavery, racism and various kinds of monarchies and dictatorships to democracy, equal rights for women, outlawing discrimination on the basis of race and a general ostracization of racists, outlawing child labor, free public education and public libraries, and so on. This doesn't mean we can't improve, but if you look at how far we've come in reaching toward the ideals of equality, we have made significant progress. But the idea of progress makes sense only in the context of some universal standard or ideal that we are attempting to reach or embody. Without a transcendent universal standard outside our culture by which it may be judged, the notion of moral progress is nonsensical. Moral progress isn't impossible in the sense that we can't improve society if everyone is a cultural relativist, it is that the whole concept of improving society is rendered meaningless, unless by improvement you simply mean increasing conformity to the standards of your culture, whatever they happen to be.

(3) The minority is always wrong under cultural relativism.

One benefit of cultural relativism is that, if true, it would take a lot of the guesswork out of moral decision-making; if one were unsure of whether a particular act was right and wrong, one could settle the matter by consulting the appropriate poll. But this also means that great social reformers or courageous individuals who attempted to change society for the better are immoral. People such as Women's Rights advocate Susan B. Anthony, Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, or Rosa Parks were all bad people, that is, until they were able to help sway the majority to their side, at which time they became good people, and their views went from being wrong to right. This is paradoxical, to say the least. Aren't some of the greatest people those who challenged prevailing wisdom, tradition and the *status quo* and who *ignored* public opinion? Don't we disdain leaders who always have their finger in the air to see which way the wind is blowing and are driven by polls rather than by core values?

(4) There is no non-arbitrary way to define "culture."

Defining what counts as a "culture" in cultural relativism and deciding who belongs in which cultural group is not simply a difficult task, but an impossible one. We are all members of various institutional and non-institutionalized social groups: political, religious and economic, along with various sub-cultures, such as academia or being a musician or an artist. Allen Ginsberg was an atheist, Jewish, homosexual poet living in San Francisco, making his most acclaimed contributions in the 1960s. Which culture does he answer to? American culture? But American culture is extremely diverse. The values of San Francisco are not the values of rural Georgia or a backwater town in Mississippi. Should he have

commissioned a national opinion poll to find out to what degree his liberal enclave may have diverged from the majority of Americans? By virtue of his Jewish cultural heritage, should he have started believing in God or stopped being a practicing homosexual? Or by virtue of his deep roots in the artistic community, should he have focused on the values of his fellow artists? It's likely that Mr. Ginsberg would have far more in common with poets or artists in any European country or even with those in large coastal cities in Europe than with "Average Americans" in Kansas or Utah. So why the focus on large land masses or vast political boundaries that group people together who will never meet and link people to places they may never go?

And what about immigration? Must you abandon your culture when you move to a new place or can you retain it? If you are a recent Chinese immigrant and live in Chinatown, can you continue to live according to Chinese values or must you instantly adopt American values? Maybe you are spending too much time on your homework and making your American counterparts look bad! You might be too respectful of authority or your parents to fit the American mold. It might be a good idea to cut class or start smoking marijuana just to make sure you fit in.

And when you look at religious or class subcultures, you see that a Mormon in Utah may have more values common with Mormons from other parts of the world than with an atheist living in Utah. A devout Pentecostal construction worker in America may have more values in common with one living in Mexico than his neighbor, the lapsed Catholic University professor. Someone who is a raver, a Deadhead, an athlete and so on may have more in common with those of other countries than the average person in their own country. One might say that most artists and musicians tend to be subversives of one sort or another; are they obligated to change their values to be in accord with mainstream society? And again, aren't the great artists the ones who break with tradition, who set the trend rather than conform to the status quo?

Culture and society are diverse and complex. There is no easy, non-arbitrary way to divide people up. But if you can't do this, then you don't have any objective standard of measure by which an individual's behavior can be judged, and cultural relativism collapses.

(5) Tolerance can sometimes be bad, and cultural relativism does not actually lead to tolerance, nor can it coherently propose tolerance as an absolute, universal value.

Many suggest that we should embrace cultural relativism because it will lead to greater tolerance. But tolerance is not always good. Should we have been tolerant of the Nazis? After all, if they wanted to exterminate their minority subversive populations—Jews, Gypsies, homosexuals, Jehovah's witnesses, those who didn't go along with the Reich—that's none of our business. Amnesty International is just morally confused, according to cultural relativism. If a country wants to torture political prisoners or persecute religious minorities, that's their business. If women are treated as property or second class citizens in various countries in the Middle East, we should look the other way. However, most of us think that there is such a thing as "human rights,"

which are what groups like Amnesty International and other international organizations are working towards. But if cultural relativism is true, then there can be no such thing as "*human* rights," only "American rights," "European rights," "Muslim rights" and so on.

And relativism doesn't necessarily lead to tolerance. There are some very intolerant cultures, and relativism would say that their intolerant practices aimed at minority populations are justified, so long as they are supported by the majority.

The historic focus on the value of tolerance by cultural relativists would appear to be contradictory. On the one hand, they assert that all values are relative to culture, but, at the same time, they assert that it is (absolutely, universally) morally wrong for one culture to impose its values on another. Shouldn't this obsession with tolerance, "diversity" and non-judgmentalism really be considered to be an American or European value, or perhaps a value of the American-European cultural elite? Certainly it is not a part of the culture of Saudi Arabia or North Korea.

The views espoused by those who claim to be cultural relativists seem to be more consistent with those of **soft universalism**, which asserts that *there are universal values that apply to everyone, regardless of culture or conscience, but the way in which these values are embodied or applied may differ from culture to culture.* **Hard universalism** maintains that ethical truths are very *particular* and *specific* in nature. For example, the concept that sex is only right in a monogamous, heterosexual relationship must be either true or false. Soft universalism holds that moral truths are general and could be represented in a variety of cultural forms. For example, it might be a moral truth that sexual relationships should be in the context of a consensual, loving relationship, but may be polygamous (one person with one or more spouses, as practiced in Islamic countries in the Middle East, Tibet, Nepal and Sri Lanka), monogamous (the rule in Western Europe and North America) or same sex couplings (increasingly accepted in Europe and the U.S., accepted as normal in Ancient Greece).

However, critics suggest that soft universalism may just be a slippery slope to relativism. What do you say about cultures in which women are treated as second class citizens and the society disapproves of them in any but traditional roles as wives and mothers? Is this simply that society's way of valuing the contribution of women or cherishing their value, or does it violate a universal moral rule of gender equality?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are there any moral principles that are either shared by all cultures or that apply to every human being, regardless of their culture? If so, give an example. If not, describe the consequences for the possibility of harmony in multicultural societies such as the United States or of lasting global peace.

2. Isn't it obvious that Nazi Germany was a corrupt culture or that various cultural practices, such as racism, genocide or slavery are immoral? If so, what does that say about cultural relativism?

3. Many people are under the impression that cultural relativism should be embraced because it is a more tolerant view than absolutism or universalism. Is tolerance always desirable? Does cultural relativism naturally lead to greater tolerance?

4. Subjectivism is relativism on an individual level and says that right and wrong are determined by each individual's moral code. Which of cultural relativism's problems does this view avoid? Which does it share? What problems of its own might it have? Argue for or against subjectivism.

CHAPTER 3
MORAL SKEPTICISM

THE REPUBLIC, BOOK II
Plato
Translated by Benjamin Jowett

Glaucon is discussing the nature of justice with his brother, Socrates:

They say that to do injustice is, by nature, good; to suffer injustice, evil; but that the evil is greater than the good. And so when men have both done and suffered injustice and have had experience of both, not being able to avoid the one and obtain the other, they think that they had better agree among themselves to have neither; hence there arise laws and mutual covenants; and that which is ordained by law is termed by them lawful and just. This they affirm to be the origin and nature of justice; it is a mean or compromise, between the best of all, which is to do injustice and not be punished, and the worst of all, which is to suffer injustice without the power of retaliation; and justice, being at a middle point between the two, is tolerated not as a good, but as the lesser evil, and honored by reason of the inability of men to do injustice. For no man who is worthy to be called a man would ever submit to such an agreement if he were able to resist; he would be mad if he did. Such is the received account, Socrates, of the nature and origin of justice.

Now that those who practise justice do so involuntarily and because they have not the power to be unjust will best appear if we imagine something of this kind: having given both to the just and the unjust power to do what they will, let us watch and see whither desire will lead them; then we shall discover in the very act the just and unjust man to be proceeding along the same road, following their interest, which all natures deem to be their good, and are only diverted into the path of justice by the force of law. The liberty which we are supposing may be most completely given to them in the form of such a power as is said to have been possessed by Gyges, the ancestor of Croesus the Lydian. According to the tradition, Gyges was a shepherd in the service of the King of Lydia; there was a great storm, and an earthquake made an opening in the earth at the place where he was feeding his flock. Amazed at the sight, he descended into the opening, where, among other marvels, he beheld a hollow brazen horse, having doors, at which he, stooping and looking in, saw a dead body of stature, as appeared to him, more than human and having nothing on but a gold ring; this he took from the finger of the dead and reascended. Now the shepherds met together, according to custom, that they might send their monthly report about the flocks to the King; into their assembly he came having the ring on his finger, and as he was sitting among them he chanced to turn the collet of the ring inside his hand, when instantly he became invisible to the rest of the company and they began to speak of him as if he were no longer present. He was astonished at this, and again touching the ring he turned the collet outward and reappeared; he made several trials of the ring, and always with the same result – when he turned the collet inward he became invisible, when outward he reappeared. Whereupon he contrived to be chosen one of the messengers who were sent to the court; where as soon as he arrived he seduced the Queen, and with her help conspired against the King and slew him and took

the kingdom. Suppose now that there were two such magic rings, and the just put on one of them and the unjust the other; no man can be imagined to be of such an iron nature that he would stand fast in justice. No man would keep his hands off what was not his own when he could safely take what he liked out of the market, or go into houses and lie with anyone at his pleasure, or kill or release from prison whom he would, and in all respects be like a god among men. Then the actions of the just would be as the actions of the unjust; they would both come at last to the same point. And this we may truly affirm to be a great proof that a man is just, not willingly or because he thinks that justice is any good to him individually, but of necessity, for wherever anyone thinks that he can safely be unjust, there he is unjust. For all men believe in their hearts that injustice is far more profitable to the individual than justice, and he who argues as I have been supposing, will say that they are right. If you could imagine anyone obtaining this power of becoming invisible, and never doing any wrong or touching what was another's, he would be thought by the lookers-on to be a most wretched idiot, although they would praise him to one another's faces, and keep up appearances with one another from a fear that they too might suffer injustice.

Enough of this. Now, if we are to form a real judgment of the life of the just and unjust, we must isolate them; there is no other way; and how is the isolation to be effected? I answer: Let the unjust man be entirely unjust, and the just man entirely just; nothing is to be taken away from either of them, and both are to be perfectly furnished for the work of their respective lives. First, let the unjust be like other distinguished masters of craft; like the skillful pilot or physician, who knows intuitively his own powers and keeps within their limits, and who, if he fails at any point, is able to recover himself. So let the unjust make his unjust attempts in the right way, and lie hidden if he means to be great in his injustice (he who is found out is nobody): for the highest reach of injustice is, to be deemed just when you are not. Therefore I say that in the perfectly unjust man we must assume the most perfect injustice; there is to be no deduction, but we must allow him, while doing the most unjust acts, to have acquired the greatest reputation for justice. If he have taken a false step he must be able to recover himself; he must be one who can speak with effect, if any of his deeds come to light, and who can force his way where force is required by his courage and strength, and command of money and friends. And at his side let us place the just man in his nobleness and simplicity, wishing, as Aeschylus says, to be and not to seem good. There must be no seeming, for if he seem to be just he will be honored and rewarded, and then we shall not know whether he is just for the sake of justice or for the sake of honor and rewards; therefore, let him be clothed in justice only, and have no other covering; and he must be imagined in a state of life the opposite of the former. Let him be the best of men, and let him be thought the worst; then he will have been put to the proof; and we shall see whether he will be affected by the fear of infamy and its consequences. And let him continue thus to the hour of death; being just and seeming to be unjust. When both have reached the uttermost extreme, the one of justice and the other of injustice, let judgment be given which of them is the happier of the

two.

They will tell you that the just man who is thought unjust will be scourged, racked, bound – will have his eyes burnt out; and, at last, after suffering every kind of evil, he will be impaled. Then he will understand that he ought to seem only, and not to be, just; the words of Aeschylus may be more truly spoken of the unjust than of the just. For the unjust is pursuing a reality; he does not live with a view to appearances – he wants to be really unjust and not to seem only – "His mind has a soil deep and fertile,

Out of which spring his prudent counsels."

In the first place, he is thought just, and therefore bears rule in the city; he can marry whom he will, and give in marriage to whom he will; also he can trade and deal where he likes, and always to his own advantage, because he has no misgivings about injustice; and at every contest, whether in public or private, he gets the better of his antagonists, and gains at their expense, and is rich, and out of his gains he can benefit his friends, and harm his enemies; moreover, he can offer sacrifices, and dedicate gifts to the gods abundantly and magnificently, and can honor the gods or any man whom he wants to honor in a far better style than the just, and therefore he is likely to be dearer than they are to the gods. And thus, Socrates, gods and men are said to unite in making the life of the unjust better than the life of the just…

Once more, Socrates, I will ask you to consider another way of speaking about justice and injustice, which is not confined to the poets, but is found in prose writers. The universal voice of mankind is always declaring that justice and virtue are honorable, but grievous and toilsome; and that the pleasures of vice and injustice are easy of attainment, and are only censured by law and opinion. They say also that honesty is for the most part less profitable than dishonesty; and they are quite ready to call wicked men happy, and to honor them both in public and private when they are rich or in any other way influential, while they despise and overlook those who may be weak and poor, even though acknowledging them to be better than the others. But most extraordinary of all is their mode of speaking about virtue and the gods: they say that the gods apportion calamity and misery to many good men, and good and happiness to the wicked. And mendicant prophets go to rich men's doors and persuade them that they have a power committed to them by the gods of making an atonement for a man's own or his ancestor's sins by sacrifices or charms, with rejoicings and feasts; and they promise to harm an enemy, whether just or unjust, at a small cost; with magic arts and incantations binding heaven, as they say, to execute their will. And the poets are the authorities to whom they appeal, now smoothing the path of vice with the words of Hesiod:

"Vice may be had in abundance without trouble; the way is smooth

and her dwelling-place is near. But before virtue the gods have set toil," and a tedious and uphill road: then citing Homer as a witness that the gods may be influenced by men; for he also says:

"The gods, too, may be turned from their purpose; and men pray to

them and avert their wrath by sacrifices and soothing entreaties, and by

libations and the odor of fat, when they have sinned and trangressed."

And they produce a host of books written by Musaeus and Orpheus, who were children of the Moon and the muses – that is what they say – according to which they perform their ritual, and persuade not only individuals, but whole cities, that expiations and atonements for sin may be made by sacrifices and amusements which fill a vacant hour, and are equally at the service of the living and the dead; the latter sort they call mysteries, and they redeem us from the pains of hell, but if we neglect them no one knows what awaits us.

He proceeded: And now when the young hear all this said about virtue and vice, and the way in which gods and men regard them, how are their minds likely to be affected, my dear Socrates – those of them, I mean, who are quick-witted, and, like bees on the wing, light on every flower, and from all that they hear are prone to draw conclusions as to what manner of persons they should be and in what way they should walk if they would make the best of life? Probably the youth will say to himself in the words of Pindar:

"Can I by justice or by crooked ways of deceit ascend a loftier tower

which may be a fortress to me all my days?"

For what men say is that, if I am really just and am not also thought just, profit there is none, but the pain and loss on the other hand are unmistakable. But if, though unjust, I acquire the reputation of justice, a heavenly life is promised to me. Since then, as philosophers prove, appearance tyrannizes over truth and is lord of happiness, to appearance I must devote myself. I will describe around me a picture and shadow of virtue to be the vestibule and exterior of my house; behind I will trail the subtle and crafty fox, as Archilochus, greatest of sages, recommends. But I hear someone exclaiming that the concealment of wickedness is often difficult; to which I answer, Nothing great is easy. Nevertheless, the argument indicates this, if we would be happy, to be the path along which we should proceed. With a view to concealment we will establish secret brotherhoods and political clubs. And there are professors of rhetoric who teach the art of persuading courts and assemblies; and so, partly by persuasion and partly by force, I shall make unlawful gains and not be punished. Still I hear a voice saying that the gods cannot be deceived, neither can they be compelled. But what if there are no gods? or, suppose them to have no care of human things – why in either case should we mind about concealment? And even if there are gods, and they do care about us, yet we know of them only from tradition and the genealogies of the poets; and these are the very persons who say that they may be influenced and turned by "sacrifices and soothing entreaties and by offerings." Let us be consistent, then, and believe both or neither. If the poets speak truly, why, then, we had better be unjust, and offer of the fruits of injustice; for if we are just, although we may escape the vengeance of heaven, we shall lose the gains of injustice; but, if we are unjust, we shall keep the gains,

and by our sinning and praying, and praying and sinning, the gods will be propitiated, and we shall not be punished. "But there is a world below in which either we or our posterity will suffer for our unjust deeds." Yes, my friend, will be the reflection, but there are mysteries and atoning deities, and these have great power. That is what mighty cities declare; and the children of the gods, who were their poets and prophets, bear a like testimony.

On what principle, then, shall we any longer choose justice rather than the worst injustice? when, if we only unite the latter with a deceitful regard to appearances, we shall fare to our mind both with gods and men, in life and after death, as the most numerous and the highest authorities tell us. Knowing all this, Socrates, how can a man who has any superiority of mind or person or rank or wealth, be willing to honor justice; or indeed to refrain from laughing when he hears justice praised? And even if there should be someone who is able to disprove the truth of my words, and who is satisfied that justice is best, still he is not angry with the unjust, but is very ready to forgive them, because he also knows that men are not just of their own free will; unless, peradventure, there be someone whom the divinity within him may have inspired with a hatred of injustice, or who has attained knowledge of the truth – but no other man. He only blames injustice, who, owing to cowardice or age or some weakness, has not the power of being unjust. And this is proved by the fact that when he obtains the power, he immediately becomes unjust as far as he can be.

The cause of all this, Socrates, was indicated by us at the beginning of the argument, when my brother and I told you how astonished we were to find that of all the professing panegyrists of justice – beginning with the ancient heroes of whom any memorial has been preserved to us, and ending with the men of our own time – no one has ever blamed injustice or praised justice except with a view to the glories, honors, and benefits which flow from them.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What do you think of Glaucon's view of moral motivation? What does he say is the motivation of most people when they act in accordance with the rules of everyday morality and refrain from lying, stealing and killing? Do you agree with his assessment?

2. What's his point in bringing up the Gyges' Ring story? How do you think most people would act if they found such a ring? How would *you* act?

3. As a matter of fact, do you think that it is always or at least generally in your interest to act morally? In other words, does it *pay* to be a morally good person? If acting morally is ever *not* in your interest (in some particular instance), would you act morally anyway? Why?

4. What do you think of Glaucon's contention that what's intrinsically good is not being just itself, but rather the reputation that flows from it, i.e., *seeming* to be just while *actually* being unjust? Obviously, if you wear your moral skepticism on your sleeve, people are going to distrust you and perhaps even resent or ostracize you. But if people see you extolling virtue and acting in what they perceive to be a

virtuous manner, they will look kindly upon you and treat you well, even if you are actually lying, stealing, killing and so on in secret. And as long as you're clever enough not to get caught, you won't face any negative consequences for your actions. So Glaucon says that the rational person will only *pretend* to be virtuous, thus gaining all the benefits of virtue but incurring none of the liabilities. Is Glaucon right in asserting that any fully rational and intelligent person behaves like this?

5. What things does Glaucon assume are intrinsically valuable (valuable for their own sake, not for what they can get you)? Is he right about this? If he's wrong, does this give you a reason to be moral?

6. Later in the *Republic*, Socrates attempts to answer Glaucon's challenge by suggesting that justice or morality is a kind of "harmony of the soul" where its parts—reason, physical appetites and the "spirited" part of soul (the "warrior" part from which comes courage and honor)—are all in alignment. Socrates argues that in an unjust or immoral person, the "appetitive" part of the soul usually takes control, subjugating the other two parts and lowering the person to the level of an irrational animal whose only concern is satiating its appetites. So, Socrates argues, by letting our desires rule us, we dehumanize ourselves. Do you find this answer to moral skepticism convincing?

7. Some philosophers have suggested the answer to the question "Why be moral?" is simply, "Because you should be." In other words, the legitimacy of morality is self-evident to any rational or good person. It is an empty truism that you *ought* to be or *should* be moral because *ought* and *should* are moral terms whose very use assume the justification of some set of moral rules. It is often added that if someone doesn't recognize the legitimacy of moral rules, they are either insane or evil, in which case the proper response is not to engage in a philosophical argument with them but to have them locked up. We don't argue with psychopaths; we imprison them or have them committed to a psychiatric facility. Is this a satisfactory answer to the "Why be moral?" question? Is the justification of morality self-evident? Are those who don't recognize this either mentally ill or evil?

MORAL SKEPTICISM AND SUBJECTIVISM

A question that often comes up concerns the difference between **subjectivism** and **moral skepticism**. The key difference is that subjectivism is a form of relativism, which says that although there is no universal morality, there are actual moral truths for particular frames of reference. According to cultural relativism, that frame of reference is a culture or society. According to subjectivism, it is each individual's moral code.

Subjectivism suffers from the same problems cultural relativism had with corrupt cultures or cultural practices. What if someone has a corrupt moral code? Isn't it obvious that the codes of Charles Manson, Ted Bundy, the BTK ("Bind Torture and Kill") killer and so on are corrupt? According to subjectivism, the only sin is *hypocrisy*. So, going against your own moral code, whatever it is, even if it includes wanton torture and murder, is wrong. It follows then that, paradoxically, if in a moment of weakness a serial killer who was committed to torture and mayhem let one of his victims go, he would be doing something morally wrong! Any theory that could assert that an act of sadistic torture and murder would be right and that an act of mercy would be wrong seems absurd and false and doesn't fit in with any of our common sense notions of morality.

Moral skepticism, which asserts that morality is an illusion, would deny that the serial killer's moral code would make things right for him but would also deny that his actions could be legitimately condemned by anyone else as wrong. So while skepticism doesn't morally justify obviously evil acts, it does say that no acts are wrong, which conflicts with our ordinary sense of morality as much as subjectivism does.