Rationality, in the sense of an appeal to a universal and impersonal standard of truth, is of supreme importance to the well-being of the human species, not only in ages in which it easily prevails, but also, and even more, in those less fortunate times in which it is despised and rejected as the vain dream of men who lack the virility to kill where they cannot agree.

Bertrand Russell, *The Ancestry of Fascism*

*Introduction*

I concluded my last lecture with one word—*reason*. My claim was that we have what I called a moral sense: a vague intuitive grasp of moral principles—most inherited and contradictory, some worked through, some not at all—that remain vague until they are brought to consciousness through analysis or crisis; and that this moral sense must remain vague and contradictory so long as we continue to accept its default state. I contended, moreover, that the same processes that go to form our moral sense (socialization, acculturation, education, etc.) are those that go to form our sensibilities also. The importance of the last point will become clear presently.

We have been speaking of moral relativism and absolutism, and of the possibility of objective moral judgment. Absolutism—the belief that of the various moral positions available at most one can be right, and the rest must be wrong—we saw, presents certain problems. First, an absolutist’s morality is not shown to be wrong by the fact that other, competing moralities exist. The absolutist’s ethical system can still be the only right, correct or valid one. What invalidates the moral absolutist position, rather, is that moral systems take shape within a particular historical and cultural context. In this sense, cultural relativism is correct because, as Prof. Placide reminded us, it is based on “the principle that the beliefs/customs/activities of any one culture make sense in only terms that culture.” But also, and what is most damning, an ethical system can be legitimately applied universally only if it can be shown to rest on facts independent of culture or individual actors. Because it depends on a cultural-historical condition, absolutism, then, is just plain wrong.

Relativism has also shown itself to be unworthy of consideration, if only because relativism is itself an absolutism. As I said in my last lecture, “when a relativist makes a claim for the relativity of all value systems, he is making that claim for all value systems except his own system.” A relativist says, at best, “The only absolute (moral) truth is that there are no others but this one.”

In his article, “Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist,” Henry Bagish writes that there are two erroneous conclusions men draw from the fact of cultural relativism, the fact that different people at different times and places may think and act differently than others, in
arguing for a moral relativistic stance: (1) that all cultural practices are equally valid, and (2) that all cultural practices are equally worthy of tolerance and respect. The first conclusion is really a continuation of the general relativist claim. It falls apart on logical and practical grounds. But let us take the second conclusion into consideration.

That all cultural practices are equally worthy of tolerance and respect is something that has seen some sympathy in this class. I heard uttered during my last lecture something along the lines of, “But even if I don’t approve of a practice, can’t I respect it, or at least tolerate it?” Let’s look at this question carefully.

What does it mean to respect something?

(1) It could mean that one holds that something in high regard, that that something holds some value. But one can’t have a high regard for something one doesn’t approve of. For instance, if one thinks abortion is murder, one couldn’t in good conscience “respect” a mother’s choice to abort. Not in this sense.

(2) It could mean that one agrees to recognize and abide by something. But one can’t agree to recognize and abide by something one doesn’t approve of, not consistently, not without enforcement. For instance, if I think marijuana use should be decriminalized, I can’t in good conscience recognize and abide by laws criminalizing it. I would consistently seek to subvert those laws at every opportunity. And I could fail to do so only under the threat of force.5

(3) Finally, it could mean that one avoids harming or interfering with something. In this sense the meaning of “respect” is roughly that of “tolerance”.

“To tolerate” means, according to the OED, to “allow (something that one dislikes or disagrees with) to exist or occur without interference”, or to “patiently endure (something unpleasant)”. Tolerance is at first glance not as problematic as respect. It may be possible, then, to hold an absolutist position, yet be tolerant of opposing positions. It may be possible to, say, hold that female genital mutilation is wrong but be tolerant of the practice—as long as the practice doesn’t include one, of course. But what happens when someone who holds tolerance as a universal value is confronted with others who don’t? Is it possible to tolerate intolerance? Of course not. Let me give you an example.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali-born Member of Parliament for the Liberal Party in the Netherlands. She has been critical of the place women have in her country’s Islamic culture. To the BBC she said, “If I were to say the things that I say now in the Dutch Parliament in Somalia, I would be killed.”6 Hirsi Ali wrote the script for the film Submission, directed by Theo Van Gogh, which criticized the treatment of women in Islam and was reputedly highly offensive to Muslims. The director, Van Gogh, was subsequently murdered in an
Amsterdam street in 2 November 2004. Pinned to his body with the knife that felled him was a note calling for, among other things, the death of the Dutch MP.

So: Is this action worthy of respect? What if I were to tell you there are cultural or religious reasons for the killing of Van Gogh? Shouldn’t we tolerate such actions, at least morally, if not legally? To claim that we must is at once to be consistent and contradictory in our toleration.

Let me take this one step further. For today we read a letter from serial killer Ted Bundy to one of his victims (whom he had failed to kill). His statement is the clearest example I have read of a consistent application of relativism. “I learned,” he says, “that all moral judgments are ‘value judgments,’ that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either ‘right’ or ‘wrong.’ … I figured out for myself … that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational.” He asks: “Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal …?” And concludes:

Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as ‘moral’ or ‘good’ and others as ‘immoral’ or ‘bad’? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me …

The cold application of relativist premises are chilling. What relativist could deny Bundy his point? On what grounds? Yet we want to say, as the author of our other reading for today, William H. Gass, points out: “Any ethic that does not roundly condemn [this] action is vicious.” Because it cannot, I say that relativism is just plain wrong.

On the other hand, to what universal, objective standard can the absolutist appeal to prove that Bundy is as wrong as we believe him to be? And we’re back to the old question, how can we legitimately pass judgment on moralities other than our own, if our own morality is itself a result of time and space.

Other Moral “-isms”
At this point one might feel like giving up altogether. Before you do, however, I want to look at some alternatives to the two moral positions we have been discussing.

The first is known as moral skepticism. The great difficulties encountered in the face of moral dilemmas and in the push-and-pull of the relative and the absolute, cause some to become moral skeptics. Such individuals grant that there might be such a thing as objective moral laws, but they question whether we can ever discover these laws.
Moral skepticism often arises from an epistemological insecurity. Man’s means of knowledge are imperfect, we are not omniscient, we cannot know all of the factors involved—how can we then possibly pass judgment? We have already addressed this kind of epistemological insecurity last semester, when we discussed the idea that things appear the way they do because we’ve been raised in a certain culture, we’ve been taught to view the world a certain way, we’re conditioned by our very means of perceiving, and so on. I ask that you refer to my lecture, if you need a refresher. But briefly: Such an accusation in the moral sphere amounts to a discrete instance of the failure to differentiate between the form and the object of perception.

However we might interpret a particular action does not change the objective reality of that action. As the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski writes, “When we extend our generous acceptance of cultural diversity … and aver, e.g., that the human rights idea is a European concept, unfit for, and [not] understandable in, societies which share other traditions, is what we mean that Americans rather dislike being tortured and packed into concentration camps but Vietnamese, Iranians and Albanians do not mind or enjoy it?”

Another source of skepticism is our old friend, the tolerance-and-respect complex, which stems from the very “generous acceptance of cultural diversity” Kolakowski alludes to that is inculcated in the schools and in the media. Martha Nussbaum writes that,

Students tend to think that skepticism is a way of being respectful to others. But good teaching will show that to refuse all application of moral standards to a foreign person or culture is not really a way of treating that person with respect. When we refuse to make judgments that we make freely in life with our own fellow citizens, we seem to be saying that this form of life is so alien and so bizarre that it cannot be expected to be measured by the same set of standards. This is another way of being patronizing.

This should sound familiar to those in my small group, and others with whom I have spoken in private, because I hold a similar position. I see no reason I must be more “respectful” (read: “careful”) when treating other religions, for instance, than when treating my own. In other words, there is no reason why I should be allowed to be critical of Christianity but not of, say, Judaism, Hinduism, or Islam. And it is a dangerous proposition that I should do so. (Compare our culture’s position with regards to ethnocentrism, the striving to inhibit any ethnocentric impulses. Yet there is, in fact, nothing more ethnocentric than to think that our culture is what no other culture has been at the level of psychology. To say that we “respect” or “tolerate” actions in other cultures which we would not hesitate to criticize in our own is both condescending and disingenuous.)

One more possible source of skepticism is religious in origin, but has seeped into the general culture. The idea that no one is free of sin, that no one is morally perfect. Who then is to cast the first proverbial stone? Yet to despair of morality and moral action because human
animals fall short of perfection is a betrayal of everything human. Who are we to judge Ted Bundy or Jeffrey Dahmer? Aren’t we all imperfect? Don’t we all live in glass houses? Etc.

Simon Blackburn writes:

*To have a stance is to stand somewhere, and in practical matters … that means being set to disagree with those who stand somewhere else.*

If relativism, then, is just a distraction, is it a valuable one or a dangerous one? I think it all depends. Sometimes we need reminding of alternative ways of thinking, alternative practices and ways of life, from which we can learn and which we can have no reason to condemn. We need to appreciate the differences.\(^{11}\)

If this weren’t true, you’d be wasting your time in this course—in fact, you’d be wasting your time and money in a university education. However, Blackburn continues:

*But sometimes we need reminding that there is time to draw a line and take a stand, and that alternative ways of looking at things can be corrupt, ignorant, superstitious, wishful, out of touch, or plain evil. It is a moral issue, whether we tolerate and learn or regret and oppose.*\(^{12}\)

I am trying to remind you of this: Skepticism—like relativism—is a copout, if for different reasons. In fact, it is worse because it fails to take a stance even as regards the relativity of morals. Skepticism, then, is just plain wrong.

Yet another option is *moral pragmatism*. We were introduced to this approach in Prof. Placide’s lecture. In response to the assumption that there is no scientifically (i.e. objective) valid way of evaluating cultures, Prof. Placide cited Bagish’s observation that while there may be no scientifically valid way of evaluating whole cultures, it is possible to evaluate *specific practices* on a non-ethnocentric basis.

Bagish suggests a “pragmatic principle” be applied in order to judge cultural practices. He writes, “Any belief or practice that enables human beings to predict and control events in their lives, with a higher degree of success than previous beliefs or practices did, can be said to ‘work better’.” You rightfully objected to this “principle”.

I will summarize your objections by pointing out that if my practice of approaching strangers on the street and saying to them, “If you please, sir, I desire to perform an experiment with your aid,” and subsequently leading them to a dark place conveniently by, and striking them on the head with the broad of an axe enables me to predict and control my desire to roast and eat human beings with a higher degree of success than, say, trying to clobber them in broad daylight or explaining to them the totality of my plan, then it can be said to “work better”, and as such, according to Bagish’s “pragmatic principle” (on its own) my killing and roasting obliging strangers may be said to be morally permissible.\(^{13}\)
The problem with this “pragmatic principle” is that it is no sort of principle at all, because pragmatism eschews principles. You were introduced to Richard Rorty last semester. Rorty writes that, “there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.”\(^\text{14}\) This is an appeal to cultural relativism. Exactly the sort of appeal we’ve learned to distrust. It goes from the \textit{is} of cultural relativism to … no \textit{ought} whatsoever, necessarily.

In “Against Unity,” Rorty wrote: “As we pragmatists see it, there can and should be thousands of ways of describing things and people—as many as there are things we want to do with things and people—this plurality is unproblematic.”\(^\text{15}\) So much for description, but what about ethics? Pragmatists agree that, practically, one must draw the line somewhere, but because they are committed to nothing but what is most practical they have no measuring stick by which to draw it: “If we should come to affirm a prohibition against [say] torture [or against eating obliging strangers], it will be because we find it to be ‘pragmatically’ justified, at least for our purposes, whatever they may happen to be.”\(^\text{16}\) This proverbial line can be drawn and redrawn to meet our purposes.

Allow me to read you a short passage from Elie Wiesel’s \textit{Night}:

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. This time the Lagercapo refused to act as executioner. Three SS replaced him.

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.
The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.
“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.
But the child was silent.
“Where is God? Where is He?” someone behind me asked.
Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon, the sun was setting.
“Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.
“Cover your heads!”
Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive.
Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive.
For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes were not yet glazed.
Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?”
And I heard a voice within me answer him:
“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows …”
That night the soup tasted of corpses.¹⁷

I read this not to draw attention to the existential questions raised by the passage, but to illustrate the point that pragmatism would not aid us in this situation. The Nazis were being as pragmatic as could be. What matters the life of a child in carrying out the Final Solution?

And yet, I would say that (most) pragmatists would want to distance themselves from such actions—which brings us to Gass’ “The Case of the Obliging Stranger.” What did you think of it?

Gass also would want to say that such a thing is wrong. Interestingly, he wants also to show that such things as killing and cooking obliging strangers are wrong—because they are. He says:

I should say that my act was wrong even if my stranger were tickled into laughter while he cooked [hedonism]; or even if his baking did the utmost good it could [utilitarianism]; or if, in spite of all, I could consistently will that whatever maxim I might have had might become universal law [Kantianism]; or even if God had spoken from a bush to me, “Thou shalt!” How redundant the property of wrongness, as if one needed that, in such a case! And would the act be right if the whole world howled its glee? Moralists can say, with conviction, that the act is wrong; but none can show it.¹⁸

How many of you agree with this? Cases such as the hanging of a young boy in a Nazi concentration camp is what Gass would call “clear” or “transparent”. They need to explanation. They are the things we base our morals on. They are primary.

But are our reactions to such acts primary? What are our reactions based on? We are back to our moral sense. Reflect on the following:

There is a strange and pathetic group of people who live in a desolate part of Africa. They are known as the Ik people. Once they were prosperous and aggressive hunters and a thriving people. But they were driven from their natural hunting grounds by the creation of a National Game Reserve …. The result was a human debacle. The Ik became a desperate people …

The Ik people were visited by Colin Turnbull, and anthropologist, who tells the terrible story of their physical and cultural devastation …. He found the Ik a loveless, unfeeling people who sacrificed all values to the need for individual survival. … Children were turned out by their parents at age three and would never be fed again even if they were to return begging and starving.

Turnbull has story after story to illustrate the remarkable state of the Ik. A nine-year old boy watched his six-year-old sister working for two days to make a little charcoal to sell to the nearby police for some food. … When she had the charcoal complete, she took her precious little package and headed across the field to the Police Post. At this point, her brother took off after her, slowly at first, to enjoy her panic, and then … “more swiftly, to
give her time to begin to cry with the pain of hopelessness, and only then did he commit the
disabled violence of leaping on her, beating her savagely to the ground …”

Such behavior was normal for the Ik and no eyebrows would be raised by it. A person
could sit quietly eating while starving parents or siblings watched in voiceless despair.
Stealing food from the mouths of old people was literally child’s play. It was thought
foolishness not to grab whatever the weak or the dying could not protect …

What did confuse the Ik and stir them to disapproval was any play of tenderness and
affection. 19

Turnbull tells of one little girl whom “everyone, including her parents, considered to be
mad”20:

Adupa was an exception. … Her madness was such that she did not know just how vicious
humans could be, particularly her playmates. She was older than they, and more tolerant.
That too was a madness in an Icien world. Even worse, she thought parents were for loving,
for giving as well as receiving. Her parents were not given to fantasies … so they ignored
Adupa, except when she brought them food that she had scrounged from somewhere. They
snatched that quickly enough. But when she came for shelter they drove her out, and when
she came because she was hungry they laughed that Icien laugh, as if she had made them
happy.

Partly through her madness, and partly because she was nearly dead anyway, her
reactions became slower and slower. When she managed to find food … she held it in her
hand and looked at it with wonder and delight, savoring its taste before she ate it. Her
playmates caught on quickly, and used to watch her wandering around, and even put tidbits
in her way, and watched her simple drawn little face wrinkle in a smile as she looked at the
food and savored it while it was yet in her hand. Then as she raised her hand to her mouth,
they set on her with cries of excitement, fun, and laughter, beat her savagely over the head
and left her. But that is not how she died. …

She demanded that her parents love her. She kept going back to their compound …
Finally they took her in, and Adupa was happy and stopped cring. She stopped crying
forever, because her parents went away and closed the asak tight behind them, so tight that
weak little Adupa could never have moved it if she had tried. But I doubt that she even
thought of trying. She waited for them to come back with the food they promised her. When
they came back she was still waiting for them. It was a week or ten days later, and her body
was already almost too far gone to bury.21

Has anything wrong been done to the child? I submit that it has. I submit that the willful
murder of an innocent is just plain wrong, regardless of inherited moral sense. And what is
more, I submit that we must explain, we must give reasons for our assertion that such a thing
is evil. We must, precisely because her parents believed it was not, because Ted Bundy
believed murder and cannibalism were right, because the Nazis believed that murdering
young Jewish boys was expedient, and because many African, Arabic and Asian cultures
believe it is good to mutilate the genitals of defenseless girls.
I will not set out a complete moral theory today. You will be exposed to two—Sartre’s Existentialism and Rand’s Objectivism—in preparing for the next lecture. Today I want to leave you with some general observations about one more option: moral objectivism. Unlike moral relativism, moral objectivism asserts that values do not (necessarily) depend on one’s culture, religion or opinion. Right and wrong, good and bad, are independent of moral actors. Moral laws are universal, discoverable because they are inherent in our human nature just as natural laws are discoverable because they are inherent in the nature of the world. It is because I believe, and can validate, an objectivist position that I can say that certain cultural practices and beliefs are, also, just plain wrong. I can take a stance against cannibalism, the murder of children, abortion as a means of birth-control, female and male genital mutilation, murder in the name of religion, of race, of culture.

However, unlike moral absolutism, moral objectivism grants that my understanding of right and wrong, my moral sense (that vague intuitive grasp of moral principles—most inherited and contradictory, some worked through, some not at all—that remain vague until they are brought to consciousness through analysis or crisis) may be influenced by my cultural background, and that it will remain thus just as long as I do not expose it to critical analysis and information.

What rescues the objectivist is rationality, the application of reason to his beliefs and the facts upon which they are based. This is important in any age, but it is imperative in ours.

Notes

1 This lecture is inspired by, and in some respects a response to, Prof. Bruce W. Hauptli’s lecture of the same title (2005).


4 Henry H. Bagish, “Confessions of a Former Cultural Relativist” (originally presented as the Second Annual Faculty Lecture at Santa Barbara City College, 1981).

5 Or out of respect for the law, in general. But this respect for the law breaks down in the face of particularly unjust laws, in which case these are justifiably violated.

6 From the BBC News’ “Moving Stories” series.

7 From Harry V. Jaffa, Homosexuality and the Natural Law (Claremont: The Claremont Institute of the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1990), 304.

8 Ibid.


12 Blackburn (emphasis added).

13 Alternately, if we say that what is morally questionable is not the way I went about killing the obliging stranger but the fact that I killed him at all, I could say that doing so (in the manner I did) “works better” than other ways to satisfy my desire to consume human flesh. Of course we could say that what is morally questionable is the very fact that I desire to consume human flesh. However, we would then be assuming that a desire is morally questionable, something with which Bagish’s “pragmatic principle” cannot aid us, since it concerns itself with the effectiveness of particular actions to accomplish particular goals and not with the motive underlying the goals themselves—which is why Bagish offers “compassion” as a corrective for “tolerance”, placing it higher in his “hierarchy of values”.

This begs the question: Why should compassion be of greater value than tolerance, or intolerance, for that matter? Bagish recognizes these difficulties. If something is done for its own sake and not as a means of achieving something else, he says, there is “no way of objectively demonstrating” that this thing “is better or worse than another”; “There it’s strictly a matter of taste, of meeting whatever the local [or, by reduction, the individual] criteria might be…. In other words, there it’s relative.”

14 Richard Rorty, Introduction to Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 1982), xli-xlili.


16 Little, 73.

17 Elie Wiesel, Night (New York: Bantam, 1982), 75-6.


20 Maguire, 59.