CHAPTER I

RELATIVISM

1. Introduction

The topic of moral evolution inevitably suggests the emergence of man from savagery into civilization, from sexual promiscuity to monogamy, from nudity to clothing, from blood vengeance to the reform of criminals in model prisons, and all the other stereotypes of moral progress. But this view of human history has to confront the awkward facts that while there has probably been an overall increase in refinement, some of the most cruel or depraved customs are to be found in societies which in other ways have been highly civilized. Many tribal peoples would be shocked to learn of the scale of human sacrifice among the Aztecs, gladiatorial combat in Rome, the use of child labour in Victorian Britain, or the obsession with sex in modern Western societies. The emergence of increasingly complex and sophisticated societies does not therefore seem to be necessarily accompanied by institutions and customs which possess an obvious moral superiority to those of simpler societies. Some thinkers, like Rousseau, have indeed supposed that civilization itself is morally corrupting, but even if we do not accept this claim it might be concluded that different levels of social complexity simply have their own characteristic combinations of virtues and vices: in the course of history the evils associated with anarchy are merely replaced by those associated with power and greed, so that there is no overall progress at all.

This approach to moral evolution concentrates on what people *do*, on specific customs such as human sacrifice, sexual practices, vengeance and taboos, but there is another tradition exemplified by the work of such scholars as Hobhouse, Ginsberg, Fauconnet, and von Fürer-Haimendorf which considers morality from a different point of view altogether: the structure of moral codes rather than their content. By structure I mean for example the extent to which the motives and intentions of agents are taken into account when assessing their responsibility for their acts, the range of those to whom consideration is due, the types of justification given for behaving morally, the clarity with which such concepts as justice, duty, and virtue are understood, or the ability to distinguish between morality and custom or law. These concepts clearly involve something which can be called 'moral understanding': this is

far broader in scope than moral philosophy, and must occur in every society, and it is my intention in this book to show that moral understanding in this sense evolves as an aspect of social evolution in general. The general argument of this book will be that this moral understanding or knowledge has developed, like other forms of knowledge, by human experience in dealing with new situations in the course of social evolution. Just as our understanding of nature has increased with the need to solve new and more difficult problems, so our understanding of ourselves and society has developed in the context of increasingly complex social institutions, and the structure of moral codes has evolved accordingly.

But the structure of moral codes is obviously much more fundamental than the diversity of cultural values and personal qualities that are the stuff of much moral disagreement: the militaristic and the peaceful, humour and seriousness of mind, formality and informality, honour, chastity, the work ethic, or the different views of life of men and women or of old and young. The claim that there is a basic structure of moral codes does not imply in any way that all such differences about what we should be or do can also be resolved by some objective and universal theory of ethics. Nor is this book about 'progress', in the sense of trying to grade societies on some scale of 'better' or 'worse', so that we somehow emerge on top, and I do not advocate any sort of reliance on the principles of biological evolution as a guide to human morality. (For criticisms of that sort of 'evolutionary ethics' see, for example, Flew 1967, T.H. Huxley 1894, J. Huxley, 1947.) My specific aims are, first of all, to show that there has been an intimate relationship between the way in which moral thinking develops in the individual and at the level of culture as a whole. Culture, of which moral thought is one aspect, cannot develop in isolation from the potentialities of the individual human beings who transmit and create it, and I shall therefore use developmental psychology as an essential means of understanding cultural evolution. This use of psychology will allow us to understand the interaction between social organization and modes of thought in a much deeper way than is possible for those theorists who assert that modes of thought are simply determined by social organization and technology. That sort of theory just produces static correlations between types of social organization and modes of thought, but by focusing on the kinds of *problems* that people have to deal with we are able to grasp the dynamic interaction between social organization and thought which is invisible to those who try to treat culture in isolation from the human mind.

Our enquiry will also provide a badly needed analytical framework for cross-cultural comparison in the field of moral thought. Far too often we find ethnographers contrasting the ways in which 'we' – modern educated Westerners – think about moral issues, with the thought of a particular tribal society. This failure to compare like with like inevitably produces an exaggerated sense of cultural difference, whereas if the comparison were instead between our modes of thought and those of educated Muslims, Buddhists, or Confucians, for example, they would find many similarities, just as there are between the members of tribal societies.

But before we can proceed with our enquiry it is necessary to deal first of all with the claim that there is no such thing as objective knowledge, whether of morality or of anything else, because it is asserted that all thought is culturally relative.