

Relativism

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1. Cultural relativism.

Common sense and the pursuit of science both assume that there is a stable external reality including things, animals, and other people whose properties cannot be altered merely by our wishing that they were different, or by how we define them, and that we come to understand these properties by experience and reasoning. While absolute certainty can never be attained, at least some closer approximation to the truth can be reached by the successive elimination of errors.

This view of the possibility of objective knowledge has been challenged for many years by some philosophers, sociologists of knowledge, and anthropologists, who regard knowledge itself as inextricably bound up with the conventions and language of the particular society in which every individual is obliged to think. As society changes, so do its forms of thought. Ideas accepted without question in one historical period are dismissed as absurd in other periods, and the way in which one culture represents reality may be very different from the representations of other cultures. This view of knowledge is generally known as 'relativism', and by anthropologists as 'cultural relativism'. I shall concentrate here on the anthropological version of relativism as this encompasses most of the other arguments; anthropology is the basic source of our awareness of cultural diversity, and it is the diversity of world views which to many seems especially liable to call in question the possibility of any objective knowledge.

The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: *Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation...* When we reflect that such intangibles as right and wrong, normal and abnormal, beautiful and plain are absorbed as a person learns the ways of the group into which he is born we see that we are dealing here with a process of first importance. Even the facts of the physical world are discerned through the enculturative screen, so that the perception of time, distance, weight, size, and other 'realities' is mediated by the conventions of any given group. (Herskovits 1972:15)

Moral relativism, on this view, is only a special case of the more general argument for cultural relativism, but I shall exclude the question of morality from the immediate discussion for two reasons. In the first place, it is possible to be a moral relativist but to reject the claims of cultural relativism, on the grounds that while scientific and technical knowledge are

objectively true, there is no such thing as moral knowledge because, for example, moral statements are only statements about our feelings and do not therefore count as knowledge at all. Westermarck, for example (1906, 1932), who maintained that moral judgements are subjective because they are based on emotions, nevertheless held that there had been an evolution in moral thinking as a result of a general growth of knowledge and enlightenment. On the other hand, if all knowledge were proved to be culturally relative the claims for objective moral knowledge would collapse automatically and so require no specific refutation. My second reason is that Herskovits and other anthropological relativists rely on most people's uncertainty about moral issues to add plausibility to the case for cultural relativism in general, and I see no reason why they should be conceded this unearned advantage in debate.

The credibility of cultural relativism has drawn considerable strength from the disposition of anthropologists to believe that classification is the primary form of cognition, and once this is granted we move in one bound to the privileged, indeed supreme status of language, as the conventional form in which all our classifications are expressed. (The work of Sapir and Whorf was, of course, especially influential in promoting this view of language.) It is further supposed that classification is an imposition of the human mind upon reality, and so has an essentially arbitrary character in the sense that it does not derive from the 'facts' but from the way in which human beings group them. Reality can then be plausibly represented as a continuum, divided up by subjective human mental activity:

Our immediate experience of reality is in itself an undifferentiated whole, as Henri Bergson has said...The human mind has carved out of this undifferentiated whole a number of separate and individualized forms. The number and nature of these forms varies from people to people, and, in the history of one people, from age to age... Whatever aspect of reality appears significant for our hope and anxiety, or our desire or will, or our acting and doing, that only is taken out as an independent segment and receives the stamp of a name, thereby becoming a concept. (Izutsu 1966:10)

It is not therefore the individual as such who does the classifying but the enduring society into which he is born, which expresses its collective concepts, its conventions, in its language.

So Leach asserts 'This world is a representation of our language categories, not vice versa. Because my mother tongue is English, it seems self-evident that *bushes* and *trees* are different kinds of things'. I would not think this unless I had been taught that it was the case' (Leach 1964:34). Indeed, the work of Lévi-Strauss in particular has led many anthropologists to suppose that culture as a whole operates rather like language, e.g. '...it is just as meaningful to talk about the grammatical rules which govern the wearing of clothes as it is to talk about the

grammatical rules which govern speech utterances'(Leach 1976:10). And for 'interpretive' anthropologists such as Geertz, culture is a kind of text, whose meanings we divine in the manner of literary criticism.

If this general theory of how we understand reality is correct the experience of any individual must count for little by comparison with the overwhelming power of his culture in determining how he interprets that experience. This power is expressed not only in the language of the culture but also in the rest of the collective representation of reality embodied in culturally defined beliefs and norms.

How much of man's knowledge and how much of his science is built up by the individual relying simply on the interaction of the world with his animal capacities? Probably very little...Does not individual experience, as a matter of fact, take place within a framework of assumptions, standards, purposes and meanings which are shared? Society furnishes the mind of the individual with these things and also provides the conditions whereby they can be sustained and reinforced. If the individual's grasp of them wavers, there are mechanisms which encourage realignment. Knowledge then is better equated with Culture than Experience. (Bloor 1976:12)

It seems obvious that if Bloor is correct the individual can have no idea of how he is influenced by his culture, which will then exercise an influence on his thought as powerful as it is *unconscious*. What is 'true' will therefore depend, not on our individual reason or experience, but on the social authority which supports or denies collective representations. 'In the case of any belief, therefore, we must ask 'Is it enjoined by the authority of the society, is it transmitted by established institutions of socialization or supported by accepted agencies of social control, is it bound up with patterns of their vested interest?'' (Barnes & Bloor 1982:23).

Quite apart from the social authority of ideas, we have become much more aware than the Victorians of the power of the emotions and of the unconscious to affect our beliefs and attitudes. In the Boasian version of culture, which has been just as influential as that of Durkheim, both the emotional and the unconscious aspects of socialization were strongly emphasized:

However rational and sensible our beliefs and practices may be, according to Boas, once learned we have an emotional attachment to them, so that an important accompaniment of all learning is a strong devotion to the patterns that are acquired. Boas made this point by saying that cultural beliefs and practices have emotional associations, in that deviation becomes intolerable to members of the society. (Hatch 1983:52) [On the unconscious power of custom, in Boas' view]...customs are habitual patterns of thought and behaviour (most of which we learn as children), and once we acquire them they become 'automatic' and 'unreflective', like the rules of grammar. He did not necessarily imply the existence of

an unconscious system in the modern sense, but he was clear that much of what goes on in human behaviour springs not from conscious thought, but from obscure patterns in the mind (ibid.,53).

Relativists claim that the data collected by anthropologists confirm this theory of learning because they show clearly that collective representations of reality differ considerably from culture to culture, and that persons brought up in one society seem to take its cultural assumptions for granted, and are not capable of stepping outside it and developing a world-view which is uninfluenced by the unconscious assumptions in which they have been reared and which are embodied in their linguistic categories. In the same way, we find that norms, beliefs, and values are very different in one historical period from those which are assumed to be correct in another, and these facts, too, are quoted as providing clear empirical support for the relativist theory of knowledge, a theory which extends, it should be noted, not only to the natural sciences but even to mathematics and logic, so that the norms of reasoning itself are held to be culturally relative:

Logic, as it is systematized in textbooks, monographs or research papers, is a learned body of scholarly lore, growing and varying over time. It is a mass of conventional routines, decisions, expedient restrictions, dicta, maxims, and *ad hoc* rules. The sheer *lack* of necessity in granting its assumptions or adopting its strange and elaborate definitions is the point that should strike any candid observer...as a body of conventions and esoteric traditions the compelling character of logic, such as it is, derives from certain narrowly defined purposes and from custom and institutionalized usage. Its authority is moral and social, and as such it is admirable material for sociological investigation and explanation. (Barnes & Bloor 1982:45)

I have tried to provide a general outline of relativism, and in a *weak* form, such as, ‘we are always liable to be unconsciously influenced by the assumptions and categories of our own culture, and must be on our guard against this’, it is certainly true, and is an example of how Western culture has developed greater self-awareness, just as we have also attained this in psychology and linguistics. We have made ourselves the object of our own scrutiny, and have learned accordingly.

But this weak form of relativism must, however, be repugnant to those who advocate the strong version precisely because it assumes that we *can* overcome the constraints and limitations of our own culture. Moderate relativists, such as myself, maintain that by the study of other cultures and the history of our own, we can liberate ourselves from the unconscious limitations on our thought which are produced by ethnocentrism. In *The Evolution of Moral Understanding*, for example, I show how the moral theory of the Western tradition has been seriously distorted by cultural factors, and in this sort of way the insights of cultural relativism

can be used in constructing a more objective account of reality. Moderate and strong relativism are not therefore simply different points on a single scale of scepticism about the possibility of objective knowledge, but are different theories altogether, because they fundamentally disagree about the possibility of correcting our own ethnocentrism. It is, then, the strong theory of relativism which I shall now consider because it denies the possibility of objective knowledge and is thoroughly fallacious.

The most obvious general objection to cultural relativism is that it is self-refuting. If we consider the proposition 'all propositions are culture-bound', then, since that proposition is itself a proposition it, too, is culture-bound and cannot therefore claim to be objectively true. As Gellner says, 'Notoriously, there is no room for the assertion of relativism itself in a world in which relativism is true', (Gellner 1985:85), but he also says that this logical problem does not '...inhibit our intuitive capacity for visualizing a relativist's world; a plurality of worlds and truths' (ibid., 85), and I would agree that to rest so large an issue on so fine a logical point is hazardous.

While the person who utters the proposition 'All propositions are culture-bound' is logically in a similar situation to the Cretan who says that all Cretans are liars, I suspect that the formal resemblance here is misleading, since 'culture-bound' is only acting as a label for a very complex theory of knowledge, whereas 'liar' is a simple and unambiguous term. For this reason the logical waters of the self-refutation of relativism are muddier than they might appear (and for a good example of just how obscure they can become see Mary Hesse's attempt (1980:42-3) to disprove the self-refutation thesis. Basing the argument that relativism is self-refuting on the logic of propositions might also be vulnerable to an outflanking manoeuvre, by which the *idea* of relativism is conveyed in non-propositional form – by a series of questions in the Zen Buddhist manner, or in poetic imagery, and so on. Rather than concentrating on any one proposition which expresses the relativist theory we may more profitably consider the whole process by which this theory was established.

The fundamental difficulty for the relativist is that even to formulate the theory at all it is necessary to rely on the truth of a large body of facts, on a number of concepts, and on modes of reasoning associated with these. We are asked, first of all, to accept that many ethnographers have really gone to study other cultures, that their reports give an accurate and discerning account of these different ways of life and thought, and that from the study of these

reports we can truly conclude that members of other cultures represent reality in ways which are significantly different from our own. (It would actually be quite easy to compile a long list of cases in which early ethnographic accounts of alien cultures have exaggerated their differences from us, and which have subsequently been corrected by more thorough investigation.) Then we have to acquire an understanding of such concepts as 'culture', 'socialization', 'learning', 'classification', 'language', and so on, and then we must accept that it is rationally valid to conclude from all this highly sophisticated thinking that the diversity of collective representations, plus the theory which relates individual cognition to these representations, really entail the conclusion that 'all representations are culturally relative'. Similar assumptions and concepts are required to use data on the history of science to establish the truth of relativism historically, and philosophers such as Wittgenstein and Winch (1958) also rely on a very elaborate set of assumptions and arguments to persuade us that thought cannot escape from 'the form of life' in which it is embedded (Gellner 1985:172). Since relativism is an empirical theory, and does not claim that its propositions about the relations of thought to culture are *a priori*, analytic truths, it must therefore rest the lever of its scepticism against some facts, theoretical concepts, and arguments which it *does* consider to be true in order to dislodge other facts, concepts, and arguments from their claim to be true.

But if this act of dislodging can be performed by the relativist, if it is possible, in this instance, to use a body of data and to reason correctly from it in an unbiased way, and so reach the conclusion that relativism is a valid theory, then it is surely asking rather much of our credulity to claim that this is the only occasion in the history of the human intellect when men have reasoned correctly from sound data, when they have seen things in the light as they really are, and that in every other instance their thinking has been shrouded in the mist of their collective representations. In short, the real paradox of relativism is that by the very procedures of establishing itself as true it invalidates its own premises (or, to put it more bluntly, saws through the very branch on which it is sitting) because the relativist has to accept that a large amount of ethnographic data are accurate, that his general theories of culture, socialization, and human knowledge are true, and that the inferences by which he draws his conclusions are valid, as the necessary foundation for stating his theory at all, and it is in this sense that relativism can be convicted of radically contradicting itself. If it is possible to use

scientific method to establish relativism then relativism itself cannot be true, and if the possibility of science is denied then relativism cannot even be formulated.

Relativism not only refutes itself in the general manner that I have indicated, but also makes a number of basic errors in its theory about the relations between culture and the thought processes of individuals. The key notion in the theory is that of 'culture' which relativism treats as though it were some clear concept of unchallengeable scientific status, like 'gravity'. In reality of course it is nothing of the kind, but a rag-bag concept well illustrated in the words of Tylor: 'Culture or Civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871:1). As soon as we reflect on this extraordinarily diverse list of items, to which should be added language and social institutions, it must be obvious that the components of culture are maintained in very different ways. Some are adhered to out of fear of ridicule or punishment, others because there is concrete evidence in their favour, others as mere local customs, known to be such and nothing more, others because they give pleasure, others because no alternative is available, or has been thought of, and some, no doubt, because they are taken for granted, like language. It is therefore not in the least obvious that culture is a homogeneous entity which holds all its members in the same type of inescapable yet intangible grasp, and relativists are prone to exaggerate the amount of social consensus by which any culture is supported.

While we all use the concept of culture, this is in the broad sense of 'what is not innate or genetically prescribed', and 'public phenomena, rather than private feelings or states of mind'. In these senses the concept is convenient and valuable, but this should not make us forget that within these broad limits it denotes a very wide range of beliefs, customs, and institutions.

Culture is also represented as a totality, a whole each of whose parts is interdependent with the others, so that it distorts the meaning of any one concept to consider it apart from its context. 'It is no surprise that relativists tend to favour holistic conceptions of truth and meaning' (Lukes 1982:9). Only by emphasizing its holistic character can culture be made to appear a self-supporting structure that needs no input from experience, and to the extent that culture is constantly being affected by the experience of individuals, then it ceases to be a world of its own, autonomous and complete. A classic case from ethnography is Evans-

Pritchard's discussion of Zande witchcraft and oracle beliefs whose mutual inconsistencies are obvious to anthropologists but are not recognized by the Azande themselves.

I have collected every fact that I could discover about the poison oracle over many months of observation and inquiry and have built all these jottings into a chapter on Zande oracles. The contradictions in Zande thought are then readily seen. But in real life these bits of knowledge do not form part of an individual's concepts, so that when a man thinks of *benge* [oracle poison] he must think of all the details I have recorded here. They are functions of different systems and are uncoordinated. Hence the contradictions so apparent to us do not strike a Zande. (Evans-Pritchard 1937:319)...The contradiction between his beliefs and his observations only becomes a generalized and glaring contradiction when they are recorded side by side in the pages of an ethnographic treatise (Ibid.,319) ...There is no incentive to agnosticism. All their beliefs hang together, and were a Zande to give up faith in witch-doctorhood he would have to surrender equally his faith in witchcraft and oracles...In this web of belief every strand depends on every other strand, and a Zande cannot get out of its meshes because it is the only world he knows. It is the texture of his thought, and he cannot think that his thought is wrong. (Ibid.,194)

We may think of Evans-Pritchard as holding the Azande Chair of Theoretical Witchcraft, and in his capacity as ethnographer he is performing exactly the same function as that of all specialist thinkers in literate societies, which is to gather together, to synthesize and reduce to more basic and general principles, the beliefs and practices of society as a whole and of whose general pattern the ordinary member may be unaware. But once the professional thinkers take over from the amateurs and systematize knowledge into a formal body of doctrine, it is much easier for this to be analyzed, criticized, and dissented from by other professionals. The history of organized knowledge has therefore been the history of one school of thought generating rival schools of thought in which the grip of a social consensus is radically weakened.

Not only do the Azande lack the services of professional thinkers, but, as Evans-Pritchard notes, they cannot dissent from their cultural beliefs not only because these are unsystematic but because 'this is the only world they know'. Lack of awareness of alternatives, as Horton (1967) was among the first anthropologists to emphasize, is one of the most important factors in preserving the 'closed' world of primitive society, and it is precisely the growth in awareness of alternatives which makes it possible for members of a culture to break out of the web of beliefs in which members of simpler cultures are enmeshed. 'The traditional thinker, because he is unable to imagine possible alternatives to his established theories and classifications, can never start to formulate generalized norms of reasoning and knowing. For only when there are alternatives can there be choice, and only when there is choice can there be norms governing it' (Horton 1967:162). The 'seamlessness' or internal interdependence of

a culture is not therefore a universal, but varies enormously in proportion to social complexity and the availability of alternative belief systems, and this diversity of thought is itself an incentive to thinking about thought.

It should be obvious, then, that culture itself will vary in the hold which it has on the thoughts and behaviour of its members; the relationship between culture and individual is not some fixed constant, something which is essential to the human condition, but varies from society to society. It will be at its maximum in small isolated primitive societies, and be much less significant in societies such as our own.

The relativist emphasis on the interdependent, holistic quality of culture also ignores change, and we are presented with the image of a culture as a timeless entity, constraining the thoughts of its members by a permanent system of collective representations. This idea of culture is very understandable in the case of anthropologists, who study non-literate societies about whose history nothing much is usually known, while philosophers tend to become engrossed in purely conceptual issues which do not raise issues of history. But as soon as we ask how a particular culture came to be the way it is, this illusion of a coherent world of representations above and beyond the individual is shattered. Change has to be brought about by human action, and this means by individuals who choose to do things differently from the way they were in the past. But here we see the use of the language analogy for the relativist position; of all cultural phenomena linguistic change seems the most remote from conscious human intervention, and the syntactic and phonemic shifts studied by linguists do indeed seem to inhabit a world of their own, independent of human volition. Yet even in the case of language the picture is misleading, and anyone who browses in the Oxford English Dictionary will find there an extraordinary account of innovations in words and meanings brought about to meet new situations, often by identifiable individuals.

Indeed, once it becomes possible for some members of a single cultural tradition to oppose other members on the basis of articulated doctrines, once it is possible for an 'epistemological crisis' to be generated within a culture, it is hard to see that a relativistic 'culture as convention' model of knowledge could work at all. This is because disputants have to choose between rival theories, and this process of choice cannot itself be purely conventional. Relativism is most closely attuned to culture in its holistic, undifferentiated, and unconscious aspects, and becomes implausible almost in direct proportion as cultures have to deal with

argument and the reconciliation of intellectual differences. To be sure, those differences will be resolved, if at all, within a particular tradition, but that tradition as we know from the history of thought can still be subject to radical innovations brought about by particular thinkers.

Relativism not only operates with a timeless and holistic model of culture, but also depends to a considerable degree on the belief that it is possible to draw a clear distinction between collective representations and the experience of individuals, and it is a dogma of anthropology that collective representations are not influenced by individual psychology. Culture, as anthropologists always remind us, is ‘learned’, and of course this is true, but *how* is it learned? Anthropologists and even philosophers generally give the impression that this is fairly straightforward, a process by which children copy the models of speech, beliefs, and actions provided by their seniors, and slowly acquire the details of their culture piece by piece. We may call this the empty bucket theory of the mind, a bucket which is slowly filled with cultural content, but whose properties as bucket have no influence on what goes into it.

The evidence of developmental psychology contradicts this view, which leaves out of account the mental processes by which learning takes place. Of course, there can be no process without content as well, but process includes the *activity* of the learner in relation to the external world and in this process of interaction with the world (things as well as people) the cognitive skills of the learner thereby develop and become the basis by which more difficult problems can be solved. Relativists in particular seem to be entirely oblivious to the findings of developmental psychology (Sperber 1982: 158-160) which provides some of the most damaging arguments against their case.

Bloor, for example, attempts to draw a neat distinction between our ‘animal capacities’ and cultural representations, and considers that very little of this type of experience is responsible for culturally defined beliefs. Let us examine, though, a simple example of ‘animal capacities’ in action. If an experimenter pours the contents of a short, fat glass of water into a tall thin glass, Bloor would presumably say that there is the same amount of water in a tall thin glass as in the short fat one. But how does he know this - did his culture define things in this way, or is this an example of animal capacities at work? Since adults in our society consider it self-evident that the quantity of water remains the same in both glasses, they are unlikely to make a point of teaching this to children (unless they have read some developmental psychology), but

is this then perceptually self-evident without the aid of culture? If so, how are we to explain the fact that children below, roughly, the age of six, believe that there is more water in the tall thin glass? The child can *see* everything that the adult can see, yet he reasons differently, concentrating on one dimension - height - and ignoring the other - diameter. Yet, without adult instruction, (since adults are unaware of the problem) older children in our society come to understand that it is necessary to consider change both in height and in diameter, and to correlate the changes in these dimensions with one another. The notion of animal capacities can refer only to our senses and physiological reactions - withdrawing the hand from a source of pain, dodging falling rocks, and so on - but the understanding of the problem of the two glasses clearly involves a cognitive process, some kind of reasoning as well, but a reasoning which is not normally taught by society at all.

Piaget, from whose work this example is taken, and many other psychologists have studied cognitive growth in all aspects of the understanding of the physical world - space, time, number, causality, and classification - and in every case it is clear that a development of reasoning occurs which is not culturally dependent in the sense of being the result of explicit teaching or of learning a particular language or the conventions of a particular culture. How therefore can relativists explain the universal similarities between the stages of children's cognitive development in all societies, so that children of the same stage of development in West Africa, Aden, Iran, Hong Kong, and Geneva give almost identical answers to the problems set them? Even the desperate expedient of claiming that our culture simply defines tall thin glasses as holding the same amount of water as short fat ones (which they don't necessarily) would not explain the universality of the answers since if relativism were true such universality would be incomprehensible.

I have discussed developmental psychology in far more detail elsewhere [in Hallpike 1980], but here I simply wish to establish that part of the plausibility of the relativist's case depends on treating the mind only as a container for contents and ignoring its processes. This illusion has been supported by the belief that classification is the essence of thought, embodied in language, and that our classifications are essentially arbitrary conventions learned by rote and imposed on the continuum of reality.

I shall deal with the notion of convention in more detail later and at the moment will concentrate on the idea that classification is the basis of culture. There is clearly something

very wrong with a theory which represents human culture as nothing more than a set of conventional classifications and each society as marooned on its own island of meaning. I believe that such a mistaken view has been made possible by the fallacy that classification, and language in particular, is the *only* important means by which we impose conceptual order on the world. This exclusive emphasis on classification, and the whole mystique of language as the paradigm of cognition, is basically mistaken because it is essentially passive, and represents human beings as though they are only observers, like the audience in a cinema watching the screen, when in fact they are constantly acting upon the world in pursuit of goals. In short, the relativist's position inherently excludes action and problem solving as an integral part of our understanding of the world.

My basic reason for rejecting the belief that we perceive the world as a continuum (that is, as having no inherent discontinuities or differences) and impose purely conventional classifications upon it can best be explained by an example. Our word 'weed', for instance, would be regarded by the relativist as a classic case of imposing arbitrarily a purely conventional distinction on the continuum of nature. All that we actually observe or perceive is a virtually limitless range of plants, and we learn to apply names like 'weed' or 'flower' to different species in a way which is conventional and varies from one period to another, and indeed, the species that are classified as weeds would also depend on whether the classifier is a gardener or a farmer, or an average person with no special interest in plants. But as soon as one abandons this image of men merely looking at the world and applying conventional names for the things that are in it in ways which they have been taught, and thinks instead of men acting on the world then categories like 'weed' take on a very different significance.

If we are trying to grow certain plants - be they flowers, vegetables, or crops - it is a fact of nature that other plants will appear among those we have planted and choke them or, as in a flowerbed, spoil the arrangement we have planned. The types of plant we consider weeds will therefore depend on the kind of activity we are engaged in and its purpose. If we are concerned for our lawn then the dandelion is a weed, but apparently some people like to eat dandelion leaves in salads, and dandelions are even grown specifically to supply this demand. For a dandelion farmer, then, the dandelion is a crop, not a weed, and this illustrates very well that the concept of 'weed' does not depend on a fixed denotation, on an unambiguous list of species which either are or not 'weeds'. The objectivity of the concept 'weed' is quite

different from this; it means, 'plants which interfere with those we are trying to grow', and, since we have domesticated most plants that can be of use to us, most 'weeds' will also be wild plants of no edible or other value. In this operational category of 'weed' the actual plant species can vary considerably because it is not the content or denotation of the category that really matters, but the significance of what weeds do in the relation to our purposes. It is not even necessary to have the actual word 'weed' in our vocabulary, and we could use instead some more general category such as 'rubbish', because the concept of 'weed' does not depend on being named, but upon our understanding of what we are trying to *do* (grow certain types of plant), and of the way in which weeds hinder this.

No doubt there are many cultures which do not have a word corresponding to 'weed' in English, and one would certainly be surprised to find such a word in any hunter-gatherer society, but the members of any society engaged in intensive agriculture would certainly understand our operational concept of weed if it were explained to them, because they encounter the same 'weed' problem in their own lives. The operational concept of weed (whether or not it has a specific name) is therefore not arbitrary at all, but expresses the way in which a fundamental human purpose - to grow food - is liable to be frustrated by nature, and we find a vast range of other concepts which, like 'weed', express common human experience of interacting with the world and with one another in society.

So Osgood has established that three of the most important cross-cultural universals of meaning are: Evaluation (good/bad, pleasant/unpleasant, positive/negative); Potency (strong/weak, heavy/light, hard/soft); and Activity (fast/slow, active/passive, excitable/calm).

What is important to us now as it was back in the age of Neanderthal man, about the sign of a thing is, first, does it refer to something *good* for me or *bad* for me (is it an antelope or a sabre-toothed tiger)? Second, does it refer to something which is *strong* or *weak* with respect to me (is it a bad sabre-toothed tiger or a bad mosquito)? And third, does it refer to something that is *active* or *passive* with respect to me (is it a bad, strong sabre-toothed tiger or a bad, strong pool of quicksand which I can safely walk around)? Survival, then and now, depends on the answers. (Osgood *et al.* 1975:395)

The existence of so many of these operational concepts, which are bound up with the pursuit of goals in relation to the constraints of the natural and social worlds, shows that it is fundamentally impossible to treat collective representations as though they could be uninfluenced by personal experience of this type, and there are constant metaphorical extensions of meaning from physical to personal interactions:

What are we trying to say when we call a thing, say the surface of a table, *hard*? We mean that it resists change when pushed or pressed, that it supports other things placed upon it without changing its own form. Hardness is resistance to change imposed by external forces; it describes a mode of interaction. Correspondingly, what is soft takes on the form of things acting upon it, as does the tablecloth that follows the contours of a surface. What now is the sense of *hard* when it refers to a person? It describes an interaction that is formally similar. We see a man refusing the appeal of another. This interaction we experience as a force proceeding from one person, having as its aim the production of a change in the other, which, however, fails to *move* him, or which produces *resistance*. The hardness of a table and of a person concerns events radically different in content and complexity, but the schema of interaction is experienced as dynamically similar, having to do with the application of force and of resulting actions in line with or contrary to it. (Asch 1958:92)

In all societies people try to get others do things for them, and the experience of resistance or compliance will therefore give the notion of hardness, which Asch analyzes, a fundamental relevance to experience, and there is an impressive array of cross-cultural similarities in the metaphorical associations of sweet, sour, bitter, colourful, straight, crooked, fast and slow, and so on (see Hallpike 1980:160-167). Indeed, the relativist claim that we perceive the world as a continuum is shown to be no more than rhetorical exaggeration as soon as we reflect on such basic human experience as light/dark, heavy/light, hard/soft, wet/dry, alive/dead, male/female, and it is the universal associations of these and many other features of experience that are among the best refutations of relativism.

In the working of human society, too, there are many inescapable problems of interacting with one another which generate a comparable range of concepts that are common to all humanity: the division of labour by gender and age, co-operation and leadership, the allocation of scarce resources, dispute settlement, and the regulation of sexual relations. Again, there are no languages incapable of expressing the ideas of true and false, good and bad, negation, commands, and questions. We find everywhere the notions of the lie, of property and theft, of gift and reciprocity, of guest and host, greeting and threat, revenge and reward, and of respect, insult, and joke. These are not arbitrary classifications imposed on experience but are generated from the basic realities of human interaction in society and in the physical world. It is because such functions are necessary to the working of human society as such that once we understand the significance of actions, gestures or forms of words in relation to these functions, we can rapidly find our bearings in alien societies, even though the actual connections between particular cultural forms of actions, gestures, and forms of words in relation to these functions always have purely conventional elements, and it is the notion of convention that we must now consider in more detail.

The idea of convention is an extremely important element in the theory of relativism because it is thought of as almost synonymous with 'arbitrary'. But the basic idea of convention is simply that of *agreement* to do something in a certain way: it is indeed a social as opposed to a natural phenomenon, something which we might in principle have decided to do differently because we are not constrained by the nature of reality to do it only in one particular way, but it is nevertheless strange to assume that people might not have good reasons for agreeing to do things in certain ways. Doctoral robes are scarlet because it is a convention, not because there is some inherent property in a doctoral degree which prevents the robe being green or yellow. But it is obviously useful on ceremonial occasions to distinguish between degrees of different rank by colour, and doctoral degrees have a function as professional qualifications which, unlike the colour of their robes, is not arbitrary at all since it answers a social need. The fact that culture consists of conventions does not therefore tell us that these are arbitrary in function as well as in form, since we can always ask 'why was this convention adopted?'. A rule of the road, for example, is unnecessary for pedestrian traffic, becomes rather more pressing in the case of horse-drawn vehicles, and is imperative for the automobile. Whether we drive on the left or the right is obviously arbitrary, but the need for a convention is not, and our agreement to establish one, while a convention, is closely related to our real circumstances and needs. It is therefore quite possible to ask of social conventions whether they are intelligent or stupid, the best that could be devised, out of date, and so on. We are at this point as far as could be imagined from the notion of convention as purely arbitrary. Conventions, moreover, are not just local solutions to functional problems but at the level of thought may have important properties as aids to more effective thinking.

Consider, for example, the case of the Roman and Arabic systems of number notation. The symbols themselves and the rules for their manipulation are clearly conventional; they have to be taught like the details of any natural language, and might easily have been different. There is no natural requirement for number magnitudes to increase from right to left, as they do in the Arabic system, rather than from left to right, and the relationship between the symbols and the numbers which they signify is arbitrary as well. If either of these number systems is used merely for writing down quantities there is little to choose between them. Roman numerals usually take up rather more space but they are also considered by many to be more decorative, which is why they are often retained for monumental inscriptions and on the

faces of clocks. But as soon as we use these notations for arithmetic calculations it immediately becomes obvious that the Roman system is virtually useless whereas the Arabic system is vastly superior (because its place value is based on magnitude alone and is not confused by the operations of addition and subtraction, and it also has the zero). This is why in the ancient world reckoning was carried out with counting boards and sand tables, while the numerals themselves were only used for writing down the results.

Culture, in short, is adaptive in the sense that it is an accumulation of solutions to what people perceive as problems in the real world and it can do this because human beings not only think about experience, but because they have a unique capacity to transmit detailed information about their experience to other human beings, and in this way it is possible for knowledge to accumulate from generation to generation so that it becomes vastly greater in scope than the unaided individual could achieve in the course of a single life time. As a result, the child born into any society is thus the heir to a great body of information that he does not need to verify for himself, of techniques and solutions to problems that he would never have thought of unaided and of representations too complex or subtle for the lone individual to have developed.

The process by which knowledge has accumulated is indeed collaborative and social, but if this knowledge came in some mysterious way from the 'culture', rather than from the experience of individuals, it would be impossible for culture to be adapted to reality at all. Yet we know quite well that human beings are able to grow crops, to cure diseases, to build houses and machines, and aeroplanes that really fly, to settle disputes, to win battles, and to govern empires. No doubt, the individuals who inherit this knowledge take most of it for granted, and are subject to many unconscious influences for this reason, but if the knowledge they are assimilating is founded in the experience of individuals, however anonymous these individuals may be, why should we assume that it is inherently untrustworthy?

It is surely perverse in the extreme to suggest that the main effect of culture is to *prevent* us understanding the social and natural world about us, when it is our capacity for acquiring and transmitting culture that has raised us above the level of the brute. We are so greatly influenced by our own culture not because we can never escape from its assumptions, but because in many ways our predecessors have done a good job and it is easy to rest on their labours. Few of us have witnessed the effects of drinking potassium cyanide, but if we are

wise we will not experiment with it ourselves but accept the authority of medical textbooks on the subject. Life is too short to allow us to check personally every item of information and every idea which is not supported by our personal experience. Traditional knowledge, therefore, will always be imperfect, but it is a rational strategy to suppose that it will lead us right more often than wrong.

Experience, no doubt, is often ambiguous, and the same 'fact' can be represented from a number of different points of view, each of which is partially correct, so that a number of different models of reality may all seem to be supported by the evidence; and the more vaguely defined an idea, or the greater its subtlety, the harder it is to bring it into any conclusive confrontation with the facts, and the easier therefore to produce a variety of explanations all of which are viable. Much of the so-called 'relativity' of knowledge can be attributed to this very obvious feature of human experience, and when little is known about a subject, the wider will be the range of explanations that can seem plausible. The Yagwoia Kukukuku of Papua New Guinea say that the sun is a man and the moon is his wife; the dew is the moon's urine and the sun is red in the morning because he is embarrassed by his wife's urination, which he quickly dries up by his heat (Hallpike 1980:141). It would be difficult for a Kukukuku to dispute this, even if he had the idea of doing so, because the Kukukuku have very little knowledge which is relevant to the problem, but obviously this account of sun and moon could not survive among those with greater information about astronomy and meteorology.

The reliance of individuals on the traditional beliefs of their culture is therefore most simply explained by the fact, obvious to children, that their elders know more than they do. Even when they are wrong, we should remember that conformity draws much of its strength from the mental sloth and credulity of man, rather than from the overwhelming force of culture. Many are too stupid to see that traditional beliefs are mistaken, or too cowardly to challenge them when they do. We are all familiar with academics who refuse to change their minds when confronted with arguments and facts which to the neutral observer seem to refute their theories. Is this because of the overwhelming power of the collective representations in this or that discipline over the individual? Or is it because those who have publicly committed themselves to a theory over many years find it too embarrassing and painful to admit that they have been wrong? Let us not be too ready to blame culture for our own failings.

We can then have no reason to deny that some cultural traditions may have accumulated more knowledge than others about certain aspects of reality, and may reason about this in more conceptually adequate ways. When two cultures differ in their interpretations of reality our confidence that one cultural tradition is more likely to be correct than the other will be based on such considerations as: 1) the opportunity for individuals to gain relevant experience; 2) the opportunity to store and transmit this experience (e.g. by writing); 3) the number and quality of full-time specialists who have devoted themselves to the study of this experience; 4) the availability of relevant techniques of analysis (e.g. mathematics); 5) the awareness of alternative points of view, and the opportunity for debating these; 6) familiarity with other cultures, and with the history of one's own; 7) the degree of methodological self-consciousness and awareness of one's own cultural biases.

The most effective method for minimizing the hidden ethnocentric assumptions and biases of our culture is comparative and systematic knowledge of as many other cultures as possible, and this is precisely what the Azande, for example, do not have, and why we should prefer Evans-Pritchard's account of their witchcraft and oracles to their own. Relativism is only one of a number of developments including philosophy, psychology, linguistics, and history, in the course of which those cultures which score highly on points 1-7 have made man himself the object of his own scrutiny; and as I have previously said, in its weak form cultural relativism is a valuable addition to our knowledge. Indeed it is ironic that even the strong relativist must admit that any society which understands the idea of the relativity of knowledge is by that very fact superior in its grasp of the human condition to those societies which are still wrapped in ethnocentrism, unaware of the 'enculturative screen'.

While the relativist is free, of course, to assert that any of our opinions *may* be distorted by cultural bias (just as it may be distorted by muddled thinking or ignorance), this claim is quite empty unless in each specific case he can show that such a bias actually exists and has affected our judgement. By so doing, however, we would then be in a position to correct our judgement by removing the cultural distortion, which is the proper use of a moderate or weak relativism. If the strong relativist wished to avoid this unpalatable conclusion and asserted that some cultural bias is never detectable because it is too deeply embedded in our thought processes, we could certainly not refute him. And we could not refute him because his theory would be,

in principle, untestable and would therefore have no claim to be scientific at all (Schmidt 1955:782).

To the extent that all cultural representations of reality are liable to be distorted by one-sided views, prejudices and false assumptions, and limited evidence I accept the value of a weak cultural relativism, but would recommend the strong variety only as a kind of intellectual sheep-dip for the simple minded - a valuable treatment if they are pushed through it fairly rapidly, but fatal to the intellect if they remain in it permanently.

2. Moral relativism.

If the strong form of cultural relativism fails, then arguments for moral relativism must look elsewhere for support, to some special quality of moral judgements themselves which distinguishes them from ordinary knowledge. In social anthropology, which is dedicated to the understanding of other cultures, ethnocentrism is the chief intellectual obstacle to be overcome, but while the ethnographic fieldworker is quite properly required to restrain his own moral opinions from distorting his accounts of those he is studying, this in itself could provide no theoretical support for the principle of moral relativism. It is clear in fact that this has been, primarily, the cultural diversity of moral values and beliefs, about which anthropologists have provided so much evidence, and this intellectual scepticism has been reinforced by the opposition to colonialism in liberal Western circles.

Since the supporters of moral relativism believe that it provides an intellectual basis for tolerance and so should be supported by all people of good will, I shall begin by showing that this is actually a dangerous and self-defeating illusion. In the words of Herskovits, 'Cultural relativism is a philosophy which in recognizing the values set up by every society to guide its own life, lays stress on the dignity inherent in every body of custom, and on the need for tolerance of conventions though they may differ from one's own' (Herskovits 1972:17). Despite these amiable sentiments, it is not very difficult to see that the tolerance and freedom from ethnocentrism which Herskovits wishes to encourage are themselves the distinctive values of one particular culture, or even sub-culture (that of educated Western liberals). But 'The principle of respect for other cultures can only be binding within the cultures that respect it and cannot consistently with relativist theory claim general validity' (Ginsberg 1956:124). On Herskovits's own assumptions, those cultures that are ethnocentric (and they are the

majority) have just as much claim to our respect as those, like our own, that condemn ethnocentrism; and toleration, far from being a universal moral norm, becomes nothing more than a local idiosyncrasy. Even worse, far from leading to the belief that all cultures have equal value, 'It is equally logical, as many a philosopher has seen, to reach the conclusion of nihilism and to treat all cultural values as equally worthless.' (Bidney 1968:547)

Indeed it is difficult to see how moral relativism could even require individual members of any culture, once they had grasped the implications of relativism, to respect their *own* moral code:

If, according to relativism, our moral judgments and decisions are based on moral principles, and if these principles are not the sort of things we can know to be true, i.e. if they are merely the effect of a process of enculturation, then does not relativism imply that these principles can have no real authority over the *individual*? In other words, if an individual should ask himself 'How can the principles which have thus been inculcated in me really *oblige* me to do some things and refrain from other things?' the answer would seem to be 'They *can't*!'. (Young 1978:294-295)

Herskovits rejected this extreme individualistic interpretation of relativism by claiming that '*Cultural* relativism must be sharply distinguished from concepts of the relativity of individual behaviour, which would negate all social controls over conduct' (Herskovits 1972:77). But, as Young points out 'Unfortunately he failed to realize that his interpretation, while rejecting nihilism, has equally disastrous implications. It amounts to the view that the code of any culture really does create moral obligations for its members, that we really *are* obligated by the code of our culture *whatever it may be*. In other words, Herskovits' interpretation turns relativism into an endorsement of tyranny' (Young 1978:296). Herskovits himself seems to confirm this implication of relativism when he says 'There is, indeed, some reason to feel that the concept of freedom should be realistically redefined as the right to be exploited in terms of the patterns of one's own culture' (Herskovits 1972:9).

If, however, it can be shown that there are certain objective principles of ethics, it may be that tolerance or some form of international law has objective moral value, but the demonstration of this could never be accomplished by any kind of relativism. Furthermore, it will not necessarily follow that simply because such an objective theory of ethics has been developed by some members of Western society therefore this type of society must be superior to any other. It is perfectly possible that by objective moral criteria Western society itself might be shown to have important defects.

We are now in the position to examine the claim that the great variability in moral values, standards, and judgements found in different societies shows that morality has no objective basis and is simply a matter of social convention. It is first of all necessary to note that a *difference* in values or opinions need not imply a *disagreement*: we would expect to find that courage and military prowess were more admired in a warlike society than in a peaceful one, and even within a single society the qualities admired in coal-miners would not be identical with those admired in professors. But these are merely differences if the members of peaceful societies do not condemn the values of military societies and can accept that they themselves would need to give greater emphasis to martial values if they lived in a more threatening environment, or if miners and professors realise why their different modes of life require an emphasis on different values.

Many differences of cultural and moral values are therefore related to circumstances, so that

...what is right in one set of conditions may be wrong in another set of conditions, or to put it in another way, that in estimating the moral quality of an act the circumstances or situation in which it occurs must be taken into consideration. 'Relative' in this sense means related to surrounding conditions, and carries with it no necessary reference to subjectivity or to the mental make-up of the person or persons judging (Ginsberg 1956:100).

Even those who believe in objective principles of ethics do not therefore expect to find a *uniformity* of practice or values and there may be 1) variations arising from differences of opinion or knowledge regarding the non-moral qualities of acts or their consequences; 2) variations due to the different moral import of the 'same' acts in different social situations and institutional contexts; 3) variations due to difference in emphasis of balance of the different elements in the moral life; and 4) variations arising from the possibility of alternative ways of satisfying primary needs (see Ginsberg 1956:101-2). So blood-vengeance, for example, would have a very different moral significance in the context of tribal life from blood-vengeance in our own type of society.

'Disagreement', unlike 'difference', refers to an incompatibility of opinions that is absolute and takes no account of circumstance. Using 'relativity' in the sense of 'disagreement' the standard argument to demonstrate that there is no rational or objective way of deciding between moral judgements or of establishing moral principles is their variability from one culture to another: 'morality is a matter of latitude and longitude', as one proverbial maxim puts it.

The content of moral prohibitions varies wildly not only as between one society and another but even within the same society as between one social class and another or between one historical period and another. Breathing apart, it is difficult to think of any kind of human activity which has not, at one time or another, been considered wrong. The Jains of India say that it is a sin to kill mosquitos; the Jews think it wrong to eat pork; in England it is indecent to describe the sexual act in one syllable instead of three. It is wrong to wear outdoor shoes in a mosque; in some Catholic churches it is wrong for a woman to bare her head. The wrongness of such acts differs in intensity, but there is no fundamental difference in kind between local conventions of manners and fashion and those which bear the deeper stamp of morality and religious duty, and the common belief that our more deeply felt moral constraints are shared by all humanity is simply a delusion. (Leach 1968:49)

This demonstration of moral variability is achieved by treating all differences as disagreements, and by the tendentious device of lumping together very specific social rules of every imaginable type, and ignoring the obvious fact that differences on this superficial level may conceal important similarities at a deeper level. As we observed in the previous section, some modern societies drive on the right and others on the left, but all agree that the common good requires a rule that one must drive on one side or the other; violation of such a rule would not only be unconventional, and illegal, but also immoral in many circumstances because it would endanger the lives of others. If we look at Leach's list of conventions it is not hard to see that while rules about how we refer to sexual matters differ in detail, we are likely to find that all societies have some rules about this. Muslims and Catholics may differ in their dress requirements when entering a mosque or a church, but the existence of some rules about dress, and especially about behaviour generally, in sacred places is close to universal. It is because of these deeper cross-cultural resemblances that we can find our way about in alien societies, and the distinction between 'local conventions of manners and fashion and those which bear the deeper stamp of morality and religious duty' is not a delusion but the *pons asinorum* of moral understanding (see in particular von Fritz 1952). As Linton said,

Behind the seemingly endless diversity of culture patterns there is a fundamental uniformity...It is easy to see why this uniformity exists. All human societies are composed of members of the same basic physiological and psychological needs of individuals. Moreover, the organization, operation, and perpetuation of societies involves the same basic problems whether the society is in Australia, Africa, or Arkansas. (Linton 1952:646)

Cultural traits that occur in the great majority of societies, 'near universals', are likely to be as significant as true universals and to require the same sort of explanations that draw upon the common features of the physical world, human nature, the mind, and the inherent constraints of social organization. Where the possibility of variation seems very large, as in the case of language, even 'statistical' universals are very significant. So, approximately one

third of the world's languages describe the pupil of the eye by a word meaning 'little person' because 'close scrutiny of the pupil reveals a 'little person' looking out at you: your own reflection' (Brown 1991:45). Given the limitless range of possible words for 'pupil' even this degree of similarity between languages is very striking. The point about universals (developed very well in Brown's excellent book) is that they reveal very clearly the limitations of the relativistic belief in the autonomous power of each culture to define the world in its own idiosyncratic, dream-like fashion, and point instead to those pan-human constraints which operate in all societies.

Universals are not therefore as hard to come by as Leach supposes, especially if one includes in 'universals' those rules and ideas which occur very widely in different and unrelated societies. Obvious examples would be the prohibition on sexual relations within the nuclear family, or on stealing, lying, and violence within the group. But it is too readily assumed, however, that universality of moral judgement, where discovered, would automatically provide some sort of guarantee of correctness, of moral authority, for that judgement or opinion, e.g. '...by seeking out specific moral principles held in common by all societies, one might be able to validate universal moral standards' (Renteln 1988:64). The first problem with this assumption is that we can find many examples of moral opinion that are or were universally held, especially outside the modern liberal West, which anthropologists would not consider very enlightened: that women are inferior to men, that it is perfectly acceptable to cheat or even kill those from other groups or societies, and that slavery is right and natural, while, in general, there is a pervasive ethnocentric attitude to other cultures; absolutism, not relativism, is the human norm.

But, secondly and more fundamentally, even if we found moral universals, what would this prove? Let us take, for example, a moral universal that even most anthropologists would probably accept as normatively valid - that of sexual modesty. Does it follow, however, that because no known society treats copulation as a matter of indifference, to be indulged in casually and in public whenever one chooses, that it is therefore morally wrong to do such things? Just as the ethnocentrism of most societies is not taken as supporting the belief that ethnocentrism is morally good, so 'advanced' thinkers might condemn sexual modesty as a regrettable survival from a repressive social order that should ideally be replaced by a cheerful abandonment to our erotic impulses. Unless, therefore, we can devise moral criteria that are

independent of cross-cultural support, we can have no means of distinguishing a universal moral truth from a universal prejudice.

The search for universals of moral opinion is therefore no more likely to provide us with guarantees of ethical truth than it is of scientific truth. E. B. Tylor said all this a long time ago:

Popularly, what everybody says must be true, what everybody does must be right...There are various topics, especially in history, law, philosophy, and theology, where even the educated people we live among can hardly be brought to see that the cause why men do hold an opinion, or practise a custom, is by no means necessarily a reason why they ought to do so. Now collections of ethnographic evidence, bringing so prominently into view the agreement of immense multitudes of men as to certain traditions, beliefs, and usages, are peculiarly liable to be thus improperly used in direct defence of those institutions themselves, even old barbaric nations being polled to maintain their opinions against what are called modern ideas. As it has more than once happened to myself to find my collections of traditions and beliefs thus set up to prove their own objective truth, without proper examination of the grounds on which they were actually received, I take this occasion of remarking that the same line of argument will serve equally well to demonstrate, by the strong and wide consent of nations, that the earth is flat, and nightmare the visit of a demon. (Tylor 1871(I):12-13)

Conversely, the variability of moral opinions might simply be the result of the great difficulty in discovering ethical truth: 'It might be argued that the diversity of moral judgements affords no more proof of their subjectivity than the diversity of judgments regarding matters of fact throws any doubt on the possibility of valid scientific judgements about them' (Ginsberg 1956:99). As Locke showed in using ethnographic evidence for the diversity of moral judgements (Locke 1690:I.iii.9-12), the fact that different societies have different moral standards only proves that awareness of moral truths is not *innate*, not that they can never be discovered, and Locke was certainly not a moral relativist. If, for example, it could be demonstrated that his theory of individual rights is correct, then those societies whose customs and opinions violate individual rights would be as mistaken as those who think that the earth is flat, or that disease is caused by witchcraft.

Yet we still have a lingering belief that universality *is* somehow relevant to deciding on the objectivity of moral opinion; there is, I think, an element of truth in this, though it is not what it is often supposed to be. Universals are actually important not as authoritative sources of moral opinion but because they refute the idea that culture is arbitrary or the product of free invention, and show that it exists within certain constraints, and has to accommodate to social and natural reality. If human nature were 'almost unbelievably malleable', as Margaret Mead (1935:280) and so many other anthropologists have claimed, and if social institutions were simply arbitrary conventions, it would be meaningless to talk about moral understanding at all,

because there would be nothing to understand. But to the extent that we find such universals as disapproval of stealing or violence within the group; admiration for generosity and courage; endorsement of the principle of 'good for good' and 'evil for evil'; the universal significance of gifts and reciprocity, the lie, insults, joking, guest and host, property and theft, we have evidence for a wide variety of constraints, of objective conditions of existence in which the *possibility* of moral ideas as a form of knowledge, a mode of understanding, at least makes sense. What that understanding actually consists of is another matter, and cannot be reached by simply collecting universals - we have to understand why they are universals, and what their significance is within some general system of moral truth. Cross-cultural surveys of moral opinions cannot, then, be a short cut to discovering which of them are true, and we have to think for ourselves about the very nature of ethics. Moral problems are real problems, not just undecidable matters of taste, or arbitrary conventions, and Kluckhohn explained why: 'Human life is a moral life precisely because it is a social life and because in the case of the human species the minimum necessities for orderly and co-operative behaviour are not provided by biologically inherited instincts ' (Kluckhohn 1960:391). [A fully worked out naturalistic theory of ethics is presented in Chapter II of my *Evolution of Moral Understanding* (2004)]

Notes

1. It should be noted that Professor Izutsu's very illuminating analysis of Islamic moral terms in the rest of his book actually owes nothing to this theory of linguistic determinism and indeed to a considerable extent refutes it.
2. It has in fact been shown that there seems to be a regular sequence in the development of such taxonomies which is not purely linguistic in origin but is closely related to size discrimination and to the woody/herbaceous opposition. According to Witkowsky and Brown (1978:434), the first class to appear in a taxonomy is 'tree' (large plant relative to the plant inventory of a particular environment whose parts are chiefly ligneous or woody). Then develops the category they label 'grerb', 'small plant...whose parts are chiefly herbaceous (green, leafy, non-woody)'. Subsequently there appears the category 'bush', meaning 'plant of intermediate size (relative to 'tree' and 'grerb)'.
3. The present fashionable emphasis on culture as a system of meaning, and on 'herrneneutics' in particular, is popular for two reasons: it is deeply relativistic, and it is intellectually undemanding while allowing its practitioners to speak an esoteric language which elevates them above the vulgar herd. The study of meaning, the sympathetic understanding of other cultures, and the description of human diversity are clearly essential components of social anthropology, but to make them its only aims must trivialize the subject to extinction, as we can see from Leach's denial that the findings of anthropology have the truth status of either science or history:
Social anthropologists should not see themselves as seekers after objective truth; their purpose is to gain insight into other people's behaviour, or, for that matter, into their own. 'Insight*' may seem a very vague concept but it is one that we admire

in other contexts; it has the quality of deep understanding which, as critics, we attribute to those whom we regard as *great* artists, dramatists, novelists, composers...(Leach 1982:52)

This is a rallying call for the woolly minded: cultural meaning only exists in the context of social relations and institutions, and of interactions with the physical environment, (in a universe of objective constraints, in other words) and good field work requires not only some of the qualities of the good novelist but those of the good scientist as well. The defining characteristic of science is not that it should be modelled on physics or biology (a 'natural' science of society is as ridiculous a notion as a 'social' science of chemistry), but that it should try to discover general principles underlying diversity and support its conclusions by relevant evidence.

4. This use of anthropological data on the variability of moral values to question the objective truth of any of them is not at all new, and was first developed as a philosophical argument by the Greek Sceptics, Pyrrho of Elis (c. 360 B.C. to c. 270 B.C.) being the first notable figure in the Sceptical tradition. (It is the 5th Mode of Philo of Alexandria and the 10th Mode of Sextus Empiricus, see Annas and Barnes 1985:151-71). But use the words 'to question' rather than 'to deny' deliberately, since the Sceptics did not assert categorically that there were no objective values, but used the anthropological evidence only as grounds for suspending judgement: Ask any moral question - e.g. 'is incest really wrong?' - and the modern Sceptic [relativist, for our purposes] will answer: 'No - objectively speaking there is nothing wrong with incest, for there are no objective values at all'. From the point of view of the Pyrrhonist, who will answer the same question with a sceptical shrug to indicate his suspension of belief, the reply is profoundly unsceptical.. (Ibid., 163) Indeed, Annas and Barnes describe it as 'negative dogmatism'.

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