ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHICS

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It has been made evident enough that the facts concerning cultural relativism unsupported by powerful theoretical considerations are not sufficient to establish either normative ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism.[1] That is to say, the fact, if indeed it is a fact, that different peoples often have moral standards which radically differ and sometimes even conflict in very fundamental ways does not establish either 1) that what is right or good for one individual or society need not be right or good for another even when the situations in question are similar or 2) that there can be no sound procedures for justifying one moral code or one set of moral judgements as over and against another code or another set of moral judgements.

The interesting question becomes whether there are any theoretical considerations either on the side of anthropological theory or in ethical theory which would, when taken in conjunction with the ethnographic facts, tend to confirm or disconfirm meta-ethical relativism. I shall consider some facets of anthropological theory in this light.

I

It is sometimes maintained by anthropologists and those sociologists of knowledge under the influence of Karl Mannheim that we can never really understand – that is, more than approximately understand – a culture which is radically different from our own or explain in an objective manner the actions and beliefs of those who have a way of life alien to our own. Indeed anthropologists do and, of course, should write ethnographical reports but these reports can never be more than approximations for the anthropologist's own conception of knowledge, truth, fact and evidence and the like inevitably reflects his own cultural background. His own historically contingent and culturebound conceptual scheme determines or at least radically limits what he will find and how he will characterize and classify what he finds when he examines alien ways of life. Moreover, we are all of necessity in the same boat; what satisfies us that we have described, classified, and explained cor-

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[1] I have argued this at some length in my "Ethical Relativism and the Facts of Cultural Relativity," *Social Research*, vol. 33 No. 4 (Winter, 1966), pp. 531-551. Also see W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals* and Paul Taylor, "Social Science and Ethical Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy*, LV, No. 1 (1958), pp. 32-44. This essay together with useful introductory material has been reprinted in Paul Taylor (ed.), *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, (Belmont, California: Dickenson Publishing Company, 1967), pp. 41-85.

rectly the actions of the people we are studying is a function of the con-
ceptual scheme with which we happen to start. Since this is so and since we
can in no significant way transcend this situation, we can never really know
whether our characterization of an alien culture is correct. We need not be
arrogant about our own culture or, as men bereft of an historical sense,
simply regard our culture as the repository of truth, but we nonetheless can-
not escape being in an ethnocentric predicament with regard to our under-
standing of other cultures.

It does not seem to me that this is a conclusion of science. In fact in the
above argument there is a conceptual muddle masquerading as a bit of
science. Once more in the disguise of science the tides of metaphysics are
running high. A. R. Louch has marked the incoherence in such a claim
appropriately when he points out that "if we can mark the alteration or
distortion" in our apperception or understanding of alien cultures then we
"must know something about other cultures which is independent of the
source of the distortion. How else would we know that the frame of refer-
ence does colour the foreign reality?" If we never have and worse still can
never have "an undistorted conception" of the way of life of an alien culture
since we have no idea what this would be like, we can have no idea whether
our present knowledge or anyone's present knowledge of it is distorted. Only
if we could *conceive* of what would count as having an undistorted con-
ception of an alien way of life, could we properly speak of "a distorted con-
ception" of such a way of life. But if we can have no idea of what it would be
like to escape our own conceptual set or pervasive culture pattern we can
have no idea of whether our concepts either do or do not distort our con-
ceptions of an alien culture. Similar difficulties apply to the arguments given
by Whorf and Sapir for their claim that the conception of "the real world"
of a given culture is for the most part a function of the linguistic structures
of that group.[3] The point I am making here is indeed an old philosophical
point but as far as I can see, it is a perfectly valid one.

II

So far I have refuted metaphysics parading as science, but there are allied
theses in anthropology with a less metaphysical ring.

Clyde Kluckhohn, Edmund Leach and Claude Lévi-Strauss have made
us quite aware that we are in the following ethnocentric bind: in trying to
characterize social relations in alien cultures we either rather uncritically
use our own familiar categories of kinship, economics, religion, politics,
ritual, law and the like and then come to realize that they do not make an
exact fit or, in keeping in mind that the essential core of cultural anthro-

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[2] A. R. Louch, *Explanation and Human Action* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1966),
p. 205.

[3] Cited by Benjamin Lee Whorf in his *Language, Thought and Reality* (Boston:
John Wiley, 1965), p. 134.

pology is field work – "the understanding of the way of life of a single particular people" – we wittingly or unwittingly make the tribe or tribes in which we have done our field-work our *model* of man. Leach puts this point well in his brilliant lecture "Rethinking Anthropology":

> When we read Malinowski we get the impression that he is stating something which is of *general* importance. Yet how can this be? He is simply writing about Trobriand Islanders. Somehow he has so assimilated himself into the Trobriand situation that he is able to make the Trobriands a microcosm of the whole primitive world. And the same is true of his successors; for Firth, Primitive Man is a Tikopian, for Fortes, he is a citizen of Ghana. The existence of this prejudice has long been recognized but we have paid inadequate attention to its consequences. The difficulty of achieving comparative generalizations is directly linked with the problem of escaping from ethnocentric bias.[4]

In going beyond the stage of the ethnographic monograph, anthropologists need to make comparative studies, but here their taxonomic assumptions may unwittingly express ethnocentric bias. In developing a typology on what grounds do the typologymakers choose one frame of reference rather than another? Radcliffe-Brown tells us that we pick a particular aspect, say, the political system, and make our comparisons on the basis of that. But here we either use our own notion of a political system with its attendant concept of a government and so we are very likely to pigeon-hole native behavior in a somewhat arbitrary manner, *i.e.*, we don't catch the native world as the natives see it or, if like Malinowski, we have a deep first-hand experience – a fully experienced participant's understanding of a given primitive culture – we in our typology making are almost inevitably pushed into conducting our whole argument for a typology in such a way that we are led to attach exaggerated significance to those features of social organization which happen to be prominent in the societies where we have such a full first hand experience.[5]

Clyde Kluckhohn in his "Universal Categories of Culture" seeks to overcome this weakness in anthropological methodology and theory by establishing certain "invariant points of reference" in virtue of which we could develop a set of non-ethnocentric categories which would permit accurate cultural comparability.[6] He recognized, as Lévi-Strauss has as well, that ethnographers must operate with the rule of procedure "that all the facts should be carefully observed and described, without allowing any theoretical preconception to decide whether some are more important and others less." [7]

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4 E. R. Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology*, (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), p. 1.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

6 Clyde Kluckhohn, "Universal Categories of Culture," in *Anthropology Today*, A. L. Kroeber (ed.).

7 Claude Lévi-Strauss, "Social Structure," in *Anthropology Today*, A. L. Kroeber (ed.), p. 526. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), Tim Moore, *Claude Lévi-Strauss and the Cultural Sciences* (Birmingham, England: Birmingham University Press: 1969) and E. R. Leach, *Claude Lévi-Strauss* (New York: The Viking Press, 1970).

This is the way of unearthing, or coming as close as we can to unearthing, what Lévi-Strauss calls the "raw phenomena" and it is obviously an aid in obtaining objectivity in our field work.

Ethnography gathers this data and cultural anthropology, by creating models concerning it, explains it. However, as Lévi-Strauss is well aware, such a rule of procedure cannot be followed literally. It is rather a heuristic maxim. We cannot literally observe and describe everything in even the simplest culture. But apart from the familiar problems concerning the selections the anthropologist unavoidably makes, there is, as Lévi-Strauss and Kluckhohn both stress, the problem of collecting ethnographical facts so as to insure their comparability. How is it possible – or is it possible – to articulate adequate categories for use in social description, so that we can go beyond the level of ethnography and have a genuine science of culture. Only if we can see how this is so or can be so can we assess the truth or even be sure of the intelligibility of the thesis of meta-ethical relativism.

Kluckhohn asks himself at the outset: 1) Are there fairly definite limits within which cultural variation is constrained by panhuman biological, psychological or social regularities? 2) If there are such regularities can we develop categories of culture which will be universal and allow accurate cross-cultural comparability? [8] That is, do we have non-culture bound units with which to characterize cultures?

Kluckhohn replies that up to the present only linguistics has been able to discover such non-culture bound isolates. We need throughout the range of cultural anthropology something like the linguistic concepts "phoneme," "morpheme," "allomorph" and the like. Elsewhere, even in physical anthropology, we rely on common sense concepts and this makes our thinking here culture bound for their very "sense" only becomes "common" in terms of cultural convention and the plain fact is that cultural conventions vary.[9] In cultural anthropology our situation is this: we are now in a condition not unlike an earlier phase of linguistics when "non-European languages were being forcibly recast into the categories of Latin grammar." [10]

Radcliff-Brown and Homans among others took the problem of a universal science of culture to be that of discovering universal social laws, generalizations which would sustain contrary-to-fact conditionals, and would assert quantitatively invariant properties of social interaction.[11] That is to say, for them, the problem of universal categories of culture is the problem of discovering a system of structural laws for social conduct in all human societies. On an empirical level there is scepticism about there being such laws, but to that scepticism there is the old refrain that social science is still

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[8] Clyde Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p. 507.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 508.

[11] D. F. Pocock gives us some very good reasons for thinking this should not be the aim of social anthropology. See D. F. Pocock, *Social Anthropology*, (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1961), pp. 95-101. In general this little book is a philosophically and methodologically sophisticated introduction to this topic.

awaiting its Newton or, if you are a little cynical, its Thales. There are, however, deeper, epistemologically oriented objections, objections articulated by Dray, Peters, Scriven, Winch, and Pocock which question whether, given what society and social understanding is, there could possibly be such laws.[12] I do not wish here to enter into this perplexing epistemological thicket. Rather I want only to remark that even if Winch *et al.* are essentially right about this, it still does not, at least on the face of it, rule out the cross-cultural comparability that Kluckhohn and Lévi-Strauss seek. Their problem is that of finding "the least common denominators of culture" − common denominators which are not so vacuous as to be useless for classification and comparison and not so culture-bound as to distort our apperception of alien cultures. The absence of laws would not, as far as I can see, preclude success here.

Kluckhohn is a rather strange admixture of pessimism and optimism about " a genuine science of culture." He is pessimistic in that, linguistics apart, he admits that anthropology has not solved "very satisfactorily the problem of describing cultures in such a way that objective comparison is possible." [13]

He is optimistic in that he believes that there are "biological, psychological and socio-situational universals" which "afford the possibility of comparison of cultures in terms which are not ethnocentric . . . ." [14] It is through these "invariant points of reference" − these "givens" of human life as Kluckhohn calls them − that "valid cross-cultural comparison could best proceed." [15]

Let us see what Kluckhohn has in mind. Any society anywhere and anywhen must to remain viable − to continue as a society − provide approved ways of coping with the existence of two sexes and human sexual drives (man's permanent sexuality), with infant helplessness, with biological needs such as food, warmth and illness. Any culture must have patterned ways of coping with these problems. There are biological necessities but there are also social necessities. As Kluckhohn puts it "Co-operation to obtain subsistence and for other ends requires a certain minimum of reciprocal behavior, of a standard system of communication, and, indeed, of mutually accepted values." Moreover all societies, to remain viable, must provide for companionship, the family, and some measure of privacy. Such facts, and others like them, can form "invariant points of reference from which cross

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[12] William Dray, *Laws and Explanations in History*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1957), R. S. Peters, *The Concept of Motivation*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), Michael Scriven, "Truisms as the Grounds for Historical Explanation," Patrick Gardiner (ed.), *Theories of History*, (New York: The Free Press, 1959), Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958), and D. F. Pocock, *op. cit.*

[13] Clyde Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p. 520.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 521.

cultural comparison can start without begging questions that are themselves at issue." [16]

If in using such invariant points of reference, it turns out that the "more important institutions of culture can be isolated from their unique setting, so as to be typed, classified and related to [such] recurring antecedents or functional correlates, it follows that it is possible to consider the institutions in question as the basic or constant ones . . ." [17]

Kluckhohn admits that there are "few genuine uniformities in culture content unless one states the content in extremely general form – e.g. clothing, shelter, incest taboos and the like." To be useful for the cultural comparison Kluckhohn envisages, these uniformities must be characterized in a way that would enable us to purge culture-bound or partially culture-bound categories. We could not, for example, use aging as such a general category for such concepts as boy, youth, man, old man – essential to give sense to such a notion – are plainly very culture-bound notions. But while the task of actually articulating such a set of categories is indeed a difficult one, it by no means appears an impossible task. There seem to be no good reasons for believing we are of necessity caught up in a series of radically dissimilar cultural monads.

In fact with his stress on human biology and what are allegedly socio-situational universals, Kluckhohn, it is reasonable to believe, has provided an opening wedge with which we can start the difficult task of forming an adequate set of such cultural constants. There is indeed the problem that in using such abstractions, operating as we do from our own first-hand cultural experience, we are, as Leach has indicated, very likely to give them an application to an alien culture that distorts our apperception of the way of life of that culture. Moreover in typing, classifying and relating recurring antecedents or functional correlates, we, in developing such a typology, should squarely face Leach's charge that one needs, as in arranging butterflies into types and subtypes, to have some non-arbitrary principles of arrangement, but that in doing this we in reality have no non-ethnocentric criteria for what constitutes a perspicuous representation of the ethnographic facts. One just proceeds, Leach claims, on an *ad hoc* basis according to the categorial posture of one's own culture or the cultures with which one has a deep first hand acquaintance.

Finally, even if this difficulty can somehow be satisfactorily surmounted, there remains the Winchian difficulties about whether the idiosyncratic cultural overlay of these constant elements – these alleged cultural universals – is so great that such "cultural universals" would be of little value in furthering the aims of social science. Do they actually help us make relevant comparisons between different cultures and to understand and explain what goes on in society? We no more learn how society works – or so it seems at least – from such a classification than we learn how butterflies behave from

[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 519.

classifying them into types and subtypes. Would not Kluckhohn's method of isolation and abstraction have all the difficulties of Pareto's method of residues to which Winch draws our attention? I think not as long as Kluckhohn gives epistemological priority to what Winch calls a participant's understanding of particular cultures.[18] In short, without a working grasp of the particular social norms and rule-governed social relations (a pleonasm) of a given society, one could have little understanding of that society. And without some grasp, that is without some "knowledge how," of social norms and rules one could have no knowledge of society at all. But even Winch does not deny that given this participant's understanding one can for certain anthropological purposes abstract and make comparisons.[19] Moreover, Winch's own treatment of what he calls "limiting notions" – birth, death, sexual relations – functions very like Kluckhohn's conception of "universal human problems." [20] They are, as Winch puts it, notions that are involved in our very conception of human life. They might very well provide us with regulative ideas for stating cross-cultural constants to use in cross cultural comparisons. Furthermore, a recognition of the indispensability of a participant's understanding of a culture can go hand in hand, as it does in Leach and Lévi-Strauss, with an even more severe stress than we find in Kluckhohn, on abstraction, and, more importantly still, on generalization. As Leach has recently remarked in discussing field-work: "the subtlest insights of the modern anthropologist come from the close intensity of his constant day-to-day contact with his informants." However, like his peer Lévi-Strauss, Leach also stresses that to attain a genuine science of culture we must go beyond this to articulate a system of non-ethnocentric categories, and finally beyond that to generalizations, that would inform us about man and society – that is, man writ large.

III

I think that it should be evident from what has already been said that such a task is indeed a formidable but by no means an impossible task. Let us assume now that Kluckhohn has given us a *Leitmotif* for such cross-cultural comparisons. Let us now examine what it implies for morality.

Kluckhohn thinks that the falsity of what I have characterized as normative ethical relativism and presumably – though he does not utilize this distinction himself – meta-ethical relativism follows from the falsity of cultural relativism.[21] And Kluckhohn does indeed think that cultural rela-

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[18] Peter Winch, *op. cit.*, Chapters 4 and 5. D. F. Pocock makes and then elaborates the same point I am making here. See D. F. Pocock, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-9.

[19] Peter Winch, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-90.

[20] Peter Winch, "Understanding a Primitive Society," in D. Z. Phillips (ed.) *Religion and Understanding*, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), pp. 37-42.

[21] Clyde Kluckhohn, "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non." *Journal of Philosophy*, LII (November 10, 1955), pp. 663-337. His arguments have been trenchantly criticized by

tivism in its extreme form is false. That is he believes that it is not the case that moral norms in different societies differ in such an extreme way that even on fundamental and abstract levels there is no universal or even near universal cross-cultural agreement about what is right or wrong or good and bad. Paul Taylor has, to my mind at least, convincingly shown that neither normative ethical relativism nor meta-ethical relativism deductively follows from cultural relativism, *i.e.* the facts of cultural relativity. To put it over-simply, such a claim is but a particular application of the claim that no atomic moral proposition can be derived from a non-moral one. Unless some such argument as John Searle's is well taken against a basic is/ought division, there is good reason to believe that Taylor is on safe ground here.[22] But Taylor's victory may well be a Pyrrhic victory, for it would be natural to argue that the facts of cultural relativity support but do not entail ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism. But even here such ethnographic facts, as I remarked at the outset, unsupported by powerful theoretical consider-ations would not establish normative ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism.

Has our above discussion of the problem of universal categories of culture provided us, as Kluckhohn thinks it has, with grounds for thinking normative ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism false? This question effectively reduces to a question about meta-ethical relativism for, as Brandt and Taylor among others have shown, normative ethical relativism in *many* of its formu-lations is an absurd position.[23] Where it is not absurd it is either meta-ethical relativism expressed in the material mode or the position I am about to state.

Sometimes normative ethical relativism has been stated in a very general form – a form that does not clearly distinguish it from ethical scepticism or nihilism. Here a normative ethical relativist is taken as "denying any uni-versal validity to moral norms." [24] To be a normative ethical relativist is to believe "that a moral standard or rule is applicable only to those who are members of the society which has adopted the standard or rule as part of its way of life." [25] Anyone who tries to judge the conduct of persons in an-other society is muddled about the nature of morality. No moral rule or principle can have any cross-cultural validity. But, as Taylor points out, if such a normative ethical relativist is challenged to justify his claim, he either

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Paul Taylor, "Social Science and Ethical Relativism," *Journal of Philosophy,* LV. No. 1 (1958).

[22] John Searle, "How to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is,' " *Philosophical Review,* Vol. 73 (1964), pp. 43-58. This important paper has been effectively criticized by J. and J. Thomson, "How not to Derive 'Ought' from 'Is,' " *Philosophical Review,* Vol. 73 (1964).

[23] Richard Brandt, "Ethical Relativism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy,* Vol. III, pp. 75-78. See reference to Taylor in footnote 1 and see his "Introduction" to his *Problems of Moral Philosophy,* pp. 41-51.

[24] Paul Taylor "Introduction" to *Problems of Moral Philosophy,* Paul Taylor (ed.), p. 45.

[25] *Ibid.,* p. 45.

appeals to what are called the facts of cultural relativism or to meta-ethical considerations.

It is, however, evident that a moralist might recognize that people differ in fundamental ways about moral matters and still claim that some moral conceptions are more enlightened and more adequate than others. If people in the United States were as enlightened about these matters as the Japanese, abortion would not be a crime in the United States; if the Italians were as enlightened about shipwrecked marriages as the North Americans, they would not make divorce impossible; if the Navaho were as enlightened as the Samoans, Navaho husbands would not chop off their wives' noses for adultery; if the Germans were as enlightened about sexual relations as the Swedes, they would have the same type sex education in their schools as do the Swedes. I am here neither affirming nor denying that these judgements about who is and who is not enlightened are correct. But I am making the conceptual point that one can accept the facts of cultural relativism and still remain an ethical absolutist or an ethical objectivist, *i.e.* believe that there are, even among fundamental moral judgments, some moral judgments whose truth or falsity or justifiability or non-justifiability does not depend on the peculiarities of the person who makes the judgement, or on the culture to which he belongs, but are determinable by any rational agent, who is apprised of the relevant facts. After all there are irrational moralities rooted in confused cosmologies and in an inadequate understanding of man and his place in nature, *e.g.* Aztec morality and Christian morality.[26]

So it is evident that normative ethical relativism does not follow from cultural relativism, but such a normative ethical relativism may well be supportable by meta-ethical considerations. Is normative ethical relativism supportable by or effectively reducible to meta-ethical relativism and do our considerations about cultural universals and anthropological theory support meta-ethical relativism? Without such a support there seem to be no good grounds for being a normative ethical relativist.

"Meta-ethical relativism" is, of course, a term of art. I have (as many have) taken it to be the claim that dissimilar cultures use different methods of reasoning to justify moral claims and that there are no universal criteria in virtue of which we could determine which method or methods, among diverse and often conflicting methods are sound. Since, if this claim is true, there are no sound, cross-culturally accepted or acceptable procedures for justifying one moral code or one set of moral judgements against another code or another set of moral judgments, two or more moral codes or ways of life may be equally sound and two or more moral claims may be equally justified even when they are conflicting moral claims. If we accept a given method of moral reasoning, a method embedded in a certain way of life, we can sometimes show, *relative to that way of life,* that a given moral claim is justified. But there is no justification of the ways-of-life or the fundamental

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[26] Kai Nielsen, "Moral Truth," in *Studies in Moral Philosophy*, Nicholas Rescher (ed.), (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1968).

methods of moral reasoning themselves. It is just that there are these different ways of life, that these different language-games are played. Justification must come to an end and in morality it comes to an end at a relativistic point, for all we can *finally* say *vis-à-vis* morality is that these ways of life get accepted and, depending on which one you accept and reason in accordance with, certain moral claims become acceptable or not acceptable.[27]

This in turn supports *the above mentioned version* of normative ethical relativism. Since there is no uniform, cross-cultural method for gaining moral knowledge or a uniform, "cross-culturally acceptable set of rules of reasoning that could tell us whether a person in any culture is reasoning correctly no claim can be [rationally] made for the universal validity of moral norms." [28]

Do the anthropological considerations we have investigated support this or cut against such a relativistic contention? I think that the most reliable statement that one can make here is the not very exciting one that until we have developed a tolerably accurate system of cross-cultural comparability with non-ethnocentric categories of comparison, we can have no firm ground for claiming that anthropology either supports or fails to support meta-ethical relativism. *As far as what we could garner from anthropological theory is concerned*, we must simply remain *agnostic* concerning meta-ethical relativism. If we do not have non-ethnocentric categories with which to compare cultures, we cannot determine whether members of different cultures are really disagreeing over the same or even over similar things when they make their *apparently* conflicting moral claims. We cannot know whether the Yirkallas' *fundamental* conception of morality is the same or different than ours because we have no non-ethnocentric grounds for accurate comparison. If all we can do is make rough approximations, then it trivially follows that we can hardly make any very fine comparisons, not to speak of the terribly fine comparisons we would have to make to show that each morality provides its own distinctive justificatory criteria – its own distinctive mode of reasoning – and that no sound procedures could be given for claiming one to be superior to the other. But to make such sophisticated and involved comparisons implies an anthropological sophistication which we are not within a country mile of attaining. What the correct answer is awaits the articulation of some acceptable universal categories of culture. Among other things this would require a non-ethnocentric characterization of such concepts as enlightenment and rationality and a characterization of those concepts which would enable us to make accurate and meaningful cross-cultural comparisons. But this is a job yet to be done.

Kluckhohn admits that such universal categories of culture have yet to be articulated, but he thinks that he has good empirical grounds for rejecting what I have called meta-ethical relativism. Given what I have just said, must I not argue that Kluckhohn is quite mistaken?

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[27] For some attempts to meet this type of relativism see Kai Nielsen, "Can a Way of Life Be Justified?" *Indian Journal of Philosophy* (1960) and Paul Taylor "On Justifying a Way of Life," *Indian Journal of Philosophy* (1961).

[28] Paul Taylor, "Introduction," to his *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, p. 47.

While I would maintain that Kluckhohn has not given us adequate grounds for rejecting meta-ethical relativism, I would want to go on to add that he has provided us with some considerations which make it the case that we cannot, as things now stand, rightly give a straightforward answer to the question: does meta-ethical relativism rest on a mistake. In thinking about Kluckhohn's claims I find myself in the following bind. On the one hand, it seems evident enough that until we have some acceptable method of cross-cultural comparability, we cannot have a definite answer concerning the relevance of anthropological theory here. And it does seem evident that we do not yet have an acceptable method of cross-cultural comparability. But, on the other hand, there is something more to be said as well that tends to support Kluckhohn. First, it is important to note that the concept of meta-ethical relativism is indeterminate in a rather important way. It is the denial that we can know or have adequate grounds for believing that there is a valid system of norms, a valid normative ethical code or way of life, that is *normative* for all men in all circumstances. It involves the claim that no society can be shown to be mistaken in its set of fundamental moral beliefs. But it need not deny, what certainly appears to be true, namely that there may be certain functional prerequisites or, as Hart calls them, natural necessities that any society must acknowledge in order to survive: that is, to remain a society at all. It may well be true that all moral codes of all cultures must express these natural necessities as moral norms or at least effectively incorporate them in their system of social control. They appear to be what Hart calls the common sense core in natural law theory.[29] (It is, however, misleading to call them laws.) [30] Kluckhohn's considerations – his prolegomena to a theory of universal institutional types – indeed show how these natural necessities must be part of any moral code of any society. Without them a group of people could not persist as a society.

He thinks that the recognition of these natural necessities is sufficient to refute what I have called meta-ethical relativism. But this is not enough to refute meta-ethical relativism, for the moral codes and methods of moral reasoning of all societies go – though often in amazingly diverse ways – beyond those natural necessities. The meta-ethical relativist could very well claim that, while there is agreement that these things ought to be done, there remains irreconcilable disagreement about what moral codes or which ways of life are superior. A life in a society – indeed a moral code at all – can only remain in force where such natural necessities are also moral necessities. But this remains as true of the moral forms of life we find in South Africa or Saudi Arabia as it does for the moral forms of life we find in Sweden, Cuba or China. It similarly holds for all of the non-literate and isolated societies of the world with their exotically different experiments in

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[29] H. L. A. Hart, *The Concept of Law*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1961). Chapters VIII and IX.

[30] Kai Nielsen, "The Myth of Natural Law," in *Law and Philosophy*, Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York: New York University Press, 1964), pp. 122-143.

living. Since these natural necessities express what as a matter of fact is necessary for the existence of all of them, it gives us no yardstick to make moral comparisons between them.

Let us give this flesh. Kluckhohn's pan-human elements which are rooted or, at least, supposedly rooted in man's very condition are like Hart's minimum conditions for life in society. Human beings are vulnerable and they suffer and wish to avoid pain. Since this is so, it, as a matter of fact, would be a part of the moral code of any society that human life should be protected. But this, of course, does not entail the liberal Western and Marxist commitment to a respect for *all* human life. Such a respect for persons is, anthropologically speaking, a rare bird. Even taken as an *ideal* it is rare. Another Kluckhohnian natural necessity is that children in any society must be reared and protected. Our biological make up insures that. There are other such necessities as well. Subsistence requires a minimum of reciprocity and some conception of expected – that is appropriate – behavior. Given a scarcity of goods and services there also must be some conception of fair-play and justice – a conception of something being one's due and an acknowledgement and allowing of another's due. There must be voluntary cooperation within the society with predetermined sanctions to coerce behavior when necessary. These are necessary prerequisites for *any society* and they insure a certain minimum morality – what some people might call a purely Hobbesian morality. It is self-contradictory nonsense to speak of a human society or culture as not having any morality at all. For there to be such a society, people must live so as to form what in some sense is a single community. That is to say, for there to be a human society – as distinct from an ant society – there must be a group of people living together in at least a minimally cooperative manner, with some shared interests and common laws and regulations. But this implies that they have a shared morality. "An immoral society" is (among other things) a society with a morality with which the person who makes that assertion does not approve. It is not – what is anyway a conceptual impossibility – a human society without a morality. The title "Moral Man and Immoral Society" makes sense but the putative title "Moral Man and Non-Moral Society" is no title at all. "A human society without a morality" is a contradiction in terms.

Yet as Hart has stressed, and I have stressed elsewhere, this common content to all moral codes is compatible with radical differences in moral belief.[31] This common sense core of the so-called natural moral law is something held in common between the most brutalitarian societies and the most egalitarian societies. There are cultures – the Mudurucu Indians of Central Brazil to cite one example – which do not conceive of a *foreigner* as having any rights at all – the idea of *human* rights is not within their moral horizon – and there are societies which at least pay lip service to the ideal that all

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[31] H. L. A. Hart, *op. cit.,* p. 201, and Kai Nielsen, "The Myth of Natural Law," in *Law and Philosophy,* Sidney Hook (ed.), (New York University Press, 1964), pp. 136-139.

human life is to be respected and all human beings are of equal intrinsic worth. Yet both societies meet Hart's criteria for a minimum content for law and morality and they both satisfy Kluckhohn's conditions for the maintenance of life in society. These "givens of human life" as Kluckhohn calls them, are plainly compatible with radically different ways of life – radically different and conflicting moralities. Kluckhohn's common denominators of culture do not provide us with a basis for rejecting meta-ethical relativism.

IV

It is time to sum up. In reflecting about morality one of the most fundamental questions we can ask is this: can we justifiably claim to know or have good grounds for believing that there is a set of moral norms that are valid for all mankind? It has often been thought that an understanding of the facts of cultural relativity and/or an understanding of anthropological theory would clearly show that we could never justifiably claim to know or have good grounds for believing that there is such a system of moral norms. In fact sometimes the stronger claim has been made that such an anthropological understanding would plainly show us the truth of one or another of its denials, *i.e.*, the truth of normative ethical relativism or meta-ethical relativism.

I have been at pains to show that an anthropological understanding does not establish any of these claims. But I do not go as far as most philosophers do here, for I do not deny that it could not, at least in theory, someday give us good, though perhaps never decisive, grounds for accepting meta-ethical relativism. But I do deny that it can do this *now* or that in the future it is likely to do it. The possibility of its success here is tied to the likelihood of its being able to develop a sophisticated and non-ethnocentric system of universal categories of culture which would make the objective and accurate comparison of cultures and culture traits possible. Until and unless this can be done, anthropology will only be of help here in providing illustrative material and in helping provide negative instances to philosophers' generalizations about what constitutes the moral point of view or the essence of morality.

Is there a set or a system of moral norms valid for all mankind? As we have seen, there are certain norms whose genuine acceptance is necessary for the viability of social life. They appear to be necessary for the very existence of any kind of society at all; and, given the fact that we want and need life together in a social context and that a distinctively human life is impossible without society, we can see that and why these norms hold. But systems of moral norms have always claimed much more. Can we establish that any one of them is normative for all mankind? I do not know and I doubt if anyone else does either.

Do we know or have good grounds for claiming that this is something we can never know? I do not see that we have good grounds for asserting that

either. Philosophical reflection – including logical analysis – *cum* knowledge of man and his works, may very well someday make it apparent either that there is or there is not a consistent system of general moral norms normative for all mankind, though with different applications to fit man's varying circumstances. It may someday be that we will establish that there are such common principles and a common method of moral reasoning that is and must be presupposed by all who think rationally about these matters.

The supreme goal of moral philosophy is to establish that it is either true or false that there is such a moral order – a moral order that can stand up to the rational scrutiny of reflective and reasonable men. This is the underlying point of our attempt as moral philosophers to get clear about the nature of moral discourse, the foundations of morality and the concept of morality. One sign of our feeling for the difficulty of this task is our awareness of the ways our innocent sounding words "think rationally," "rational scrutiny," "reflective and reasonable men" in my final summation can lead to crucially begged issues. But I have not tried here to resolve such staggering issues but I have contented myself with making the by no means uncontroversial claim that the science of anthropology, at present at least, does not provide us with good grounds for believing ethical relativity to be true or for that matter false. But I have not taken the high *a priori* road here; I have not relied on the familiar is/ought distinction. And, I have made no claims about what tomorrow or at least the day after tomorrow may bring.

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