

ETHICAL RELATIVISM AND THE FACTS OF CULTURAL RELATIVITY

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I

ANTHROPOLOGISTS have discussed in great detail the question of cultural relativism. They have commonly assumed that objective moral judgments are possible only if there is a significant cross-cultural agreement over what is *believed* or *felt* to be good and evil. If we can find such agreement we have *eo ipso* found an adequate basis for an objective morality.¹ I want to argue that no such direct moral conclusion can be drawn from facts concerning the relativity of what people take to be right and wrong. That is to say, discovery of a common acceptance among all peoples that certain things are good or bad would not *of itself* establish that they are good or bad.

The material obtainable in anthropological monographs may be necessary for a well-grounded claim that there are objective moral beliefs but it could not be sufficient, for after we had discovered the procedures used by our tribe and by other tribes in making moral appraisals, the question would still remain as to which if any of these procedures could stand up to rational examination. Whether some could or not would never be simply a matter of anthropological investigation but would also involve conceptual inquiry. If analysis disclosed that certain criteria of moral appraisal could withstand such a logical examination, we

¹ See R. Linton, "Universal Ethical Principles: An Anthropological Approach," in R. N. Anshem, ed., *Moral Principles of Action*, (New York: 1952) and "The Problem of Universal Values," in *Method and Perspective in Anthropology*, R. F. Spence, ed. (Minneapolis: 1952); R. Redfield, "The Universally Human and The Culturally Variable," *The Journal of General Education*, vol. X (July 1967), pp. 150-160; C. Kluckhohn, "Ethical Relativity, Sic et Non," *Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LII (1955), pp. 663-667.

would have good grounds for rejecting ethical relativism. Anthropological material could count against this conclusion only if it were established that our very canons of logical and conceptual appraisal were so relative that no amount of discussion or inquiry could give us any cross-cultural Archimedian point from which to reason about conduct. In such a situation there would be good grounds for claiming that there are no ways to appraise rationally various experiments in living.

Elementary considerations of this sort should instill the suspicion that the situation vis-à-vis anthropological discoveries and ethical relativism is much more complex and indirect than it is usually thought to be. It should be said in the beginning that the very dichotomy between what is called absolutism-relativism is anything but a clear one. Exactly what a relativist or an absolutist is supposed to be committed to is not evident. Furthermore, it is not altogether apparent that the two concepts signify exhaustive categories. I contend, for example, that in an ordinary way we do have objective moral knowledge, but I would not call myself an absolutist, for I do not think any moral knowledge is self-evident and I do not know with sufficient clarity what it is to be an absolutist. "Relativism" itself seems to have several meanings. Different people mean different things by it. When a rosy-cheeked, freshly-scrubbed freshman briskly announces to me that he is a relativist, I do not know, and I suspect he does not know, what he means. Perhaps he means that he has just concluded that pre-marital intercourse might not be such a bad idea after all.

Still it will not do to say that these terms are so vague that we have no sense at all of what they mean or that there is no conflict between so-called objectivists and relativists. I want here to comment on some anthropological literature on this subject and consider the logical relevance of such literature to any theory of ethical relativism.

II

Among anthropologists, Lévy-Bruhl and Ruth Benedict give a classical formulation of cultural relativism. In the same year

that *Principia Ethica* was published, Lévy-Bruhl argued in his *La Morale et la Science des Moeurs* that moral codes and systems "are merely rationalizations of custom." What is done, he argued, is right. Where a given culture has a rule that all twins are to be killed at birth or, as in some places in the Amazon, that all captured children of an enemy tribe are first to be adopted and then, during adolescence, to be eaten by the families that adopted them, such mandatory social practices are right (morally obligatory) for that society. Morality is simply the body of rules which actually determines conduct in any society. Social structure and expected behavior vary enormously among different cultures, and thus morality—the normal, sanctioned behavior—takes radically different forms. Thirty years later Ruth Benedict, with a much greater store of anthropological information at hand, made the same type of claim. "Morality," she tells us "differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits." In a way that would bring chills to one affected by G. E. Moore, she calmly tells us that "It is morally good" means the same as "It is habitual," and what is habitual for the Tapirape is not habitual for the Papago or the American.² In a culture which conditions people to amass property and wealth and directs people to seek success, the attainment of extensive property and power will be good, while in a society in which contemplation and fidelity to one's ancestors are stressed above all, the attainment of wealth and power will not be so highly prized. Confronted with an exuberant variety of cultures, anthropologists, until very recently, have been impressed with the differences in human nature and moral rule rather than the similarities. Lévy-Bruhl, Westermarck, Boas, Benedict and Herskovits are the classical sources here.³

More recently, the worm has turned and now we find such eminent anthropological authorities as Kroeber, Linton, Redfield,

² Ruth Benedict, "Anthropology and the Abnormal," *Journal of General Psychology*, vol. 10 (1934), pp. 59–80.

³ Lévy-Bruhl, *La Morale et la Science des Moeurs* (Paris: 1903); E. Westermarck, *Ethical Relativity* (London: 1932); F. Boas, *Anthropology and Modern Life* (New York: 1928); R. Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: 1934); and M. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: 1950).

Mead and Kluckhohn emphasizing that there are common denominators amid the variations.⁴ There are what they like to call "universal values." Kroeber and Kluckhohn remark that "to say that certain aspects of Nazism were morally wrong, is not parochial arrogance. It is—or can be—an assertion based upon cross-cultural evidence as to the universalities in human needs, potentialities, and fulfilments and upon natural science knowledge with which the basic assumptions of any philosophy must be congruent."⁵ They speak of a "raw human nature" and the "limits and conditions of social life." They urge that it is proper to speak of a "common humanity" and our common humanity can serve as a basis for a morality that is *not* completely culturally relative. Amid incredible variation in human ideals there are some commonly accepted ideals of a very general but still fundamental nature resting on a *consensus gentium*. There are certain very general recipes for moral action that all normal members of all cultures take as authoritative. The incest taboo is universal, all cultures regulate sexual behavior, all cultures have some property rights and no culture tolerates indiscriminate lying or stealing. All cultures believe that it is good as a general rule to preserve human life; they draw a distinction between "murder" and "justifiable homicide," such as execution, killing in war, in religious ceremonials and the like. As Redfield points out, there are no societies where a mother is not obliged to care for her children.⁶ Neglect of her own child, or abuse of her own or another's child, is universally taken to be wrong. And in all cultures children also have obligations to their parents, though the exact content of those obligations varies considerably from culture to culture.

⁴ A. L. Kroeber and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture* (Papers of the Peabody Museum of Harvard University); R. Redfield, *The Primitive World and Its Transformations*; Margaret Mead, "Some Anthropological Considerations Concerning Natural Law," *Natural Law Forum*, vol. VI (1961), pp. 51-64. See also footnote one.

⁵ Kroeber and Kluckhohn, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁶ Redfield, "The Universally Human and the Culturally Variable," *loc. cit.*, pp. 152-153.

More generally, there are no cultures without moral codes; and, as Linton points out, these codes always function to insure "the perpetuation and successful functioning of the society," though *sometimes* the relevant social unit may be all of mankind. This function takes pride of place—all societies have something very much like our right of eminent domain—but "within the limits set by the priority given to society's needs, all ethical systems also seek to provide for the physical needs of individuals." Man needs society but he has familial needs as well and he has a need for protection from what Linton calls "ego injury," as well as physical injury. All moral codes serve both to protect society and such individual needs, though where there is a conflict an individual's needs are secondary to those of the society.⁷

In short, there are deep-seated needs, distinctive capacities and characteristic human attitudes that are perfectly universal. Universal values are said to be based on these needs and it is on these values that a cross-culturally valid, objective morality rests.

It is indeed true that just what is to count as "incest," "murder," "neglect," "abuse" and the like is to an astounding degree culturally relative. For the Romans, killing one's parents was the most unspeakable of evils, but for the Scandinavians and the Eskimos it was a duty in order to establish them in Valhalla or to insure a reasonably new model machine in the life to come. But amid this variety we still find a concern to preserve life and there remains some overlap between cultures concerning what is to count as "murder" and what is to count as "justified killing." Similar things could be said for "incest," "neglect," "abuse" and the like. In short, there are, as Kluckhohn concludes, "pan-human universals as regards needs and capacities that shape . . . at least the broad outlines of a morality that transcends cultural difference."⁸

⁷ Linton, "Universal Ethical Principles: An Anthropological View," *loc. cit.*, pp. 645–660.

⁸ Kluckhohn, "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," *loc. cit.*, p. 668.

It is Kluckhohn's and Linton's belief that this convergence is not just a fortunate circumstance. Kluckhohn goes so far as to claim that it is a "presumptive likelihood" that certain very general "moral principles somehow correspond to inevitabilities given the nature of the human organism and of the human situation." We humans have many variable needs but "some needs," Kluckhohn argues, "are so deep and so generic that they are beyond the reach of argument; pan-human morality expresses and supports them."⁹ (In the last part of that sentence we have metaphysics parading as science.)

III

There is a plenitude of conceptual confusion here. Linton and Kluckhohn are partially aware that an ability to formulate very general moral principles acceptable to all normal members of all cultures establishes very little, for we can always find some common denominator for such formulations if we delete enough detail. We have not discovered anything very interesting or significant when we find out that all normal people in all cultures regard some patterns of sexual behavior as bad and some ways of eating as desirable and that all cultures have some concept of murder. To say that murder is wrong and eating is good is at best minimally informative. Taylor is perfectly justified in saying that "What an ethical absolutist wants to know is . . . whether it is right to let a person die of neglect when he can no longer contribute to a society's economic production, whether it is right to kill unwanted infants, whether monogamy is the best sexual institution, whether a person ought to tell the truth under specified circumstances and so on."¹⁰ If we are troubled by ethical relativism, we generally want to know things of this order: Are

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 670.

¹⁰ P. Taylor, "Social Science and Ethical Relativism," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LV (1958), p. 38.

there some non-ethnocentric objective reasons for our moral belief that we ought not to kill a child whom we do not want? We want to know whether our very strong convictions here could be established as sound, and conflicting convictions extant in other cultures shown to be wrong.

There is a further difficulty for any view that seeks to base morality on some common human nature. Even if there are universal human needs, why should they be satisfied? We all have needs for companionship and sexual satisfaction. But universal as such needs are, they can be so modified and controlled as to become almost non-existent.¹¹ Let us see how this occurs. I can ask myself whether I should shun companionship and become self-absorbed, or whether I should become more outgoing and gregarious. A certain amount of contact with others is almost inevitable, but beyond the bare minimum should I seek a life full of friends and the resources of society or should I live in relative isolation? Would it be better for a reflective young man to try to become another Thomas Merton and seek the "voices of silence" and renounce the joys of the flesh, or should he have wife, family and the art of conversation? Discoveries about universal human needs are not sufficient to resolve questions like these. The fact that people universally have sexual urges does not tell us whether we should make our present sexual patterns more or less permissive. After we find out what the needs of man are, we still have to find out which needs should be allowed to flourish and in what way, and which needs should be inhibited. In seeking what Weston La Barre has aptly called "a more adequate culture," in attempting to decide whether one way of life is better than another, anthropological discoveries *by themselves* can give us no new directions.¹² That there are certain universal needs does not entail the making of any moral judgment at all.

¹¹ H. D. Monro, "Anthropology and Ethics," *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy* (December, 1955).

¹² Weston La Barre, "Wanted: A More Adequate Culture," in *Sociology: A Book of Readings*, Samuel Koenig, ed. (New York: 1953) pp. 52-62.

If we try to build our moral house from cross-culturally validated, distinctively human capacities, we get into similar difficulties. It may be the case that men try to develop certain powers or abilities that are distinctively human. Yet in making moral appraisals we must often choose among them since they are sometimes in conflict. Furthermore, why should we develop only the non-conflicting capacities? Why not make a choice among certain conflicting capacities and then develop the capacity we decided to develop? To say the conflicting ones are "perverse" or "abnormal" in a tone that suggests they should not be sought assumes a moral criterion *not* based on human capacities. That certain capacities or dispositions are common to all men everywhere is not a sufficient ground for developing them or claiming they *ought* to flourish. To say that people should develop these capacities is to say that "people ought to do what other people can do, given the environmental conditions of their cultures." But whether such conformism is desirable is itself a debatable *moral* belief. That we should conform to this belief is not something we could discover in a biological treatise or in a cross-cultural survey of the mores of diverse cultures.

Cross-cultural agreement in moral belief or attitude does not establish ethical objectivism. Similarly cross-cultural difference does not establish ethical relativism. Ethical relativism is the contention that the moral beliefs of different cultures are frequently incompatible and that there are and can be no sound grounds for accepting the moral beliefs of one or more of the groups as correct and rejecting conflicting moral beliefs as mistaken. But universal agreement in moral belief does not establish the soundness of the belief, for the soundness of a moral belief does not depend simply on the number of people who believe it but on whether adequate justifying reasons can be given for holding it. If reasonable people assent to it, we have some reason for assenting to it, but whether a person is either reasonable or a rational moral agent is not dependent on whether or not his beliefs, attitudes and actions are in accordance with majority rule or some *consensus gentium*. Even if a universal concurrence in moral be-

lief and attitude were discovered, the moral relativist could still claim that this agreement does not rest on rational grounds but merely on a contingent and fortuitous similarity or uniformity in what is approved. The moral relativist could reasonably argue that though the agreement is extensive it is quite arbitrary for it has no rational basis. Since it is reinforced by early and persistent social stimulation, it is very persuasive and often very compelling psychologically; just as many of the literati and quasi-literati started to admire Kipling simply because T. S. Eliot did, so people come to approve what they approve because from a very early age they have been told it is *to be* approved. This generally makes for agreement rather than disagreement. But if some others come to have different and conflicting moral beliefs the fact that most do not have these moral beliefs and attitudes does not constitute a sound basis for asserting that the minority is wrong. That there are what Linton calls "universal values" only proves (if it proves anything) that people tend to agree about some very general moral judgments. It says nothing about who (if anyone) is right or which moral views (if any) are sound.

In sum, I wish to say that anthropological facts about the divergence, convergence or complete coincidence of the moral beliefs of different cultures do not establish or refute ethical relativism or conventionalism. People and whole cultures could be in radical disagreement about what they ought to do, and yet ethical relativism would not be established. But if it were shown that a considerable number of contradictory moral claims were equally *sound* and that whole moral codes were in logical conflict but were still equally *well justified*, then conventionalism or ethical relativism would be established. The rather common assumption that if men share moral beliefs then conventionalism and ethical relativism is false is itself false.

IV

Someone might readily agree that the facts of ethical relativity taken by themselves cannot sanction the conclusion that moral principles can never be sound or the moral conclusion that what

a group *says* is right is right. That cultures differ radically in their moral beliefs does not of itself establish that "is right" is simply a convenient way of saying "is right in my group," and that all cultures agree that certain things are right does not establish that they are right. Someone might concur in all this and still contend that there is something frightfully unrealistic about stressing this as a bare logical truth, for it follows from what I have been saying that one lone moral radical might have sound reasons for his moral claims while the rest of us are deluded. As it might be the case that everyone believed the earth to be flat when in reality it was round, so it might be the case that everyone believed killing unwanted infants was wrong when in reality it was right or morally indifferent. But while the factual contention is easy enough to understand, the moral claim is, to say the least, paradoxical. In certain important respects it is like saying "Acorns taste good" even when many people, including the utterer, spit them out and make a face whenever they taste them. In such circumstances we are puzzled about what could be *meant* by saying "Acorns taste good." In saying this, what could a person mean, other than something like, "If you would only repeatedly try them, especially when you want something bitter, you will in time come to like them and no longer spit them out but savor them"? But if people, including the man who said this, continued even after such a trial to spit them out we would indeed be very puzzled as to what could be *meant* by "They taste good."

Similarly, if we say "Life ought to be protected," and repeatedly and for no reason sanction killing and have no attitudes opposed to any form of killing, it would no longer be clear what could be meant by saying "Life ought to be protected." Indeed "Life ought to be protected" is *not* equivalent to "I want life protected" or "People generally wish that life be protected," for it is reasonably clear how we could establish the truth of the last two statements, but what would establish the truth of the first statement is not clear. But it is clear that "Life ought to be protected"

would not be asserted if no one had an attitude favoring the protection of life.

Whatever we do mean by "a sound moral standard," a standard or claim that ignores what people actually choose, what they do, and how they feel would hardly be a standard at all, much less a sound moral standard. And in finding out what people do and what attitudes they have we obviously must turn to the information that anthropologists and psychologists give us. Here Linton's remarks about the importance of "a comparative study of cultures" is quite in place. Without such information, we are very likely to have an ethnocentric standard. If an anthropologist supplied us with detailed, well-documented information to the effect that all people of normal intelligence sought or desired certain things when fully acquainted with both the causes of their desires and with the probable consequences of having their desires satisfied, it would be conceptually odd to say that what they strove for or desired in those circumstances was not good or desirable. Such information—if we had it—would indeed be relevant to our understanding of morality and to the establishment of an objective moral code even though it would not by itself establish such a code.

Yet we must not forget that there is indeed a place for the moral reformer and even for the moral radical and iconoclast—the disciplined man who in Nietzsche's terms would "create values." We cannot find out what is good by simply finding out what people—no matter how wide our sample—call "good." In the end each of us must make up his own mind about what is good; we must make our own moral choices on the basis of a disinterested review of the facts. ("Must" has a logical force in both of its occurrences in the preceding sentence.) Iconoclasts such as Jesus or Nietzsche were not saying something unintelligible when they advocated radically new moral standards. But if intelligent, honest and rational men do not commend and seek what Jesus or Nietzsche sought, even when these men are fully aware of the facts that Jesus and Nietzsche were aware of, and know no new

facts that would serve to alter the situation, then it would be paradoxical to say that Jesus and Nietzsche were right, and the others were wrong. To this extent, agreement is important in determining the soundness of moral claims, though this is not to say—what is indeed ludicrous—that we could determine what is right and wrong or good and evil by vote. What others do seek and choose is indeed a relevant consideration for a man faced with a moral choice. But it is also relevant that he know the facts of the case, be rational, impartial and prepared to give reasons for his choices. In neglecting these last considerations, the anthropologists, trying to establish an objective morality on our “common human nature,” have been wide of their mark. But it remains true that they have stressed an important point concerning morality when they point out that in deciding what is normally good or worthy of pursuit it is crucial to know not only what good red-blooded Americans say and believe is the right thing to do, but what all men say and believe is right and worthy of attainment.

This can be overstressed, for it is perfectly true that in many situations an individual need not consider what other peoples do. When a man is deciding whether or not to be unfaithful to his wife, he need not consider what the Arapesh or even the Samoans do. But in thinking about what attitudes people generally should take toward extra-marital relations, what the Arapesh and Samoans think and do is relevant. When we reflect in this way, we are in effect thinking about long-range effects; our thinking is to a degree utopian and visionary. If we ask ourselves what sort of lives we would take to be desirable for our children, we should be able to recognize that such long-range considerations are plainly relevant. When we ask about what is worthy of pursuit and what is the best possible life for the human animal, it would indeed be very, very good to know in depth what men everywhere and at all times have sought and have taken as ideal.

In giving us information about peoples' moral attitudes, anthropologists have brought up some facts that are of obvious im-

portance to any adequate understanding of what would constitute a rational morality. Morality is not the province of social science or psychology; the facts obtainable by these disciplines cannot resolve the issue over whether what is *believed* to be right in my culture really is right in my culture or whether all talk about what is right *sans phrase* is nonsense; but it does not follow from this that facts about man and his nature are irrelevant to sound moral appraisals. If these facts are not relevant then no facts would be. Let us not forget that while moral statements indeed are not factual statements, factual statements are crucially relevant to the appraisal of moral statements.

V

The problem of ethical relativism is an ancient and very tangled one—a problem that cuts to the very heart of our thinking about morality. I have not thought to unravel the whole snarl here, but only to establish two points which are crucial to any adequate treatment of the problem. The two points are these: (1) cultural agreement or difference over what is said to be good and evil will not establish either ethical relativism or ethical objectivism; (2) nonetheless, any extensive cross-cultural agreement over what is humanly desirable cannot reasonably be ignored in the statement of a rational morality. These two points seem to me to be platitudinous, but the literature on the subject amply attests to the fact that these “platitudinous points” have been denied again and again. Yet whether my points are platitudinous or not, my argument still prompts certain questions that need at least a brief consideration.

Throughout my essay there seems to run an unargued claim that there must be a rational or logical basis for morality. I speak of “a rational morality” but do not specify what I mean; I ask if the procedures used by our tribe and other tribes will stand up to rational examination; I argue that in making moral appraisals one must be rational; I examine the ethical relativist’s claim that there are and can be no *sound grounds* for claiming

the moral beliefs of one culture to be correct and those of another to be mistaken. But surely my analysis is clouded by these unspecified references to a "rational" or "sound" basis for morality. Must there be a rational basis for morality?

This question cannot have a straightforward answer. There is an important sense in which anything that would count as morality must be rational for, by implicit definition, a "moral claim" is a claim that must be supportable by reasons. (The force of the "must" here is logical.) If someone says to another person "Please do this for me," or "I like this," they need not give reasons for their request or avowal, but if someone claims "You should do this for me," or "This is good," it is always appropriate, from a logical point of view at least, to ask why. For "Please do this for me" I can answer "For no reason, I just wish you would." I cannot do this for "You should do this for me" since I cannot appropriately reply "For no reason, I just wish you would." The logic of "should" requires the relevance of "But why should I?" in the way "having mass" requires "having weight."¹³ Moral discourse is *in this way* rational discourse.

It must also in another way be rational discourse. By definition a *justified* moral judgment must be reasonable in that it must—logically must—be a judgment that will stand up to an impartial review of the facts, and it must consider the interests of everyone in an impartial way. This is a part of the very logic of moral discourse.¹⁴

In another way it is an open question whether moral claims must be supportable by reason. We indeed must support a moral judgment by giving reasons, but have we shown that what will count as "good reasons" or even as "relevant reasons" is determined or even determinable by cross-culturally agreed-on criteria? Is there something in the very logic of moral discourse that dictates that there must be an agreement about this? Certainly this is an open question. Perhaps people actually differ in their

¹³ See W. D. Falk, "Goading and Guiding," *Mind*, vol. ILXII (1953), pp. 145-171.

¹⁴ See J. N. Findlay, *Language, Mind and Value* (London: 1963), chs. IV and IX.

criteria as to what will count as "good reasons" in ethics; it may even be that they can on reflection find no shared grounds for deciding what are to count as "good reasons" in ethics. Perhaps the force of the "must" in "There must be agreed-on criteria," is itself *moral* rather than logical, that is to say, it may very well be more like "We must make this marriage work" than like "Red things must be colored." It may in effect give voice, in a disguised but quite understandable way, to an urgent *plea* for a universal morality. But if this is so, we must not forget that this is a *moral plea* and not something that can be determined by a careful philosophical or logical analysis of the concept of morality.

It is also true that a man may perfectly well know what is right and still not do what is right either through weakness of will or, like the fictional character Hud, through a deliberate rejection of the very canons of morality. The former phenomenon is frequent enough; the latter is far more puzzling, for as a matter of *psychological fact* it may remain the case that no one flaunts the very dictates of morality in a thorough and systematic way. Yet it is logically possible that someone might, and it is very questionable whether there is any morally neutral sense of "reason" in which we can find some reason or set of reasons of an absolutely conclusive sort which will prove to a man that he must be moral. There is no Reason somehow embedded in the nature of things that will show him that he *must* so reason.¹⁵

We need to twist the tiger's tail a little more. People affected by certain "theories" about "the sociology of knowledge" will argue that men not only reason from an established set of facts, but what *are* the facts depends upon the frame of reference, the mental set, the body of presuppositions that men bring to their observations of the facts. This supposedly undercuts my claim that to talk of what is the case (the facts) is one thing and to talk

¹⁵ I have argued that point at length in my "Why Should I Be Moral?," *Methodos*, vol. XV, no. 59-60 (1963), pp. 275-306, "On Looking Back At the Emotive Theory," *Methodos*, vol. XIV, no. 53 (1962) pp. 1-20 and "On Being Moral?" *Philosophical Studies*, vol. XVI, no. 1-2 (January-February, 1965), pp. 1-4.

of what ought to be the case (values) is another. It also presumably undercuts my claims that anthropological facts about the moral beliefs and reasoning of other cultures are relevant and important facts to be utilized in moral appraisal and criticism.

But such a criticism does not undermine my argument. In fact if it is taken *literally*, it is obviously and plainly false that what the facts are depends on our frame of reference or "value orientation." That I am writing this paragraph with a green pencil is a plain fact. That it is a fact does not depend on my or anyone else's attitudes, values or beliefs. That people in another culture do not draw a distinction between green and black or that, being preliterate, they have no conception of a pencil, does not make it any less a fact that I am writing this paragraph with a green pencil. As we can be taught to make other color discriminations than those we do in fact habitually make, so people in other cultures can be and are taught to discriminate between what we call a black and a green object and they can also be taught, though here the teaching is vastly more complicated, what a pencil is even though their culture does not have an artifact that is even remotely like a pencil. There is no case at all for saying that the fact that I am writing this paragraph with a green pencil depends on any "value orientation" or set of moral beliefs that I or anyone else might hold. As this case and millions like it show, facts, for the most part, are not the creatures of our culture pattern, "value orientation," our "existential interpretation" or anything of that order. By the use of true statements we state facts, but they are not for a whole range of cases at any rate the creatures of our cultural or historical imagination.

Yet, as the old saying goes, where there is smoke there is fire. If the above claim were reduced to the claim that our value judgments shape in a radical way our *selection* of what facts are *relevant* and *important* facts then we would have an important and challenging claim. Such stances concerning what is worthwhile and what is good, may even determine which facts are selected for notice and which are not. If a Marxist were to write about the

Peloponnesian War he would surely select for attention more facts about the economic life of the different Greek poli than did Thucydides. If a man were a Freudian the fact that Luther had hemorrhoids would be a fact to be noticed, but for most non-Freudians it is without historical significance. But in all sobriety we must realize that to say this is not to imply that the facts are determined by our "value-orientation;" but it does mean that in selecting the facts to be recorded in an anthropological or sociological study, judgments of relevance and importance are crucial. They in large measure determine what facts are to be examined.

We need rather fully and carefully to consider a hypothetical case to see how this is so. Suppose a Puerto Rican is considering what position he should take concerning the political status of his country. Should he be for an expanded commonwealth status, for statehood or for an independent Puerto Rico? There are a host of facts that he could consider. With independence there will initially be the maximum freedom of self-determination, but with independence Puerto Rico may well come to have what is in effect a dictatorship. Furthermore, countries like Puerto Rico when independent tend to get very corrupt governments. The presence of officials from the States keeps health and educational standards at a higher level than they otherwise might be, and the investment of American capital will be greater if Puerto Rico does not become a sovereign state. Yet an independent Puerto Rico would free the United States from charges of colonialism. With independence the island could impose its own tariffs and develop its own foreign policy.

Factual considerations or putative factual considerations of this sort would be selected by any rational human being in making such a deliberation; but many facts are completely irrelevant to such a deliberation. Rational human beings do not select as even relevant to the discussion the fact that low tide was at noon, that Mrs. Fernandez bought a new blue hat or that Puerto Ricans like music. That such facts are irrelevant and that those previously mentioned are relevant is, in part, determined by the attitudes or

"value-orientation" of the people involved; but it is not as simple as that. There are general conditions which are brought to bear in judgments of relevancy and importance. Not all attitudes are relevant. The factual considerations which are relevant are for the most part those that point to the harmful or beneficial consequences for everyone involved in adopting one status rather than another; furthermore precisely which consequences are harmful or beneficial is not simply a function of the attitudes we happen to have, for consequences that are harmful are, among other things, consequences that cause pain, suffering or anguish to the people involved, and consequences which are beneficial are consequences that give rise to fairly permanent states of enjoyment, ease and "peace of mind" to the people involved.¹⁶ That Puerto Rico could impose its own tariffs, would presumably work to the advantage of at least some people. Thus such a factual consideration is relevant in making a decision about what political status Puerto Rico ought to have. In such a situation a reason is a relevant reason for a moral decision, if what the reason asserts to be the case is the case and if, when that which the reason asserts to be the case is the case, something good or bad results or is likely to result, which would not otherwise come about or be likely to come about. But we could make this claim only if we had some prior conception of good and bad. Decisions about relevance and irrelevance involve the imposition of normative standards. Judgments about the weight or merit of admittedly relevant reasons are still more difficult; and such judgments surely involve the imposition of normative standards. In the case mentioned, we have a decision as to which reasons are relevant reasons, but we must also assess the comparative *merit* of the different relevant reasons, in deciding what we ought to do. How are we to decide which of the relevant reasons are the most important? Here one's values and attitudes, sooner or later, are crucial in any

¹⁶ See my "Appraising Doing the Thing Done," *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. LVII (November 24, 1960) and my "Moral Truth," *American Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

selection or weighting. But how, in turn, do we rationally justify adopting those values?

This is indeed a difficult problem—a problem that takes us to the very heart of thinking about morality. I can not here attack this problem.¹⁷ But I will say this: granting that one's attitudes or one's "value orientation" is of fundamental importance in determining a selection of the facts, this still does not, by itself, establish either ethical relativism or cultural relativism. There may well be cross-cultural agreement about certain very fundamental values used in making such a selection. In the first part of my essay I have shown that agreement about what is taken to be desirable or valuable does not of itself establish that what is taken to be desirable is in fact desirable. Such cultural agreement is not *by itself* enough to establish an objective morality. But if there were such agreement, and furthermore, if this agreement were to persist in cases where people did not have mistaken or superstitious *factual* beliefs and where they carefully thought through the consequences of holding these values and took what these values enjoined to heart, we, in such a situation, would have a very strong case for saying that here we have in part at least a basis for a rational and objective morality.

My reference to "rational morality" and my earlier reference to "a rational human being" might be thought to be question begging. The term "rational," it might be argued, does have approbative force, but it makes no objective reference. The last part of this statement is false. If a man is a rational man, he must be willing to listen to evidence and he must act in accordance with the evidence. Furthermore, where such considerations are relevant, a rational human being must act according to principle and he must grant that if X is a good reason for B's doing Y in Z, it is also a good reason for anyone else relevantly like B and similarly situated.

¹⁷ I have tried to do this in the articles mentioned in notes 15 and 16 and in my "Justification and Moral Reasoning," *Methodos*, vol. IX no. 33-4, (1957), pp. 77-113 and my "The Good Reasons Approach Revisited," *Archiv für Rechts und Sozialphilosophie*, vol. 1964 L/4, pp. 445-484.

The force of all the above occurrences of "must" is logical. My above remarks are explicative of what is *meant* by "being a rational human being." The recognition of this involves no value judgment on anyone's part. It would be an abuse of the English language to assert that people can fail to act in this manner and still act rationally. And given the conventions of English, people who habitually fail to act in this manner cannot correctly be said to be rational human beings. Moreover, this does not simply reflect the conventions of English, but holds for the concept expressed by the English term "rational human being." Such a convention would hold for any language in which this concept was expressed. The above claim could be stated in German, for example, though we would speak in German of the conventions governing the German term "vernünftiger Mensch."¹⁸

Furthermore, that our "value orientation" radically influences or even determines the selection of facts to be used in moral appraisal, does not make us impervious to the facts selected by others with different "value orientations" for appraising the same actions we are appraising. Certain "unwelcome facts" may be brought to our attention which will lead us, if we are rational human beings, to alter our appraisal of an action.

In short, even if there are no cross-culturally agreed-on criteria of relevancy or criteria for deciding which of the relevant facts are the most *important* facts in making moral assessments, it still does not follow that ethical relativism is true, for some people might be mistaken in their judgments of relevancy and importance. We would need some further theoretical argument to show that no one could be mistaken in this respect and that all such criteria are equally valid. But that no one can be mistaken

¹⁸ More needs to be said about this than I can say here. I have said some of it in my "Rational Explanations in History," in *Philosophy and History*, Sidney Hook, ed. (New York University Press: 1963), pp. 311-313, "Appealing to Reason," *Inquiry*, vol. V (1962) and "Wanton Reason," *Philosophical Studies* (Maynooth, Ireland), vol. XII (1963).

in this way or that all such criteria are of equal worth can not be determined from the anthropological facts *alone*.

The main thrust of my essay has been to show that, as important as the facts concerning cultural agreement and disagreement are, they will establish neither ethical relativism nor ethical objectivism. It is important to note that if cultural disagreement about what is *said* to be good or bad cannot by itself establish that what is good or bad is relative to the culture, then, as a strict logical consequence, cultural agreement over what is *said* to be good or bad cannot establish that what is so said to be good or bad is indeed good or bad. If the fact of cultural disagreement cannot establish ethical relativity the fact of cross-cultural agreement cannot establish ethical objectivism. In neither case can we move directly from a factual consideration to a moral one.

In thinking intelligently about morality we need to know about the facts of cultural relativity, we need to develop a sensitivity to the cultural determinants of what it is to be reasonable or what it is to "follow Reason," and we need to see how deeply our very forms of life affect our criteria of relevance and our weighing of the various facts appealed to in moral reasoning; but no matter what discoveries we make here, we have not thereby established ethical relativism or, its shadow, ethical objectivism .