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CHAPTER 2

The Challenge of Cultural Relativism

Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.

RUTH BENEDICT, *PATTERNS OF CULTURE* (1934)

2.1. Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes

Darius, a king of ancient Persia, was intrigued by the variety of cultures he met in his travels. He had found, for example, that the Callatians, who lived in India, ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that—the Greeks practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the natural and fitting way to dispose of the dead. Darius thought that a sophisticated outlook should appreciate the differences between cultures. One day, to teach this lesson, he summoned some Greeks who happened to be at his court and asked what it would take for them to eat the bodies of their dead fathers. They were shocked, as Darius knew they would be, and replied that no amount of money could persuade them to do such a thing. Then Darius called in some Callatians and, while the Greeks listened, asked them what it would take for them to burn their dead fathers' bodies. The Callatians were horrified and told Darius not to speak of such things.

This story, recounted by Herodotus in his *History,* illustrates a recurring theme in the literature of social science: Different cultures have different moral codes. What is thought right within one group may horrify the members of another group, and vice versa. Should we eat the bodies of the dead

or burn them? If you were a Greek, one answer would seem obviously correct; but if you were a Callatian, the other answer would seem equally certain.

There are many examples of this. Consider the Eskimos of the early and mid-20th century. The Eskimos are the native people of Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, and northeastern Siberia, in Asiatic Russia. Today, none of these groups call themselves "Eskimos," but the term has historically referred to that scattered Arctic population. Prior to the 20th century, the outside world knew little about them. Then explorers began to bring back strange tales.

The Eskimos lived in small settlements, separated by great distances, and their customs turned out to be very different from ours. The men often had more than one wife, and they would share their wives with guests, lending them out for the night as a sign of hospitality. Moreover, within a community, a dominant male might demand—and get—regular sexual access to other men's wives. The women, however, were free to break these arrangements simply by leaving their husbands and taking up with new partners—free, that is, so long as their former husbands chose not to make too much trouble. All in all, the Eskimo custom of marriage was a volatile practice that bore little resemblance to our custom.

But it was not only their marriages and sexual practices that were different. The Eskimos also seemed to care less about human life. Infanticide, for example, was common. Knud Rasmussen, an early explorer, reported meeting one woman who had borne 20 children but had killed 10 of them at birth. Female babies, he found, were especially likely to be killed, and this was permitted at the parents' discretion, with no social stigma attached. Moreover, when elderly family members became too feeble, they were left out in the snow to die. In Eskimo society, there seemed to be remarkably little respect for life.

Most of us would find these Eskimo customs completely unacceptable. Our own way of living seems so natural and right to us that we can hardly conceive of people who live so differently. When we hear of such people, we might want to say that they're "backward" or "primitive." But to anthropologists, the Eskimos did not seem unusual. Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have known that conceptions of right and

wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ethical ideas will be shared by all cultures, we are merely being naïve.

2.2. Cultural Relativism

To many people, this observation—"Different cultures have different moral codes"—seems like the key to understanding morality. There are no universal moral truths, they say; the customs of different societies are all that exist. To call a custom "correct" or "incorrect" would imply that we can judge that custom by some independent standard of right and wrong. But no such standard exists; every standard is culture-bound. The sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) put it like this:

> The "right" way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. . . . The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.

This line of thought, more than any other, has persuaded people to be skeptical about ethics. Cultural Relativism says, in effect, that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Cultural Relativism challenges our belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth.

The following claims have all been made by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

These five propositions may seem to go together, but they are *independent* of one another, meaning that some of them may be true even while others are false. Indeed, two of the propositions appear to be inconsistent with each other. The second says that right and wrong are determined by the norms of a society; the fifth says that one should always be tolerant of other cultures. But what if the norms of one's society favor intolerance? For example, when the Nazi army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, thus beginning World War II, this was an intolerant action of the first order. But what if it conformed to Nazi ideals? A cultural relativist, it seems, cannot criticize the Nazis for being intolerant, if all they're doing is following their own moral code.

Given that cultural relativists take pride in their tolerance, it would be ironic if their theory actually supported the intolerance of warlike societies. However, their theory need not do that. Properly understood, Cultural Relativism holds that the norms of a culture reign supreme *within the bounds of the culture itself.* Thus, once the German soldiers entered Poland, they became bound by the norms of Polish society—norms that obviously excluded the mass slaughter of innocent Poles. "When in Rome," the old saying goes, "do as the Romans do." Cultural relativists agree.

2.3. The Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural Relativists often employ a certain *form of argument.* They begin with facts about cultures and end up drawing a conclusion about morality. Thus, they invite us to accept this reasoning:

(1) The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.

(2) Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Or:

(1) The Eskimos saw nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.

(2) Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Clearly, these arguments are variations of one fundamental idea. They are both examples of a more general argument, which says:

(1) Different cultures have different moral codes.

(2) Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

We may call this the Cultural Differences Argument. To many people, it is persuasive. But is it a good argument—is it *sound?*

It is not. For an argument to be sound, its premises must all be true, and the conclusion must follow logically from them. Here, the problem is that the conclusion does not *follow from* the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion might still be false. The premise concerns what people *believe*—in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe something else. The conclusion, however, concerns what *really is the case.* This sort of conclusion does not follow logically from that sort of premise. In philosophical terminology, this means that the argument is *invalid.*

Consider again the example of the Greeks and Callatians. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead; the Callatians believed it was right. Does it follow, *from the mere fact that they disagreed,* that there is no objective truth in the matter? No, it does not follow; it could be that the practice was objectively right (or wrong) and that one of them was simply mistaken.

To make the point clearer, consider a different matter. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat. In other societies, such as our own, people believe that the earth is a sphere. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no "objective truth" in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion, because we realize that the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round, everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth, everyone must know it. The Cultural Differences Argument

tries to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree. But this is impossible.

This point should not be misunderstood. We are not saying that the conclusion of the argument is false; for all we have said, Cultural Relativism could still be true. The point is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. This means that the Cultural Differences Argument is invalid. Thus, the argument fails.

2.4. What Follows from Cultural Relativism

Even if the Cultural Differences Argument is unsound, Cultural Relativism might still be true. What would follow if it were true?

In the passage quoted earlier, William Graham Sumner states the essence of Cultural Relativism. He says that the only measure of right and wrong is the standards of one's society: "The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right." Suppose we took this seriously. What would be some of the consequences?

1. *We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own.* This, of course, is one of the main points stressed by Cultural Relativism. We should never condemn a society merely because it is "different." This attitude seems enlightened, so long as we concentrate on examples like the funerary practices of the Greeks and Callatians.

However, we would also be barred from criticizing other, less benign practices. For example, the Chinese government has a long history of repressing political dissent within its own borders. At any given time, thousands of political prisoners in China are doing hard labor, and in the Tiananmen Square episode of 1989, Chinese troops slaughtered hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful protesters. Cultural Relativism would preclude us from saying that the Chinese government's policies of oppression are wrong. We could not even say that a society that respects free speech is *better* than Chinese society, for that would also imply a universal standard of comparison. The failure to condemn *these* practices does not seem enlightened; on the contrary, political oppression seems wrong wherever it occurs. Nevertheless, if we accept Cultural Relativism, we have to regard such practices as immune from criticism.

2. *We could no longer criticize the code of our own society.* Cultural Relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and what is wrong: All we need to do is ask whether the action is in line with the code of the society in question. Suppose a resident of India wonders whether her country's caste system—a system of rigid social hierarchy—is morally correct. All she has to do is ask whether this system conforms to her society's moral code. If it does, there is nothing to worry about, at least from a moral point of view.

This implication of Cultural Relativism is disturbing because few of us think that our society's code is perfect—we can think of ways in which it might be improved. Moreover, we can think of ways in which we might learn from other cultures. Yet Cultural Relativism stops us from criticizing our own society's code, and it bars us from seeing ways in which other cultures might be better. After all, if right and wrong are relative to culture, this must be true for our own culture, just as it is for all other cultures.

3. *The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.* We think that at least some social changes are for the better. Throughout most of Western history, the place of women in society was narrowly defined. Women could not own property; they could not vote or hold political office; and they were under the almost absolute control of their husbands or fathers. Recently, much of this has changed, and most people think of it as progress.

But if Cultural Relativism is correct, can we legitimately view this as progress? Progress means replacing the old ways with new and improved ways. But by what standard do we judge the new ways as better? If the old ways conformed to the standards of *their* time, then Cultural Relativism would not judge them by *our* standards. Sexist 19th-century society was a different society from the one we now inhabit. To say that we have made progress implies that present-day society is better—just the sort of transcultural judgment that Cultural Relativism forbids.

Our ideas about social *reform* will also have to be reconsidered. Reformers such as Martin Luther King Jr. have sought to change their societies for the better. But according to Cultural Relativism, there is only one way to improve a society: to make it better match its own ideals. After all, the society's ideals are the standard by which reform is assessed. No one, however, may challenge the ideals themselves, for they are by definition correct. According to Cultural Relativism, then, the idea of social reform makes sense only in this limited way.

These three consequences of Cultural Relativism have led many people to reject it. Slavery, we want to say, is wrong wherever it occurs, and one's own society can make fundamental moral progress. Because Cultural Relativism implies that these judgments make no sense, it cannot be right.

2.5. Why There Is Less Disagreement Than It Seems

Cultural Relativism starts by observing that cultures differ dramatically in their views of right and wrong. But how much do they really differ? It is true that there are differences, but it is easy to exaggerate them. Often, what seemed at first to be a big difference turns out to be no difference at all.

Consider a culture in which people believe it is wrong to eat cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a society would appear to have values very different from our own. But does it? We have not yet asked *why* these people won't eat cows. Suppose they believe that after death the souls of humans inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows, so that a cow may be someone's grandmother. Shall we say that their values differ from ours? No; the difference lies elsewhere. The difference is in our belief systems, not in our value systems. We agree that we shouldn't eat Grandma; we disagree about whether the cow could be Grandma.

The point is that many factors work together to produce the customs of a society. Not only are the society's values important, but so are its religious beliefs, its factual beliefs, and its physical environment. Thus, we cannot conclude that two societies differ in value just because they differ in custom. After all, customs may vary for a number of different reasons. Thus, there may be less moral disagreement than there appears to be.

Consider again the Eskimos, who killed perfectly healthy infants, especially girls. We do not approve of such things; in our society, a parent who kills a baby will be locked up. Thus, there appears to be a great difference in the values of our two cultures. But suppose we ask why the Eskimos did this. The

explanation is not that they lacked respect for human life or did not love their children. An Eskimo family would always protect its babies if conditions permitted. But the Eskimos lived in a harsh environment, where food was scarce. To quote an old Eskimo saying: "Life is hard, and the margin of safety small." A family may want to nourish its babies but be unable to do so.

As in many traditional societies, Eskimo mothers would nurse their infants over a much longer period than mothers in our culture—for four years, and perhaps even longer. So, even in the best of times, one mother could sustain very few children. Moreover, the Eskimos were nomadic; unable to farm in the harsh northern climate, they had to keep moving to find food. Infants had to be carried, and a mother could carry only one baby in her parka as she traveled and went about her outdoor work. Finally, the Eskimos lacked birth control, so unwanted pregnancies were common.

Infant girls were more readily killed for two reasons. First, in Eskimo society, the males were the primary food providers—they were the hunters—and food was scarce. Males were thus more valuable to the community. Second, the hunters suffered a high casualty rate, so the men who died prematurely far outnumbered the women who died young. If male and female infants had survived in equal numbers, then the female adult population would have greatly outnumbered the male adult population. Examining the available statistics, one writer concluded that "were it not for female infanticide . . . there would be approximately one-and-a-half times as many females in the average Eskimo local group as there are food-producing males."

Thus, Eskimo infanticide was not due to a fundamental disregard for children. Instead, it arose from the recognition that drastic measures were needed to ensure the group's survival. Even then, however, killing the baby would not be the first option considered. Adoption was common; childless couples were especially happy to take a fertile couple's "surplus." Killing was the last resort. I emphasize this in order to show that the raw data of anthropology can be misleading; it can make the differences in values between cultures seem greater than they are. The Eskimos' values were not all that different from our own. It is only that life forced choices upon them that we do not have to make.

2.6. Some Values Are Shared by All Cultures

It should not surprise us that the Eskimos were protective of their children. How could they not be? Babies are helpless and cannot survive without extensive care. If a group did not protect its young, the young would not survive, and the older members of the group would not be replaced. Eventually the group would die out. This means that any culture that continues to exist must care for its young. Neglected infants must be the exception, not the rule.

Similar reasoning shows that other values must be more or less universal across human societies. Imagine what it would be like for a society to place no value on truth telling. When one person spoke to another, there would be no presumption that she was telling the truth, for she could just as easily be lying. Within that society, there would be no reason to pay attention to what anyone says. If I want to know what time it is, why should I bother asking anyone, if lying is commonplace? Communication would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, in such a society. And because societies cannot exist without communication among their members, society would become impossible. It follows that every society must value truthfulness. There may, of course, be situations in which lying is thought to be okay, but the society will still value honesty in most situations.

Consider another example. Could a society exist in which there was no prohibition against murder? What would this be like? Suppose people were free to kill one another at will, and no one disapproved. In such a "society," no one could feel safe. Everyone would have to be constantly on guard, and everyone would try to avoid other people—those potential murderers—as much as possible. This would result in individuals trying to become self-sufficient. Society on any large scale would thus collapse. Of course, people might band together in smaller groups where they could feel safe. But notice what this means: They would be forming smaller societies that did acknowledge a rule against murder. The prohibition against murder, then, is a necessary feature of society.

There is a general point here, namely, that *there are some moral rules that all societies must embrace, because those rules are necessary for society to exist.* The rules against lying and murder are two examples. And, in fact, we do find these rules in force in all

cultures. Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but this disagreement exists against a broad background of agreement. Therefore, we shouldn't overestimate the extent to which cultures differ. Not every moral rule can vary from society to society.

2.7. Judging a Cultural Practice to Be Undesirable

In 1996, a 17-year-old named Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport in New Jersey and asked for asylum. She had fled her native country of Togo, in West Africa, to escape what people there call "excision." Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure. It is sometimes called "female circumcision," but it bears little resemblance to male circumcision. In the Western media, it is often referred to as "female genital mutilation."

According to the World Health Organization, excision is practiced in 28 African nations, and about 135 million females have been painfully excised. Sometimes, excision is part of an elaborate tribal ritual performed in small villages, and girls look forward to it as their entry into the adult world. Other times, the practice is carried out in cities on young women who desperately resist.

Fauziya Kassindja was the youngest of five daughters. Her father, who owned a successful trucking business, was opposed to excision, and he was able to defy the tradition because of his wealth. Thus, his first four daughters were married without being mutilated. But when Fauziya was 16, he suddenly died. Fauziya then came under the authority of her aunt, who arranged a marriage for her and prepared to have her excised. Fauziya was terrified, and her mother and oldest sister helped her escape.

In America, Fauziya was imprisoned for nearly 18 months while the authorities decided what to do with her. During this time, she was subjected to humiliating strip searches, denied medical treatment for her asthma, and generally treated like a criminal. Finally, she was granted asylum, but not before her case aroused a great controversy. The controversy was not about her treatment in America, but about how we should regard the customs of other cultures. A series of articles in *The New York Times* encouraged the idea that excision is barbaric and should be condemned. Other observers were reluctant to be so judgmental. Live and let live, they said; after all, our culture probably seems just as strange to outsiders.

Suppose we say that excision is wrong. Are we merely imposing the standards of our own culture? If Cultural Relativism is correct, that is all we can do, for there is no culture-independent moral standard to appeal to. But is that true?

Is There a Culture-Independent Standard of Right and Wrong? Excision is bad in many ways. It is painful and results in the permanent loss of sexual pleasure. Its short-term effects can include hemorrhage, tetanus, and septicemia. Sometimes it causes death. Its long-term effects can include chronic infection, scars that hinder walking, and continuing pain.

Why, then, has it become a widespread social practice? It is not easy to say. The practice has no obvious social benefits. Unlike Eskimo infanticide, it is not necessary for group survival. Nor is it a matter of religion. Excision is practiced by groups from various religions, including Islam and Christianity.

Nevertheless, a number of arguments are made in its defense. Women who are incapable of sexual pleasure are less likely to be promiscuous; thus, there will be fewer unwanted pregnancies in unmarried women. Moreover, wives for whom sex is only a duty are less likely to cheat on their husbands; and because they are not thinking about sex, they will be more attentive to the needs of their husbands and children. Husbands, for their part, are said to enjoy sex more with wives who have been excised. Unexcised women, the men feel, are unclean and immature.

It would be easy, and perhaps a bit arrogant, to ridicule these arguments. But notice an important feature of them: They try to justify excision by showing that excision is beneficial—men, women, and their families are said to be better off when women are excised. Thus, we might approach the issue by asking whether excision, on the whole, is helpful or harmful.

This points to a standard that might reasonably be used in thinking about any social practice: *Does the practice promote or hinder the welfare of the people affected by it?* But this looks like the sort of independent moral standard that Cultural Relativism forbids. It is a single standard that may be brought to bear

in judging the practices of any culture, at any time, including our own. Of course, people will not usually see this principle as being "brought in from the outside" to judge them, because all cultures value human happiness.

Why, Despite All This, Thoughtful People May Be Reluctant to Criticize Other Cultures. Many people who are horrified by excision are nevertheless reluctant to condemn it, for three reasons. First, there is an understandable nervousness about interfering in the social customs of other peoples. Europeans and their descendants in America have a shameful history of destroying native cultures in the name of Christianity and enlightenment. Because of this, some people refuse to criticize other cultures, especially cultures that resemble those that were wronged in the past. There is a difference, however, between (a) judging a cultural practice to be deficient and (b) thinking that we should announce that fact, apply diplomatic pressure, and send in the troops. The first is just a matter of trying to see the world clearly, from a moral point of view. The second is something else entirely. Sometimes it may be right to "do something about it," but often it will not be.

Second, people may feel, rightly enough, that we should be tolerant of other cultures. Tolerance is, no doubt, a virtue—a tolerant person can live in peace with those who see things differently. But nothing about tolerance requires us to say that all beliefs, all religions, and all social practices are equally admirable. On the contrary, if we did not think that some things were better than others, then there would be nothing for us to tolerate.

Finally, people may be reluctant to judge because they do not want to express contempt for the society being criticized. But again, this is misguided: To condemn a particular practice is not to say that the culture on the whole is contemptible. After all, the culture could still have many admirable features. Indeed, we should expect this to be true of most human societies—they are mixtures of good and bad practices. Excision happens to be one of the bad ones.

2.8. Back to the Five Claims

Let us now return to the five tenets of Cultural Relativism that were listed earlier. How have they fared in our discussion?

1. Different societies have different moral codes.

This is certainly true, although there are some values that all cultures share, such as the value of truth telling, the importance of caring for the young, and the prohibition against murder. Also, when customs differ, the underlying reason will often have more to do with the factual beliefs of the cultures than with their values.

2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action *is* right, at least within that society.

Here we must bear in mind the difference between what a society *believes* about morals and what is *really true.* The moral code of a society is closely tied to what people in that society believe to be right. However, that code, and those people, can be in error. Earlier, we considered the example of excision—a barbaric practice endorsed by many societies. Consider three more examples, all of which involve the mistreatment of women:

- In 2002, an unwed mother in Nigeria was sentenced to be stoned to death for having had sex out of wedlock. It is unclear whether Nigerian values, on the whole, approved of this verdict, given that it was later overturned by a higher court. However, it was overturned partly to appease the international community. When the Nigerians themselves heard the verdict being read out in the courtroom, the crowd shouted out their approval.
- In 2005, a woman from Australia was convicted of trying to smuggle nine pounds of marijuana into Indonesia. For that crime, she was sentenced to 20 years in prison—an excessive punishment. Under Indonesian law, she might even have received a death sentence.
- In 2007, a woman was gang-raped in Saudi Arabia. When she complained to the police, the police discovered in the course of their investigation that she had recently been alone with a man she was not related to. For that crime, she was sentenced to 90 lashes. When she appealed her conviction, this angered the judges, and they increased

her sentence to 200 lashes plus a six-month prison term. Eventually, the Saudi king pardoned her, although he said he supported the sentence she had received.

Cultural Relativism holds, in effect, that societies are morally infallible—in other words, that the morals of a culture can never be wrong. But when we see that societies can and do endorse grave injustices, we see that societies, like their members, can be in need of moral improvement.

3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society's code as better than another's. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.

It is difficult to think of ethical principles that hold for all people at all times. However, if we are to criticize the practice of slavery, or stoning, or genital mutilation, and if such practices are really and truly wrong, then we must appeal to principles that are not tethered to any particular society. Earlier I suggested one such principle: that it always matters whether a practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people affected by it.

4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.

It is true that the moral code of our society has no special status. After all, our society has no heavenly halo around its borders; our values do not have any special standing just because they happen to be ours. However, to say that the moral code of one's own society "is merely one among many" seems to imply that all codes are the same—that they are all more or less equally good. In fact, it is an open question whether a given code "is merely one among many." That code might be among the best; it might be among the worst.

5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

There is much truth in this, but the point is overstated. We *are* often arrogant when we criticize other cultures, and tolerance *is* generally a good thing. However, we shouldn't tolerate everything. Human societies have done terrible things, and it is a mark of progress when we can say that those things are in the past.

2.9. What We Can Learn from Cultural Relativism

So far, in discussing Cultural Relativism, I have dwelt mostly on its shortcomings. I have said that it rests on an unsound argument, that it has implausible consequences, and that it suggests greater moral disagreement than exists. This all adds up to a rejection of the theory. Nevertheless, you may have the feeling that this is a little unfair. The theory must have something going for it—why else has it been so influential? In fact, I think there is something right about Cultural Relativism, and there are two lessons we should learn from it.

First, Cultural Relativism warns us, quite rightly, about the danger of assuming that all of our practices are based on some absolute rational standard. They are not. Some of our customs are merely conventional—merely peculiar to our society—and it is easy to lose sight of that fact. In reminding us of this, the theory does us a service.

Funerary practices are one example. The Callatians, according to Herodotus, were "men who eat their fathers"—a shocking idea, to us at least. But eating the flesh of the dead could be understood as a sign of respect. It could be seen as a symbolic act which says, "We wish this person's spirit to dwell within us." Perhaps this is how the Callatians saw it. On this way of thinking, burying the dead could be seen as an act of rejection, and burning the corpse as positively scornful. Of course, the idea of eating human flesh may repel us, but so what? Our revulsion may be only a reflection of our society. Cultural Relativism begins with the insight that many of our practices are like this—they are only cultural products. Then it goes wrong by inferring that, because some practices are like this, all of them must be.

Or consider modesty of dress. In America, a woman is not supposed to display her breasts in public. For example, during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, Justin Timberlake ripped off part of Janet Jackson's costume, exposing one of her breasts to the audience. CBS quickly cut to an aerial view of the stadium, but it was too late. Half a million viewers complained, and the federal government fined CBS $550,000. In some cultures, however, it is considered unremarkable for a woman to

show her upper torso in public. Objectively speaking, such displays are neither right nor wrong.

Finally, consider an even more complex and controversial example: that of monogamous marriage. In our society, the ideal is to fall in love with, and to marry, one person, and then one is expected to remain faithful to that person forever. But aren't there other ways to pursue happiness? The advice columnist Dan Savage lists some possible drawbacks of monogamy: "boredom, despair, lack of variety, sexual death and being taken for granted." For such reasons, many people regard monogamy as an unrealistic goal—and as a goal whose pursuit would not make them happy.

What are the alternatives to this ideal? Some married couples reject monogamy by giving each other permission to have the occasional extramarital fling. Allowing one's spouse to have an affair is risky—the spouse might not come back—but greater openness in marriage might work better than our current system, in which many people feel sexually trapped and, on top of that, feel guilty for having such feelings. Other people deviate from monogamy more radically by practicing *polyamory*, which is having more than one long-term partner, with the consent of everyone involved. Polyamory includes group marriages such as "triads," involving three people, or "quads," involving four people. Some of these arrangements might work better than others, but this is not really a matter of morality. If a man's wife gives him permission to have an affair, then he isn't "cheating" on her—he isn't betraying her trust, because she has consented to the affair. Or, if four people want to live together and function as a single family, with love flowing from each to each, then there is nothing morally wrong with that. But most people in our society would disapprove of any deviation from the cultural ideal of monogamy.

The second lesson has to do with keeping an open mind. As we grow up, we develop strong feelings about things: We learn to see some types of behavior as acceptable, and other types as outrageous. Occasionally, we may find those feelings challenged. For example, we may have been taught that homosexuality is immoral, and we may feel uncomfortable around gay people. But then someone suggests that this may be prejudice; that there is nothing wrong with being gay; and that gay people are just people, like anyone else, who happen to

be attracted to members of the same sex. Because we feel so strongly about this, we may find it hard to take this line of reasoning seriously.

Cultural Relativism provides an antidote for this kind of dogmatism. When he tells the story of the Greeks and Callatians, Herodotus adds:

> For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.

Realizing this can help broaden our minds. We can see that our feelings are not necessarily perceptions of the truth—they may be due to cultural conditioning and nothing more. Thus, when we hear it suggested that some element of our social code is *not* really the best, and we find ourselves resisting the suggestion, we might stop and remember this. Then we will be more open to discovering the truth, whatever it might be.

We can understand the appeal of Cultural Relativism, then, despite its shortcomings. It is an attractive theory because it is based on a genuine insight: that many of the practices and attitudes we find natural are really only cultural products. Moreover, keeping this thought in mind is important if we want to avoid arrogance and remain open to new ideas. These are important points, not to be taken lightly. But we can accept them without accepting the whole theory.