

# Louis P. Pojman; An Argument Against Ethical Relativism

Ethical Relativism (ER) is the doctrine that the moral rightness and wrongness of actions vary from society to society, and that there are no objective universal moral standards binding on all people at all times. Accordingly, ER holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on, or is relative to, the society to which he or she belongs. *Ethical objectivism (EO)* is the doctrine that even though different societies hold different moral codes, an objective core morality exists, made up of universally valid moral principles. Accordingly, EO holds that whether or not it is right for an individual to act in a certain way depends on whether the act is covered by the set of universally valid moral principles.

One must first distinguish ER from *cultural relativism (CR)*. CR states that different cultures hold different moral codes, that there is cultural diversity. For instance, Eskimos traditionally allow their elderly to die by starvation, whereas we believe that this practice is morally wrong. The Spartans of ancient Greece and the Dobu of New Guinea believe that stealing is morally right; but we believe it is wrong. Many cultures, past and present, have practiced or still practice infanticide. A tribe in East Africa once threw deformed infants to the hippopotamuses, but our society condemns such acts. Sexual practices vary over time and clime. Some cultures homosexual behavior, whereas others condemn it. Some tribes in Africa practice genital mutilation on females, whereas we find such practices abhorrent. Some cultures permit abortion; others condemn it. Some cultures, including Moslem societies, practice polygamy, whereas Christian societies view it as immoral.

CR is a descriptive thesis, not a normative one. Just because a society believes that the Earth is flat doesn't mean that it is. Similarly, just because a society permits slavery doesn't mean that slavery is morally justified. In "A Word to the Student" I noted that Stalin had killed 42 million presumably innocent people in the former U.S.S.R. Even if the majority of Soviet citizens approved of Stalin's regime and these killings, that approval does not necessarily make his behavior morally correct.

Ethical objectivism accepts the anthropological data that different societies have different moral practices. It simply doesn't agree that believing P makes P true. Just as believing that the Earth is flat doesn't make it true (though the believer may be justified or excused in so believing), so believing that killing your children or enslaving people is morally right doesn't make it so (though the believer may not be culpable). The believers may have been conditioned to think that way or may not know any better.

Ethical objectivism must not be confused with ethnocentrism, which dogmatically supposes one's moral code is the true one. Today we condemn ethnocentrism as a variety of prejudice tantamount to racism and sexism. But one must hold some sort of ethical objectivism to condemn ethnocentrism, as well as racism and sexism. Otherwise, one can argue only that prejudice is wrong in our culture, but not in Afghanistan, or Rwanda, or Mali, or wherever things are different.

### *An Analysis of Ethical Relativism (conventionalism)*

Ethical relativism holds that there are no universally valid moral principles, but rather that all moral principles are valid relative to cultural or individual acceptance.

The argument for ER consists of three premises:

1. *The diversity thesis.* What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so there are no moral principles that all societies accept.
2. *The dependency thesis.* All moral principles derive their validity from cultural acceptance.
3. *Ethical relativism.* Therefore, there are no universally valid moral principles, no objective standards that apply to all people everywhere and at all times.

We have already examined the diversity thesis in our discussion of cultural relativism and found it to be true. The heart of ER is the dependency thesis, to which we now turn.

#### *The Dependency Thesis*

The *dependency thesis* asserts that individual acts are right or wrong depending on the nature of the society in which they occur. Morality does not exist in a vacuum; rather, what is considered morally right or wrong must be seen within a context, depending on the goals, wants, beliefs, history, and environment of the society in question. As William Graham Sumner says:

We learn the [morals] as unconsciously as we learn to walk and hear and breathe, and [we] never know any reason why the [morals] are what they are. The justification of them is that when we wake to consciousness of life we find them facts which already hold us in the bonds of tradition, custom, and habit.

Trying to see things from an independent, non-cultural point of view would be like taking out our eyes in order to examine their contours and qualities. We are simply culturally determined beings.

We could, of course, distinguish both a weak and a strong thesis of dependency. The non-relativist can accept a certain relativity in the way moral principles are *applied* in various cultures, depending on beliefs, history, and environment. For example, many Asians show respect by covering the head and uncovering the feet, whereas Occidentals do the opposite. Though both groups adhere to a principle of respect for deserving people, they apply the principle differently. Some cultures practice polygamy, whereas others are committed to monogamy, but both are committed to strong intimate relations and the protection and nurturing of children. Both polygamy and monogamy may be workable, and so both are moral options. But the ethical relativist must maintain a stronger thesis, one that insists that the very validity of the principles is a product of the culture and that different cultures will invent different valid

principles. The ethical relativist maintains that even beyond the environmental factors and differences in beliefs, there are fundamental disagreements among societies.

In a sense, we all live in radically different worlds. Each person has a unique set of beliefs and experiences, a particular perspective that colors all his or her perceptions. Do the farmer, the real estate dealer, and the artist, all looking at the same spatio-temporal field, actually see the same thing? Not likely. Their different orientations, values, and expectations govern their perceptions, so for each of them, different aspects of the field are highlighted and some features are missed. Even as our individual values arise from personal experience, so social values are grounded in the particular history of the community. Morality, then, is just the set of common rules, habits, and customs that have won social approval over time, so that they seem part of the nature of things, like facts. There is nothing mysterious or transcendent about these codes of behavior. They are the outcomes of our social history.

There is something conventional about *any* morality, so *every* morality really depends on a level of social acceptance. Not only do various societies adhere to different moral systems, but the same society could (and often does) change its moral views over time and place. For example, in the southern United States, slavery is now viewed as immoral, whereas about 140 years ago, it was not. We have greatly altered our views on abortion, divorce, and sexuality as well.

The conclusion--that there are no absolute or objective moral standards binding on all people--follows from the first two propositions. Cultural Relativism (the diversity thesis) plus the dependency thesis yields ethical relativism in its classic form. If there are different moral principles from culture to culture and if all morality is rooted in culture, then it follows that there are no universal moral principles valid for all cultures and all people at all times. Morality is merely a matter of convention.

### **Subjectivism**

Some relativists think that the conclusion noted above is still too tame, and they maintain that morality depends not on the society but rather, on the individual. As my students sometimes maintain, morality is in the eye of the beholder. They treat morality like taste or aesthetic judgments, which are person-relative. As Ernest Hemingway wrote:

So far, about morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after and judged by these moral standards, which I do not defend, the bullfight is very moral to me because I feel very fine while it is going on and have a feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality, and after it is over I feel very sad but very fine.

This form of moral subjectivism has the sorry consequence of making morality a very useless concept, for, on its premises, little or no interpersonal criticism or judgment is logically possible. Hemingway may feel good about killing bulls in a bullfight, whereas Saint Francis or Mother Teresa would no doubt feel the opposite. No argument about the matter is possible. Suppose that you are repulsed by observing John torturing a child. You cannot condemn him if one of his principles is to torture little children for the fun of it. The only basis for judging him wrong

might be if he was a *hypocrite who* condemned others for torturing children. However, one of his or Hemingway's principles could be that hypocrisy is morally permissible (he feels "very fine" about it), so it would be impossible for John to do wrong. For Hemingway, hypocrisy and non-hypocrisy are both morally permissible (except, perhaps, when he doesn't feel very fine about it).

On the basis of subjectivism, Adolf Hitler and the serial murderer Ted Bundy could be considered as moral as Gandhi, so long as each lived by his own standards, whatever those might be. Witness the following paraphrase of a tape-recorded conversation between Ted Bundy and one of his victims, in which Bundy justifies his planned murder:

Then I learned that all moral judgments are "value judgments," that all value judgments are subjective, and that none can be proved to be either "right" or "wrong." I even read somewhere that the Chief Justice of the United States had written that the American Constitution expressed nothing more than collective value judgments. Believe it or not, I figured out for myself—what apparently the Chief Justice couldn't figure out for himself—that if the rationality of one value judgment was zero, multiplying it by millions would not make it one whit more rational. Nor is there any "reason" to obey the law for anyone, like myself, who has the boldness and daring—the strength of character—to throw off its shackles ... I discovered that to become truly free, truly unfettered, I had to become truly uninhibited. And I quickly discovered that the greatest obstacle to my freedom, the greatest block and limitation to it, consists in the insupportable "value judgment" that I was bound to respect the rights of others. I asked myself, who were these "others"? Other human beings, with human rights? Why is it more wrong to kill a human animal than any other animal, a pig or a sheep or a steer? Is your life more to you than a hog's life to a hog? Why should I be willing to sacrifice my pleasure more for the one than for the other? Surely, you would not, in this age of scientific enlightenment, declare that God or nature has marked some pleasures as "moral" or "good" and others as "immoral" or "bad"? In any case, let me assure you, my dear young lady, that there is absolutely no comparison between the pleasure I might take in eating ham and the pleasure I anticipate in raping and murdering you. That is the honest conclusion to which my education has led me—after the most conscientious examination

Notions of good and bad, or right and wrong, cease to have interpersonal evaluative meaning. We might be revulsed by Ted Bundy's views, but that is just a matter of taste.

Absurd consequences follow from subjectivism. If it is correct, then morality reduces to aesthetic tastes about which there can be neither argument nor interpersonal judgment. Although many students say they espouse subjectivism, there is evidence that it conflicts with some of their other moral views; for example, they typically condemn Hitler and his genocidal policies as evil. A contradiction seems to exist between subjectivism and the very concept of morality, which it is supposed to characterize, for morality has to do with *proper* resolution of interpersonal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament (both deontological and teleological systems do this, though in different ways). Whatever else it does, morality has a minimal aim of preventing a Hobbesian state of nature, wherein life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." But if so, then subjectivism is no help at all, for it rests neither on social agreement of principle (as the conventionalist maintains) nor on an objectively independent set of norms that bind all people for

the common good. If there were only one person on earth, there would be no occasion for morality, because there wouldn't be any interpersonal conflicts to resolve or others whose suffering that person would have a duty to ameliorate. Subjectivism implicitly assumes something of this solipsism, an atomism in which isolated individuals make up separate universes.

Subjectivism treats individuals as billiard balls on a societal pool table where they meet only in radical collisions, each aimed at his or her own goal and striving to do the others in before they do him or her in. This atomistic view of personality is belied by the fact that we develop in families and mutually dependent communities in which we share a common language, common institutions, and similar rituals and habits, and that we often feel one another's joys and sorrows. As John Donne wrote, "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man. is a piece of the continent."

Radical individualistic ethical relativism is incoherent. Thus, it follows that the only plausible view of ethical relativism must be one that grounds morality in the group or culture. This form is called conventionalism, which we noted earlier and to which we now return.

#### *Conventional Ethical Relativism (Conventionalism)*

*Conventional ethical relativism*, the view that there are no objective moral principles but that all valid moral principles are justified (or are made true) by virtue of their cultural acceptance, is based on the dependency thesis. It recognizes the social nature of morality. That is precisely its power and virtue. It does not seem subject to the same absurd consequences that plague subjectivism. Recognizing the importance of our social environment in generating customs and beliefs, many people suppose that ethical relativism is the correct ethical theory. Furthermore, they are drawn to it for its liberal philosophical stance. It seems to be an enlightened response to the sin of ethnocentricity, and it seems to entail or strongly imply an attitude of tolerance toward other cultures. As the anthropologist Ruth Benedict says, in recognizing ethical relativity, "We shall arrive at a more realistic social faith, accepting as grounds of hope and as new bases for tolerance the coexisting and equally valid patterns of life, which mankind has created for itself from the raw materials of existence." The most famous proponent of this position is the anthropologist Melville Herskovits, who argues even more explicitly than Benedict that ethical relativism entails intercultural tolerance:

- [1] If morality is relative to its culture, then there is no independent basis for criticizing the morality of any other culture but one's own.
- [2] If there is no independent way of criticizing any other culture, then we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.
- [3] Morality is relative to its culture.
- [4] Therefore, we ought to be tolerant of the moralities of other cultures.

Tolerance is certainly a virtue, but is this a good argument for it? I think not. If morality simply is relative to each culture, then if the culture in question has no principle of tolerance, its members have no obligation to be tolerant. Herskovits seems to be treating the principle of tolerance as the one exception to his relativism. He seems to be treating it as an absolute moral principle. But from a relativistic point of view, there is no more reason to be tolerant than to be intolerant, and neither stance is objectively morally better than the other.

Relativists not only offer no basis for criticizing those who are intolerant, but also cannot rationally criticize anyone who espouses what they might regard as a heinous principle. If, as seems to be the case, valid criticism supposes an objective or impartial standard, then relativists cannot morally criticize anyone outside their own culture. Adolf Hitler's genocidal actions, so long as they are culturally accepted, are as morally legitimate as Mother Teresa's works of mercy. If conventional relativism is accepted, then racism, genocide of unpopular minorities, oppression of the poor, slavery, and even the advocacy of war for its own sake are as moral as their opposites. Even if a subculture decided that starting a nuclear war was somehow morally acceptable, we would have no basis for morally criticizing those people. Any actual morality, whatever its content, would be as valid as every other and more valid than ideal moralities—since no culture adheres to the latter.

There are other disturbing consequences of conventional ethical relativism. It seems to entail that reformers are always (morally) wrong, since they go against the tide of cultural standards. Consider the following examples. William Wilberforce was wrong in the 18th century to oppose slavery. Similarly, the British were immoral in opposing and forbidding *suttee* in India (the burning of widows, which is now illegal there). If the villagers believed that the widow should be thrown into the funeral pyre and burned to death, who are we to oppose them? Similarly, if Nazi society believed it was right to exterminate Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals, we are morally evil in opposing them by trying to impose our values on them. Ethical relativism has the consequence that all reformers are immoral since they oppose the status quo, which by definition is the basis of morality. Indeed, Jesus himself was immoral in breaking the law of his day by healing on the Sabbath and by advocating the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, since it is clear that few in his time (or in ours) accepted them.

Yet (at least retrospectively) we normally feel just the opposite, that the reformer is a courageous innovator who is right, who has the truth, who stands against the mindless majority. Sometimes the individual must stand alone with the truth, risking social censure and persecution. In Ibsen's *Enemy of the People*, after Dr. Stockman loses the battle to declare his town's profitable, but polluted, tourist spa unsanitary, he says, "The most dangerous enemy of the truth and freedom among us—is the compact majority. Yes, the damned, compact and liberal majority. The majority has *might*—unfortunately—but *right* it is not. Right—are I and a few others." Yet if relativism is correct, the opposite is necessarily the case. Truth is with the crowd and error with the individual.

Similarly, conventional ethical relativism entails disturbing judgments about the law. Our normal view is that we have a *prima facie* duty to obey the law, because law, in general, promotes the human good. According to most objective systems, this obligation is not absolute, but relative to the particular law's relation to a wider moral order. Civil disobedience is warranted in some cases

wherein the law seems to seriously conflict with morality. However, if moral relativism is true, then neither law nor civil disobedience has a firm foundation. On the one hand, from the side of the society at large, civil disobedience will be morally wrong, so long as the majority culture agrees with the law in question. On the other hand, if you belong to the relevant subculture that doesn't recognize the particular law in question (because it is unjust from your point of view), then disobedience will be morally mandated. The Ku Klux Klan, which believes that Jews, Catholics, and blacks are evil or undeserving of high regard, is, given conventionalism, morally permitted or required to break the laws that protect these endangered groups. Why should I obey a law that my group doesn't recognize as valid?

To sum up, unless we have an independent moral basis for law, it is hard to see why we have any general duty to obey it; and unless we recognize the priority of a universal moral law, we have no firm basis for justifying our acts of civil disobedience against "unjust laws." Both the validity of law and the morally motivated disobedience of unjust laws are annulled in favor of a power struggle.

There is an even more basic problem with the notion that morality depends on cultural acceptance for its validity. The problem is that the notion of a culture or society is notoriously difficult to define, especially in a pluralistic society like our own. A person may belong to several societies (subcultures) with different value emphases and arrangements of principles. A person may belong to the nation as a single society with certain values of patriotism, honor, courage, and laws (including some that are controversial but have majority acceptance, such as the current law on abortion). But he or she may also belong to a church that opposes some of the laws of the state. He or she may also be an integral member of a socially mixed community where different principles hold sway and may belong to clubs and a family where still other rules prevail. Relativism would seem to tell us that if a person belongs to societies with conflicting moralities, then that person must be judged both wrong and not wrong whatever he or she does. For example, if Mary is a U.S. citizen and a member of the Roman Catholic Church, then she is wrong (qua Catholic) if she has an abortion and not wrong (qua citizen of the United States) if she acts against the church's teaching on abortion. As a member of a racist university fraternity, KKK, John has no obligation to treat his fellow black students as equals, but as a member of the university community (which accepts the principle of equal rights), he does have the obligation; but as a member of the surrounding community (which may reject the principle of equal rights), he again has no such obligation; but then again, as a member of the nation at large (which accepts the principle), he is obligated to treat his fellow students with respect. What is the morally right thing for John to do? The question no longer makes much sense in this moral babel. It has lost its action-guiding function.

Perhaps the relativist would adhere to a principle that says that in such cases, the individual may choose which group to belong to as his or her primary group. If Mary has an abortion, she is choosing to belong to the general society relative to that principle. And John must likewise choose among groups. The trouble with this option is that it seems to lead back to counterintuitive results. If Murder Mike of Murder Incorporated feels like killing Bank President Ortcutt and wants to feel good about it, he identifies with the Murder Incorporated society rather than the general public morality. Does this justify the killing? In fact, couldn't one justify anything simply by forming a small subculture that approved of it? Ted Bundy would be morally

pure in raping and killing innocents simply by virtue of forming a little coterie. How large must the group be in order to be a legitimate subculture or society? Does it need 10 or 15 people? How about just 3? Come to think of it, why can't my burglary partner and I found our own society with a morality of its own? Of course, if my partner dies, I could still claim that I was acting from an originally social set of norms. But why can't I dispense with the interpersonal agreements altogether and invent my own morality—since morality, in this view, is only an invention anyway? Conventionalist relativism seems to reduce to subjectivism. And subjectivism leads, as we have seen, to moral solipsism, to the demise of morality altogether.

If one objects that this is an instance of the *slippery slope fallacy*, then let that person give an alternative analysis of what constitutes a viable social basis for generating valid (or true) moral principles. Perhaps we might agree (for the sake of argument, at least) that the very nature of morality entails two people who are making an agreement. This move saves the conventionalist from moral solipsism, but it still permits almost any principle at all to count as moral. And what's more, one can throw out those principles and substitute contraries for them as the need arises. If two or three people decide to make cheating on exams morally acceptable for themselves, via forming a fraternity, Cheaters Anonymous, at their university, then cheating becomes moral. Why not? Why not rape, as well?

I don't think you can stop the move from conventionalism to subjectivism. The essential force of the validity of the chosen moral principle is that it depends on *choice*. The conventionalist holds that it is the group's choice, but why should I accept the group's "silly choice," when my own is better (for me) ? If this is all that morality comes to, then why not reject it altogether—even though, to escape sanctions, one might want to adhere to its directives when others are watching? Why should anyone give such august authority to a culture or society? I see no reason to recognize a culture's authority, unless that culture recognizes the authority of something that *legitimizes* the culture. It seems that we need something higher than culture by which to assess a culture.

We have shown that ethical relativism has a lot of problems, but showing this doesn't make its opposite, ethical objectivism, true. What can be said for EO? Just this: If morality has to do with promoting human flourishing, ameliorating suffering, and resolving conflicts of interest justly,

then it would seem that certain rules of behavior would be more conducive than others to these goals. What is the evidence for universal principles? Some scientists reject the diversity thesis (what we call cultural relativism). One can see great similarities among the moral codes of various cultures. E. O. Wilson has identified over a score of common features, and before him, Clyde Kluckhohn noted some significant common ground:

Every culture has a concept of murder, distinguishing this from execution, killing in war, and other "justifiable homicides." The notions of incest and other regulations upon sexual behavior, the prohibitions upon untruth under denned circumstances, of restitution and reciprocity, of mutual obligations between parents and children—these and many other moral concepts are altogether universal."

Colin Turnbull's description of the sadistic, semi-displaced, disintegrating Ik culture in northern Uganda supports the view that a people without principles of kindness, loyalty, and cooperation will degenerate into a Hobbesian state of nature. But he has also produced evidence that underneath the surface of this dying society, there is a deeper moral code from a time when the tribe flourished, which occasionally surfaces and shows its nobler face.

On the other hand, there is enormous cultural diversity, and many societies have radically different moral codes. Cultural relativism seems to be a fact, but, even if it is, it does not by itself establish the truth of ethical relativism. Cultural diversity in itself is neutral with respect to theories. The objectivist could concede complete cultural relativism but still defend a form of universalism; for he or she could argue that some cultures simply lack correct moral principles.

Earlier in this chapter we distinguished between a weak and a strong thesis of dependency. The weak thesis says that the application of principles depends on the particular cultural predicament, whereas the strong thesis affirms that the principles themselves depend on that predicament.

The nonrelativist can accept a certain degree of relativity in the way moral principles are *applied* in various cultures, depending on beliefs, history, and environment. For example, a raw environment with scarce natural resources may justify the traditional Eskimos' brand of euthanasia to the objectivist, who would consistently reject that practice if it occurred in another environment. The East African tribe throws its deformed infants into the river because the tribe believes that such infants *belong to* the hippopotamus, the god of the river. We believe that these groups' beliefs in euthanasia and infanticide are false, but the point is that the principles of respect for property and respect for human life operate in such contrary practices. The tribe differs with us only in belief, not in substantive moral principle. This is an illustration of how nonmoral beliefs (e.g., deformed infants belong to the hippopotamus), when applied to common moral principles (e.g., give to each his or her due), generate different actions in different cultures. In our own culture, the difference in the nonmoral belief about the status of a fetus generates opposite moral prescriptions. The major difference between pro-choicers and pro-lifers in the abortion debate is not whether we should kill persons but whether fetuses are really persons. It is a debate about the facts of the matter, not the principle of killing innocent persons.

### *Moderate Objectivism*

If we give up the notion that a moral system must contain only absolute principles, duties that proceed out of a definite algorithm, what can we put in its place?

The *moderate objectivist's* account of moral principles is what William Ross refers to as *prima facie* principles, valid rules of action that one should generally adhere to but that in cases of moral conflict may be overridable by another moral principle. For example, even though a principle of justice may generally outweigh a principle of benevolence, there are times when one could do enormous good by sacrificing a small amount of justice; thus an objectivist would be inclined to act according to the principle of benevolence. There may be some absolute or non-overridable principles, but there need not be any (or many) for objectivism to be true. Renford Bambrough states this point nicely:

To suggest that there is a *right* answer to a moral problem is at once to be accused of or credited with a belief in moral absolutes. But it is no more necessary to believe in moral absolutes in order to believe in moral objectivity than it is to believe in the existence of absolute space or absolute time in order to believe in the objectivity of temporal and spatial relations and of judgments about them.

If we can establish or show that it is reasonable to believe that there is, in some ideal sense, at least one objective moral principle that is binding on all people everywhere, then we shall have shown that relativism probably is false and that a limited objectivism is true. Actually, I believe that many qualified general ethical principles are binding on all rational beings, but one principle will suffice to refute relativism:

[A] It is morally wrong to torture people for the fun of it.

I claim that this principle is binding on all rational agents, so that if some agent, S, rejects A, we should not let that affect our intuition that A is a true principle; rather, we should try to explain S's behavior as perverse, ignorant, or irrational instead. For example, suppose Adolf Hitler doesn't accept A. Should that affect our confidence in the truth of A? Is it not more reasonable to infer that Hitler is morally deficient, morally blind, ignorant, or irrational than to suppose that his non-compliance is evidence against the truth of A?

Suppose further that there is a tribe of "Hitlerites" somewhere that enjoys torturing people. Their whole culture accepts torturing others for the fun of it. Suppose that Mother Teresa or Mahatma Gandhi try unsuccessfully to persuade these sadists to stop torturing people altogether, and the sadists respond by torturing her or him. Should this affect our confidence in A? Would it not be more reasonable to look for some explanation of Hitlerite behavior? For example, we might hypothesize that this tribe lacks the developed sense of sympathetic imagination that is necessary for the moral life. Or we might theorize that this tribe is on a lower evolutionary level than most Homo sapiens. Or we might simply conclude that the tribe is closer to a Hobbesian state of nature than most other societies, and as such probably would not survive very long—or if it did, the lives of its people would be largely "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short," as in the Ik culture in northern Uganda, where the core morality has partly broken down.

But we need not know the correct answer as to why the tribe is in such bad shape to maintain our confidence in A as a moral principle. If A is a basic or core belief for us, then we will be more likely to doubt the Hitlerites' sanity or ability to think morally than to doubt the validity of A.

We can perhaps produce other candidates for membership in our minimally basic objective moral set:

1. Do not kill innocent people.
2. Do not cause unnecessary pain or suffering.
3. Do not steal or cheat.

4. Keep your promises and honor your contracts.
5. Do not deprive another person of his or her freedom.
6. Tell the truth, or at least, don't lie.
7. Do justice, giving people what they deserve.
8. Reciprocate; show gratitude for services rendered.
9. Help other people, especially when the cost to oneself is minimal.
10. Obey just laws.

These 10 principles are examples of the *core morality*, principles necessary for the good life within a flourishing human community. They are not arbitrary, for we can give reasons to explain why they are constitutive elements of a successful society, necessary to social cohesion and personal well-being. Principles such as the Golden Rule and those listed above are central to the fluid progression of social interaction and the resolution of conflicts of interest that ethics bears on. For example, language itself depends on a general and implicit commitment to the principle of truth telling. Accuracy of expression is a primitive form of truthfulness. Hence, every time we use words correctly (e.g., "That is a book" or "My name is Sam"), we are telling the truth. Without a high degree of reliable matching between words and objects, language itself would be impossible. Likewise, without the practice of promise keeping, we would not be able to rely on one another's words when others inform us about future acts and could have no reliable expectations about each other's behavior. But we are social beings and our lives are dependent on cooperation, so it is vital that when we make an agreement (e.g., "I'll help you with your philosophy paper if you'll help me install a new computer program") we have confidence that the other party will reciprocate when we have done our part. Even chimpanzees follow the rule of reciprocity, returning good for good (returning evil for evil may not be as necessary for morality). Without a prohibition against stealing and cheating, we could not claim property—not even ownership of our very limbs, let alone external goods. And without the protection of innocent life and liberty, we could hardly attain our goals. Sometimes people question whether rule, "Do justice, giving people what they deserve" is valid. Each person should be judged on the basis of his or her abilities, moral character and effort, not on the basis of race, gender, or economic status. We should reward people according to their contributions and accomplishments. Conversely, they should be punished for their evil deeds. Of course, these principles are *prima facie*, not absolutes. They can be overridden when they come into conflict, but, in general, they should be adhered to in order to give maximal guarantee for the good life.

There may be other moral rules necessary or highly relevant to an objective core morality. A moral code would be adequate if it contained a requisite set of these objective principles, but there could be more than one adequate moral code that contained different rankings or different combinations of rules. Different specific rules may be required in different situations. For example, in a desert community, there may be a strict rule prohibiting the wasting of water, and in a community with a preponderance of females over males, there may be a rule permitting

polygamy. Such moral plasticity does not entail moral relativism, but simply a recognition of the fact that social situations can determine which rules are relevant to the flourishing of a community. In matters of sexual conduct, a society where birth control devices are available may have rules that differ from those in a society that lacks such technology. Nevertheless, an essential core morality, such as that described above, will be universally necessary.

## Two Kinds of Objective Moral Theories

Finally, we must note that there are two types of ethical theories: deontological and consequentialist, or utilitarian. *Deontological ethical theories* place the emphasis on right action versus wrong action. It is simply wrong to torture or kill innocent people no matter what the consequences. *Consequentialist ethical theories*, on the other hand, place the emphasis on the good consequences that are likely to result from the act. If you can save a large number of people by torturing or killing one innocent person, that act may be justified. Consequentialists are likely to approve of the United States dropping an atomic bomb on Hiroshima to end the War in the Pacific, saving thousands of soldiers, but most deontologists condemn the act as unjust. Or suppose a terrorist has planted an atomic bomb somewhere in our city. We have his daughter in custody. If we think we can get the terrorist to tell us where the bomb is by torturing his daughter, are we justified in doing so? The deontologist is likely to say no, the end does not justify the means. The consequentialist is likely to say yes, the end often does justify the means. Typical deontological theories are intuitionism (roughly, Trust your deepest reflective intuitions in ethics) and Kantianism (roughly, Universalize the principles you want to act on—act in a way consistent with everyone's doing that kind of act). Consequentialists hold that morality consists in maximizing certain values. The pluralist thinks that there are a number of such values, such as happiness, friendship, knowledge, and desert. The utilitarian, or monist consequentialist, holds that happiness (or pleasure) is the only value that we should aim at maximizing.

I must leave it to you to decide which type of ethical theory is best. Both deontological and consequentialist theories are objectivist.

### *Conclusion*

Ethical objectivism, the thesis that a core of universally valid moral principles exists is more justified than its opposite, ethical relativism, but there is some truth in the latter position. Some aspects of morality do depend on cultural approval ("When in Rome, do as the Romans do" does have limited application). Moral principles are also situational, being applied differently in different situations. Normally, lying is immoral, but it is not immoral to lie to an assassin who asks you for vital information on the whereabouts of a diplomat. Similarly, although killing another human being is generally wrong, killing in self-defense is not wrong.