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Cliff Notes

*The Pluralisms of Clifford Geertz*

FOR THREE DECADES Clifford Geertz has been the single most influential cultural anthropologist in the United States. Throughout his career he has put his vast intellectual and literary skills to work “ferreting out the singularities of other peoples’ ways of life,” cultivating a provocative variety of philosophical pluralism and promoting the idea that there is no fixed kernel to human nature. No “mind for all cultures.” No “deep down homo.” “If anthropology is obsessed with anything,” he writes, “it is with how much difference difference makes” (2000, 197). He goes on to say, “If you want a *good* rule-of-thumb generalization from anthropology I would suggest the following: Any sentence that begins, ‘All societies have . . .’ is either baseless or banal” (135).

In many ways Cliff Geertz’s sense of style has exemplified (and given distinctive character) to his beliefs. He is a master of distinctions who recoils at typologies, grand theories, and universal generalizations and rejects abstractionism and reductionism as methods for the social sciences. He is a discriminating writer who feels very much at home taking the measure of some complex scene. “Rushing to judgment,” he writes, “is more than a mistake, it’s a crime” (2000, 45). He believes that ultimate reality (if he is willing to speak of “ultimate” things at all) is a complex continuum of overlapping likenesses and differences that should not be placed in neat boxes, and certainly not two boxes. And as everyone in this anthropological audience surely knows he is the mahatma of “thick description.” “I don’t do systems,” he writes, and his preference for portraying “cases,” and his antipathy for general laws and formal principles will be obvious to anyone familiar with his work.

Cliff Geertz’s critics are many. Almost everyone initially gets sidetracked by the visibility and distinctiveness of his writing style, which is like Cyrano de Bergerac’s nose. It is conspicuous, it is spectacular, but it is best to just ignore it, for the sake of getting on with a discussion of his ideas, which is what we hope to do in this symposium. Reading Clifford Geertz is the perfect antidote to obscurantism in the social sciences, which

is a very good thing for those of us who have been educated, inspired, or challenged by his writings. It is even good for those who care to be constructive critics or to interrogate various aspects of his work.

Looking beyond reactions to style, it seems fair to say that among Geertz's critics the lumpers in the social sciences feel frustrated by him because he is a splitter who is not so easy to dismiss. He argues that knowledge is "local" and most social science generalizations restricted in scope, for which he has no regrets. Geertz writes, "I have never been able to understand why such comments as 'your conclusions, such as they are, only cover two million people [Bali], or fifteen million [Morocco], or sixty-five million [Java], and only over some years or centuries' are supposed to be criticisms" (2000, 137). Nevertheless, the universalizers mistakenly think he is a radical relativist. The positivists mistakenly think he is anti-science. And the skeptical postmodernists (by which I mean those scholars who really are subjectivists, nihilists, and radical relativists, which Clifford Geertz is not), think he is an old-fashioned American anthropologist who still believes there is some good work to be done with the idea of "culture" (by which I mean human conceptions of what is good, true, beautiful, and efficient made manifest, and thereby expressed, in practice). •

But I am a fan. And one reason I admire his work so much is because I believe Cliff Geertz is one of the world's most significant proponents of cultural, moral, and scientific pluralism (which is not the same as radical relativism and is certainly not the same as being "anti-science").

If I had to identify some of the big philosophical or theoretical themes in his writings I would name four. Theme 1: Diversity is inherent in the human condition. Theme 2: There is no universal essence to human nature that *strongly* determines human behavior. Theme 3: Across time and space (history and culture) human nature is continuously transformed by the never-ending attempt of particular groups of human beings—Balinese, Moroccans, Northern European Protestants—to understand themselves and to create a social world that makes manifest their self-understandings. Theme 4: Securing universal agreement about what is good, true, beautiful, or efficient in life is rarely possible across cultures and, even more importantly, the ecumenical impulse to value uniformity (for example, convergence in belief) over variety and to overlook, devalue, or even eradicate "difference" is not a good thing. Culture is not icing, he writes. Biology is not cake. Differences are not necessarily shallow. Likeness is not necessarily deep (See Shweder 2000 for a similar but more expansive summary of Geertz's contribution to the social sciences).

Cliff Geertz has written that relativism "disables judgment" while absolutism "removes it from history." He has strongly intimated that finding a middle path between relativism and absolutism is what culture theory ought to be about. For my own very specific substantive contribution to this symposium I want to briefly focus on a not very small question concerning judgments about morality (good and bad, right and wrong) and on the issue of cultural critique. In particular I want to ask, is it possible to offer moral evaluations of the social practices of different societies without imposing one's own parochial or ethnocentric conception of things on others? If the answer is yes, precisely how is that to be done? If the answer is no, precisely why is that so? In other words, what exactly is Cliff Geertz's implied third choice between relativism and absolutism; and what exactly does it look like (what shape does it take) when one is asked to judge whether, for example, such customary practices as polygamy, arranged marriage, adolescent circumcision, physical punishment, animal sacrifice, and so forth are good or bad, right or wrong?

In his well-known essay "Anti Anti-Relativism," Cliff Geertz offers this quote from Montaigne: "Each man calls barbarism whatever is not his own practice . . . for we have no other criterion of reason than the example and idea of the opinions and customs of the country we live in." "That notion," Geertz then remarks, "whatever its problems, and however more delicately expressed, is not likely to go entirely away unless anthropology does" (2000, 45). He goes on to say, "What the relativists, so-called, want us to worry about is provincialism—the danger that our perceptions will be dulled, our intellects constricted, and our sympathies narrowed by the over-learned and overvalued acceptances of our own society" (45).

In the light of that remark it seems reasonable to raise the question: when it comes to evaluating the social norms of others what does the sharpening of our perceptions, the expanding of our intellects, and the widening of our sympathies actually amount to, and doesn't that process of sharpening, expanding, and widening imply that there is more to a moral judgment than Montaigne imagined? And if there is more, doesn't that process of informed evaluation take us beyond the country we live in, making it possible for us to achieve a nonethnocentric understanding of the degree of moral value of the customs of other societies. Doesn't the process of cultural critique mean that it is possible (perhaps difficult, but possible) to separate the provincial aspects from the nonprovincial aspects of one's own moral judgments?

My guess is that Cliff Geertz, for a variety of reasons (some of them

Wittgensteinian; some not), will be reluctant to theorize in the abstract about such questions. So in the little time that remains I aim to simply open a conversation, the ultimate purpose of which is to answer such questions. I would begin by inviting Cliff to say how his own position on moral judgment and cultural critique compares to the positions of two other famous anti-universalists from two other disciplines—the legal scholar Richard Posner and the philosopher Isaiah Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

Posner, who is a United States appellate judge and senior lecturer at the University of Chicago, is also the most widely cited contemporary American legal scholar. Notably, he is a thoroughgoing anti-realist and a provocative moral relativist. When it comes to the study of moral judgments he fully appreciates the Geertzian generalization that “Any sentence that begins, ‘All societies have . . . is either baseless or banal.’” In his book *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (1999) he (Posner) quotes approvingly from Geertz’s essay “Anti Anti-Relativism” and has the following to say:

I shall be arguing first of all that morality is local, and that there are no *interesting* moral universals. There are tautological ones, such as “murder is wrong” where “murder” means “wrongful killing,” or “bribery is wrong,” where bribery means “wrongful paying.” But what counts as murder, or as bribery, varies enormously from society to society. There are a handful of rudimentary principles of social cooperation—such as don’t lie *all* the time or don’t break promises without *any* reason or kill your relatives or neighbors indiscriminately—that may be common to all human societies, and if one wants to call these rudimentary principles the universal moral law, that is fine with me. But they are too abstract to be criterial. Meaningful moral realism is therefore out, and a form (not every form) of moral relativism is in. Relativism in turn invites an *adaptationist* conception of morality, in which morality is judged—nonmorally, in the way that a hammer might be judged well or poorly adapted to its goal of hammering nails into wood or plaster—by its contribution to the survival, or other ultimate goals, of a society or some group within it. Moral relativism implies that the expression “moral progress” must be used with great caution, because it is perspectival rather than objective; moral progress is in the eye of the beholder. (Posner 1999, 6)

In his book (an extension of his 1997 Oliver Wendell Holmes Lectures at Harvard University) Judge Posner offers a sustained attack on moral realism. In his lectures he suggests that “many moral claims are just the gift wrapping of theoretically ungrounded (and ungroundable)

preferences and aversions.” He also argues that if any nonlocal moral facts exist at all they are completely useless for resolving any actual real world moral issue. He writes,

Every society, every subculture within a society, past or present, has had a moral code but a code shaped by the exigencies of life in that society or that subculture rather than by a glimpse of some overarching source of moral obligations. To the extent it is adaptive to those exigencies, the code cannot be criticized convincingly by outsiders. Infanticide is abhorred in our culture, but routine in societies that lack the resources to feed all children that are born. Slavery was routine when the victors in war could not afford to feed or free their captives, so that the alternative to enslaving them was killing them. Are infanticide and slavery “wrong” in these circumstances? It is provincial to say that “we are right about slavery, for example, and the Greeks wrong,” so different was slavery in the ancient world from racial enslavement, as practiced, for example, in the United States until the end of the Civil War, and so different were the material conditions that nurtured these different forms of slavery. To call infanticide or slavery presumptively bad would be almost as provincial as unqualified condemnation. The inhabitants of an infanticidal or slave society would say with equal plausibility that infanticide or slavery is presumptively good, though they might allow that the presumption could be rebutted in peaceable, wealthy, technologically complex societies. (Posner 1999, 19)

Three features of Posner’s position with regard to these and other cases are especially worthy of note. First, he describes himself as a moral relativist. As he stated in his Holmes Lectures he believes “that the criteria for pronouncing a moral claim valid are local, that is, are relative to the moral code of the particular culture in which the claim is advanced, so that we cannot call another ‘immoral’ unless we add ‘by our lights.’”

Second, he allows that he is a moral subjectivist in the sense that he believes that there are no “reasonably concrete transcultural moral truths.” In effect he argues that there is no independent or transcendent or objective domain of the right and the true (no “objective order of goodness”) to which one might appeal, as the legitimate source for one’s particular judgments about what is right or wrong, good or bad. (The discourse of “inalienable” or “natural” rights is, of course, by Posner’s anti-realist account, thereby rendered either illusory or vacuous.)

Third, he claims that he is not a strong moral skeptic. There are moral truths worth knowing and judgments worth making, he argues. But they are merely facts about what is judged right and wrong in one’s own

society, for example, the existing social norms, customs, and laws of one's own land. These local norms and laws are knowable, he argues, and he is quite prepared to make parochial judgments about what is right and wrong for members of his parish or community, and to enforce them.

What Posner is not prepared to do is pretend that his judgments about the practices of other societies are anything more than reactions based on feelings of personal disgust. Perhaps as a result of personal temperament or cultural taste he might feel revolted by some practice (such as infanticide or suttee) and even inclined to intervene to stop the practice with the power at his command. Nevertheless he argues, in keeping with his anti-realist approach, "moral emotions" (shame, guilt, disgust, indignation) have no universal concrete moral content or objective foundation or source in some transcendental domain of the moral good.

Fully consistent with his moral subjectivism, he also rejects that idea that there is a universal moral obligation to tolerate cultures that have social norms different from one's own. He comes close to saying that the experience of a negative-feeling state may result in the exercise of power to eradicate the practices of others, and that it is misguided to even ask whether such an intervention is justifiable or not. The moral domain by Richard Posner's account of moral relativism and subjectivism is simply a natural scene in which different groups, each with their own distinctive social norms and equipped (in varying degrees) with powers and resources to dominate the local or global scene, compete with each other to perpetuate their own way of life. Some will succeed better than others do. Some will adapt or surrender their social norms under pressure to do so. But none of this social norm competition or social norm replacement represents true moral progress, and there are no rational discussions or arguments to be had about what the outcome of the competition or conflict ought to be. Why? Because, according to Posner, there is no objective moral standard against which divergent claims about what is right and good can be assessed. All that matters is power and the struggle to carry forward one's way of life efficiently, and to survive in the competition with other groups.

Precisely how do Cliff Geertz's views on these issues differ from Posner's, if at all? The comparison of Geertz and Posner is instructive. If I understand him correctly, Cliff Geertz believes that it is possible to reject subjectivism and radical relativism while at the same time refusing to place anything (other than banalities) outside of culture. Yet if I understand Posner correctly, he advocates moral subjectivism and relativism precisely because (Geertz-like) he refuses to place anything other than

banalities outside of culture. Posner thereby forces us to ask the following question: If, as Cliff Geertz suggests, there is so very little in the moral domain that transcends culture and history, how is it possible for others to be both different from us in their social norms yet *entitled* to have their social norms valued by us, or at least tolerated by us, at the same time? Posner's version of anti-universalism (and his refusal to endorse tolerance or any other moral values as real or objective goods) provokes us to consider the possibility that a fully theorized stance of moral pluralism in anthropology must take us beyond any particular culture and outside of history, for the sake of the theory's own systematic justification. If one rejects both subjectivism and relativism, as Clifford Geertz (in apparent contrast to Richard Posner) recommends, what does one put in its place? In the absence of any objective values or nonethnocentric moral goods what type of value judgments survive the corrosive force of moral skepticism?

These are big questions, old questions, hard questions. Yet it is with regard to such questions that a comparison of Clifford Geertz to Isaiah Berlin is instructive. One wonders, how close is the connection between the Geertzian practice of anthropology and the philosophical theory of "value pluralism" elucidated by Berlin, and systematized in a thoughtful book by John Gray titled *Isaiah Berlin* (1996; also see Galston 2002). Berlin's theory is associated with the idea (quoting John Gray here and below) that "human values are objective but irreducibly diverse." And it is linked to an intellectual stance that affirms the "reality, validity and human intelligibility of values and forms of life very different from our own." One basic claim of the theory is that "fundamental human values are many, that they are often in conflict and rarely, if ever, necessarily harmonious, and that some at least of these conflicts are among incommensurables—conflicts among values for which there is no single, common standard of measurement or arbitration."

In other words some moral dilemmas are insolvable and ultimately undecidable by rational reflection. For Berlin at least that is not quite the same as saying (Montaigne-like) that there is nothing more to moral evaluation than "the opinions and customs of the country we live in" or (Posner-like) that moral judgments are no more than an expression of culturally socialized preferences and aversions. What would Cliff Geertz say about Berlin's theory of "value pluralism"? Would he accept that moral values (e.g., liberty, justice, loyalty, equality, protection of the vulnerable, beneficence) are not only diverse and irreconcilable but also real and objective (and in that sense *do* stand outside of culture and history)?

In one sense or another Clifford Geertz, Richard Posner, and Isaiah Berlin are all deeply critical of universalized moral claims about the goodness or badness, rightness or wrongness of particular social practices. They have views of moral value that appear to be similar in some ways and different in other ways. If I understand them correctly all three would argue that as a matter of fact people around the world do not universally agree on what behaviors in particular are right or wrong, good or bad. All three accept the notion that there exist moral disagreements that cannot (even in principle) be settled by rational means, and that to the extent there exist universal maxims of morality (for example, the injunction to be fair minded in the sense of treating like cases alike and different cases differently) those maxims cannot in and of themselves resolve real world moral disputes. All three would presumably argue that moral judgments depend on circumstances. I can only guess whether Cliff Geertz would accept Posner's argument that there is no such thing as objective moral progress. I can only speculate whether he would accept Posner's view that even the presumption that infanticide is immoral is too presumptive and provincial to count as a moral universal; although I suspect that he would endorse the stance advocated by both Posner and Berlin that there is no determinate or universal way to choose between various alternative moral claims, for example claims of autonomy versus community, or liberty versus equality, or family values versus sexual pleasure? But I would certainly love to hear some of his answers to such questions.

A systematic comparison of Geertz's theory of value with the value theories of Posner and Berlin is sure to be helpful in the further development of a philosophically defensible anthropological theory of cultural pluralism. And it is one very timely way to be challenged by, and to honor, that great intellectual tradition that extends from Franz Boas to Clifford Geertz. I have been speaking here, of course, of an intellectual tradition that (not by coincidence) is coincidental with the 100-year-old history of the American Anthropological Association itself. And, I might add, in a world in which triumphal "West Is Best" thinking has returned in full force to the international scene, it is an intellectual and critical tradition that is just as important today as it was in 1902, during a former age of global empire.

#### NOTE

1. A more extensive discussion of Posner and Berlin appears in a keynote address, "The Idea of Moral Progress: Bush versus Posner versus Berlin," which I delivered at the 2003 Philosophy of Education Society meetings. Parts of that discussion are reported here as well.

Also see Richard A. Schweder, "Moral Realism without the Ethnocentrism: Is It Just a List of Empty Truisms?" in *Human Rights with Modesty: The Problem of Universalism*, ed. András Sajó (Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 2004).

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