Ethical Relativism: Is There a Defensible Version?

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Spirited accusations and counteraccusations of romanticism, ethnocentrism, and banality have long been conventionalized features of debate in anthropological forums. While the spirit of the debate is not always understood or appreciated outside the discipline, those stylized allegations do give natural expression to a problematic inherent in anthropological interpretation: the tension, both creative and destructive, between relativism, developmentalism, and universalism in the representation of the native, the primitive, the alien, or the “other.”

The problematic arises in the first place because of the apparent strangeness of many of the ideas and practices of the “other.” Confronted by the apparent strangeness of such ideas and practices as witchcraft, pollution and original sin, menstrual seclusion, infanticide, and ritualized homosexuality, anthropologists have reacted interpretively and imaginatively in one of three ways.

Some, the universalists, have tried to look through what is alien in search of deeper similarities, as though the strangeness was an illusion.

Some, the developmentalists, have perceived in the history of culture a battle between reason and superstition, science and igno-
rance, and have interpreted the exotic practices and beliefs of the "other" as indications or expressions of a deficiency in rationality or the absence of a proper education.

Some, the relativists, have tried to preserve the exotic and alien; and they have sought to defend the idea of legitimate diversity or difference.

The tension between universalistic, developmental, and relativistic interpretations of the "other" is, perhaps, of the nature of the anthropological enterprise. It is a deep and cherished part of our intellectual history, and it provides the terms for anthropology's traditional form of disputatious communalism. We expect of each other a mastery of the standard criticisms and countercriticisms of the three modes of interpretation, and we goad (and perhaps even entice) each other by putting those criticisms on display. The relativists are "soft on superstition." The developmentalists are "ethnocentric." The universalists, well, they are merely "superficial," and so on.

That is not to say that the tension between universalism, developmentalism, and relativism is always put to creative or justifiable use. Debates in anthropological forums can and do, at their very worst, devolve into name-calling and factional dispute. Here is a cleaned-up version of a disputatious exchange, illustrating the downside of communal debate.

A speaker presents an analysis of status obligations in orthodox Hindu families. A "radical relativist" in the audience criticizes the presentation on the grounds that it is ethnocentric. He enunciates the view that the very concept of a role or status obligation is a Western sociological concept, and that the analysis presented imposed Parsonian concepts on Hindu informants.

The speaker responds that the concept of a role is a universal folk concept encoded in all known languages, that studies in diverse cultures, including India, indicate that information about a person's social role affects native judgments of culpability, and that it seems more sensible to argue that Western sociology has merely given explicit theoretical expression to an idea recognized as important on a worldwide scale.

A retort to the speaker's response follows, to the effect that the distinction drawn between obligations based on status (e.g., mother to child) and obligations based on contract went out of fashion with
Sir Henry Maine, and even when it was in fashion it was nothing more than an ideological product of the 19th century.

The speaker retorts to the retort: How fascinating if orthodox Hindu informants, and everyone else around the world, are Victorians!

My reconstruction of that exchange makes it sound far more playful than it was at the time. One of the reasons it was not playful was that the debate got framed as though it were a contest between some general position called relativism and some other general positions called universalism and developmentalism, each position struggling with the other for intellectual ascendency through its designated anthropological champion.

Creative debate in anthropology may require that we resist the temptation to embrace any general position on universalism, developmentalism, and relativism. For one of the consequences of defining oneself as a relativist or a developmentalist or a universalist is that it becomes too easy to overlook the fact that there is something of value in all three positions; and to overlook that fact is to miss a central message of the metaphysics of form.

THE METAPHYSICS OF FORM

The expression “metaphysics of form” refers to the ontology of likeness and difference presupposed by the act of comparing things to each other (see Shweder 1989, from which this discussion is drawn; also Shweder and Miller 1985). To understand is to compare, and to compare is to presuppose some metaphysics of form.

There is a metaphysics of form (and I doubt there is a better one) in which universalism, developmentalism, and relativism can all live together, without any one of those interpretive positions permanently pushing the others out. That metaphysics of form rests on the following assumptions.

In some ways any two things are alike. In some ways any two things are different. When the differences between things are trivial, unimportant, or irrelevant (that is, when what is true about the functioning of one thing is also true of the other thing regardless of their differences) then universalism is at a premium and nonidentical things can, with profit, be treated as equivalent.

Yet sometimes the differences between things do matter and nonidentical things should not be treated as equivalent. The universals
that unite the things are insufficient to explain their functioning; be-
cause of their differences the dynamics of their functioning are dif-
ferent, even though in other respects the things are alike.

When the differences between things matter in that way (because of their differences things function differently even though they are alike) those differences are sometimes revelatory of progress or ad-

vance. That is especially true when the differences represent points or stages in the attainment of some adaptive equilibrium or proper end-state. At such times, developmentalism is at a premium.

Sometimes, however, the differences are significant, yet remain neutral with regard to the issue of relative progress. That is espe-
cially true when they represent or indicate the existence of multiple equilibria or noncomparable end-states. At such times relativism is at a premium.

The merit of a relativistic stance, within the terms of that meta-
physics of form, is that it gets us to recognize that there are cases where there are genuine or important or significant differences be-
tween things that are not matters for developmental analysis, al-
though not every case is such a case. And by that account it should be possible to construct a defensible, although qualified, version of relativism, in creative (rather than destructive) tension with universalism and developmentalism.

**QUALIFIED RELATIVISM**

The version of qualified relativism that I will try to defend in this brief discussion of ethical relativism asserts two things: (1) there are genuine and significant differences between the moral codes of dif-
ferent peoples; a universalistic approach cannot handle all the facts; and (2) there exists more than one rationally defensible moral code; not every significant difference in the moral codes of different peo-
ple can be developmentally ranked.

Several comments and qualifications are immediately in order:

1. The first claim—that the moral codes of different cultures dis-
play significant variation—is not as trivial or obvious as it may seem. It is, of course, obvious that the practices and institutions of different cultures vary considerably. What is not so obvious is that those diverse practices involve *moral* issues.

Some social theorists have argued that in those areas where peo-
ple differ in their practices, the obligations involved are not matters
of morality but rather matters of habit, custom, or convention that lack moral force, even for the native.

Thus, for example, Murdock (1980) describes the category of sin among the Semang people of Malaysia. For the Semang the category of sin includes combing one's hair during a thunderstorm, watching dogs mate, killing a sacred black wasp, drawing water in a vessel blackened by fire, and casual, informal behavior with one's mother-in-law.

Murdock does not believe that the normative judgments of the Semang are moral judgments. He asserts that the category of sin for the Semang is "arbitrary and devoid of ethical justification" and that to the extent that the Semang conform at all to their customary prohibitions, it is merely out of fear of external sanctions by a superhuman, omniscient god. Other anthropologists who argue that culture is arbitrary seem to suggest that social practices are followed merely out of habit, conformity, or social pressure.

In contrast, the ethical-relativist view advocated here holds that cultural differences are often differences over what is obligatory from a moral point of view—that is, both sides believe their obligations are objective obligations derivable through reason, but they disagree about what those objective obligations happen to be.

During the past several years I have been conducting research on the native understandings of children and adults (male and female) concerning the obligations associated with family life and social practices in an orthodox Hindu community in Orissa, India, and a secular American community (Shweder 1985, 1986; Shweder and Miller 1985; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987; Shweder and Much 1987). It turns out that while Oriya and American informants disagree sharply over whether, for example, it is okay for a man to cook for his wife, or whether it is okay to eat beef, or whether it is permissible for a man to beat his wife if she repeatedly leaves the house without his permission, for both sets of informants the issues are moral issues involving obligations that are perceived as unalterable by human consensus, binding on all peoples around the world and expressions of natural laws available for rational analysis.

2. A credible ethical relativist is not committed to the extreme view that there are no universal aspects to moral codes. Quite the contrary, to identify genuine differences in moral codes is to presup-
pose some common criterion for identifying moral issues; meaningful differences always presuppose a more general likeness.

3. A defensible ethical relativism must do more than merely document variety in moral beliefs. Developmentalists do that. Ethical relativism is a normative position in that it holds that at least some of the variety is rationally based and thus defensible. The aim of ethical relativism is to give permission to diversity, to the extent that such permission is rationally warranted.

4. Some care must be taken in formulating the relativist position that there exists more than one rationally defensible moral code. I will formulate the proposition this way, in two subparts: (a) In any moral code that is to have rational appeal, some concepts and principles are “mandatory.” They are mandatory in the sense that without those particular mandatory concepts and principles the code will lose its rational appeal. Other concepts and principles are “discretionary.” They are discretionary in the sense that there are alternative concepts and principles whose substitution into the code would not reduce its rationality. (b) Every moral code that is rationally defensible (to the extent that any moral code is rationally defensible) is built up out of both mandatory and discretionary concepts and principles. The rational appeal of a moral code would be diminished, it would become empty, if it were divested or stripped of all discretionary concepts and principles.

UNIVERSALS IN MORAL CODES

As should be clear from the above formulation, there is no theoretical or principled reason for an ethical relativist to deny that in some ways the moral codes of different cultures are alike. Indeed, it might be useful to pause for a moment and consider some of the features of moral codes that seem like good candidates for moral universals in any defensible moral code.

What are the good candidates for moral universals? For one thing, there are certain feelings, the morally relevant emotions—repugnance, shame, anger, guilt, indignation, shock, dread, pride, empathy, and the feelings of being “lowered” or “elevated,” dirtied or stained, sanctified or cleansed. Those feelings form part of a rational response to a perceived transgression and may well constitute an ultimate aim of moral codes—to preserve and enhance the spiritual dignity of persons.
Second, there is the idea that social practices and institutional arrangements can be justified by reference to natural laws or objective obligations. The idea that the social order is a moral order and that the moral order is an expression of natural law may be a universal idea. Our research in India suggests that the idea is displayed early in life—certainly by the age of five years. Indeed, the idea that social practices (for example, for Americans, freedom of choice in marriage; for Hindus, menstrual seclusion) are expressions of objective, eternal, unalterable obligations is the predominant mode of normative evaluation among children and adults, males and females, Americans and Indians, Brahmans and Untouchables.

Professional anthropologists may be theoretically or ideologically driven to argue that social practices and customs are conventional and arbitrary and to argue that what is in the “culture” of things stands in contrast to what is in the nature of things (see Shweder 1987), but few natives, including anthropologists, perceive their own practices in that way. It seems fairly clear that rational, moral justification requires some idea of objective obligations and natural law (for example, the “natural” rights set forth in the Bill of Rights, or the commands set forth in the “Ten Commandments,” or the natural duties of Hindu dharma set forth in the Puranas and Epics).

Perhaps the simplest way to think about the idea of natural law is to imagine that there are certain standards (whatever they may be) to which social practices, man-made rules or laws, and personal desires must conform if those practices, rules, laws, and desires are to be valid.

Those standards of validity are natural laws. They are presupposed whenever we talk about a discrepancy between what is and what ought to be. As many moral philosophers and philosophers of language have pointed out, when we say to someone, “It is right (or wrong) to abort a fetus, or to permit capital punishment, or to have more than one wife, or to prohibit widow remarriage,” we are not simply exhorting strongly, “I like (or don’t like) that practice; you like (or don’t like) it as well.” Rather, we seem to imply that there are objective standards that justify our conclusions. That implication seems to be there in many of the languages of humankind. Indeed, one candidate for a moral universal seems to be the obligation to make sense of your conduct and have your sense-making under-
stood as rationally or objectively based by members of your comm-
unity.

A third candidate for universality is the formal idea of justice. All
moral codes seem to subscribe to the principle, "treat like cases alike
and different cases differently." Paraphrasing one moral philoso-
pher (Singer 1963), if I invoke a right or duty (for example, the right
to vote; the duty to feed my children) by reference to my possession
of certain characteristics, then I am logically committed to holding
that anyone else with the same characteristics also has the same
right or duty. In that rather formal sense of justice, most cultures of
the world recognize the logic of justice, and most peoples experience
repugnance at its violation.

Finally, it is not impossible to find concrete instances or cases of
transgressions that are viewed as morally repugnant across quite di-
vergent cultural traditions. There are certain actions (brother-sister
incest, fathers making and then breaking promises to sons, doctors
refusing to treat accident victims because they are too poor to pay)
that Brahman, Untouchable, and American adults commonly view
as morally wrong.

It seems likely that there are certain minimum requirements for
life in society. Thus, it is not too surprising that certain virtues
(keeping promises, protection of the vulnerable, fair allocation, ta-
boo on incest, reciprocity-gratitude) are viewed as virtues across
most cultural traditions (see Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller
1987).

So there probably are universal features to moral codes, just as
there probably are certain universal or constant human needs and
inclinations. Someone interested in what is relative or defensibly
culture-specific need not deny that. The value of a relativist per-
spective is not the denial of universals, but rather the insistence that
to focus exclusively on what is universal is to miss much of the ac-
tion, while failing to understand actual moral decision making. The
main idea is that any moral decision is the product of a line of rea-
soning involving principles and concepts, some of which are univer-
sally distributed and many of which are not. Not everything that is
rational or reasonable is universal.

**DIFFERENCES IN MORAL CODES**

If one merely focuses on the universal moral principles and con-
cepts underlying a judgment, then it is not possible to predict infor-
mants’ judgments about particular cases. Thus, for example, while Oriya Brahman adults disapprove of kicking a dog that is sleeping on a street, they do not disapprove of beating “black and blue” a wife who goes to the movies without the husband’s permission. And, while they disapprove of unfair treatment (nepotism, cutting in line, a hotel rule excluding invalids from the dining hall), they believe it is okay for the son to inherit far more than the daughter. Indeed, 60 percent of the female adult members of the Brahman community believe there is a positive moral obligation to save the life of the first-born son over the life of the last-born daughter if only one life can be saved.

Needless to say, Oriya Brahmans do not view beating an errant wife as an instance of arbitrary assault, and they do not believe it is unfair to choose the son over the daughter in matters of life and death or inheritance. What Americans view as similar cases (kicking the dog, beating the wife) Oriyas view as quite different cases, and what Americans view as quite different cases (for example, addressing the father by first name and the wife requesting a massage from the husband) Oriyas view as similar cases, involving disrespect and insubordination.

The appeal to some small set of common abstract principles (justice, harm, protecting the vulnerable, etc.) does not help us understand or predict which cases will be seen as alike or different. If we are to understand our informants’ moral judgments about particular cases we are going to have to understand the culture-specific aspects of their moral codes, and we are going to have to understand the way those culture-specific aspects interact with the more universal aspects to produce a moral judgment.

Oriya Brahmans, for example, believe that beating a wife who goes to the movies without permission is roughly equivalent to corporeal punishment for a private in the army who leaves the military base without permission. For Oriyas there are rationally appealing analogical mappings between the family as a unit and military units as units. In both types of units there are differentiated roles and status obligations in the service of the whole, hierarchical control, drafting and induction, and so on. One thing the family is not, for Oriyas, is a voluntary association among co-equal individuals, acting as though they were all members of a Montessori school.

There are numerous culture-specific moral ideas pertinent to an understanding of the moral judgments of American, Brahman, and
Untouchable informants. Issues having to do with chastity, sanctity or purity, respect for status per se, and hierarchy play a distinctive and important part in the Hindu code. There are notions of reincarnation, prior sin, and immanent justice, and the idea that received inequalities (male over female, elder over younger, Brahman over Untouchable, etc.) are a form of just dessert.

There is a preference for paternalism, asymmetrical interdependency, and the idea that most people need to be protected against their own vulnerabilities over the idea of autonomous functioning and self-sufficient voluntarism. There is an inclination to view the family, not the marketplace, as the prototype of moral relationships. There is a corollary tendency to represent the moral order as a natural order built up out of particular status obligations (wife to husband, stranger to stranger) rather than out of promises, commitments, or contracts between abstract individuals living in the marketplace of a free contract regime. It is here that the status/contract distinction seems relevant.

Earlier I identified several mandatory or universal features of any rationally based moral code. Those features included the idea of spiritual dignity, natural law, and the idea of formal justice. Then I briefly enumerated some concepts and principles that are optional, discretionary, or culture-specific aspects of an orthodox Hindu moral code. Let me conclude by broadening and generalizing the discussion, speculating about strong candidates for the optional, discretionary, or culture-specific aspects of any rationally based moral code.

1. One culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes is the adoption of a rights-based conception of natural law. The feature is discretionary because not every rationally defensible moral code must be based on a category of natural "rights." One major alternative is to base the code on a conception of natural "duties." A second alternative is to base the code on a conception of natural "goods" or "ends" (Dworkin 1977; Shweder and Miller 1985).

2. A second culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes has to do with what is taken as a starting point or as more basic, fundamental, real, or natural—"roles and statuses" (the social parts to be played) or "individuals" (the people who play the parts). (See Shweder and Bourne 1984; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987; Miller 1984.)
Some codes give priority to the individual, conceived to exist apart from or prior to social arrangements, and assumed to have intrinsic value, quite apart from his or her value as an occupant of a particular status.

An alternative is to start with the assumption that social arrangements are primary and fundamental, not secondary and derivative and to attribute moral significance to the universal fact of social role differentiation and the unequal distribution of health, wealth, talent, beauty, and status.

3. A third culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes has to do with who is a "person" or "moral agent," and thus entitled to personal respect, just treatment, and the like. Corporations but not fetuses? Members of the "family" but not outsiders?

4. A fourth culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes has to do with where the boundaries are to be drawn around the symbolic, psychological, and physical territories of the self. Which invasions of which territories are to be considered harmful assaults? Is it that "sticks and stones can break your bones but words can never harm you?" Or are honor and reputation as important as life?

5. A fifth culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes has to do with the application of the principle of justice. The principle, "treat like cases alike and different cases differently," does not tell us which likenesses and differences to emphasize or overlook. Discretionary analogies and presuppositions seem to be decisive here. It's wrong to eat dogs—they are members of the family. It's wrong to eat cows—they are incarnations of the first mother. People who are uneducated and illiterate, who know nothing about politics or political issues and are unreliable in their judgments, should not be allowed to vote—they are like children and we do not let children vote, and so on.

6. A sixth culture-specific or discretionary feature of moral codes has to do with a culture's preferred mode of representation of natural laws or objective obligation. Some codes are built up around the idea that there are beings (experts, ecstasies, prophets, sages, hermits, gods) with superior powers of understanding who have privileged access to the truths of natural law—and in such cases the code is represented in the form of sacred texts, scriptures, testimo-
nials, revealed truths, or divine commands, whose rationale not every mortal will be able to understand.

Other codes are built on the assumption that natural laws are things any normal adult "individual" should be able to discover through empirical observation and logic, and be able to defend without reference to "higher" authority. (For a more detailed discussion of the mandatory and discretionary aspect of moral codes see Shweder 1983; Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987.)

WHEN IN ROME . . .

Looking at the similarities, and especially the differences, in the conceptions of my Hindu and American informants about what is dictated by reason and natural law, I am reminded of a comment attributed to Socrates: "There are some things about which even the Gods disagree." The differences are stable differences. They persist over generations and they persist even among rational people, even among sophisticates and virtuosos.

Let me use that point to make a moral argument in defense of that well-known, ethical-relativist piece of advice to anthropological fieldworkers: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do!"

One possible defense goes something like this. Assume a society that has proved itself viable. It has persisted for thousands of years. Children get born. Work gets accomplished. People have meaningful social identities, a sense of the meaning of life, and an understanding of ways to maintain or increase their feeling of personal sanctity, self-esteem, and dignity.

Assume that the institutions and practices of that society are different from your own and that those differences have not narrowed over time, and have shown no tendency to go away even after a heavy dose of instruction in deductive logic and statistical inference and a full-year course on reason and morality.

Assume that in your own society the practices of the other society (arranged marriage, polygamy, purdah, adolescent circumcision) are viewed as immoral.

Question: When you live in their society, when you enter their social order, is it wrong for you to do what they do? Is it wrong for your daughter to respect the rules of purdah, or for you to have two wives or to arrange a marriage for your son?
Putting aside matters of prudence, and putting aside the question of whether you could, in fact, bring yourself to do things that you emotionally find repugnant or offensive, putting that aside, it seems to me that you are under no moral obligation to refrain from those practices.

If what is right or wrong varies along with variations in culture-specific or discretionary rational principles, and if social practices are expressions of those principles, and if those culture-specific principles have proved themselves livable, then the choice of how to live is yours. What is moral is not anything, but it is more than one thing.

I can see that it is just a small step to the view that ethical relativism is a rational justification for an image of individuals as "consumers of lifestyles," or as deconstructionists, always on the move from one moral world to the next. But don't worry, there are always other rational images and other rationalities to choose!

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REFERENCES


