CHAPTER THREE

Relativism

Shafilea Ahmed, a 17-year-old student who planned a career in law, disappeared from her home in Warrington, England in September 2003. Five months later, her dismembered corpse was found in the River Kent. The murder investigation gradually revealed her plight.

Earlier in 2003, on a trip with parents to their native Pakistan, Shafilea had swallowed bleach. It was an apparent suicide attempt, though her father claimed it was a mistake made during a power outage. But she had refused treatment for the injury. She had written an emotional poem titled "I Feel Trapped." She had been reported missing twice previously, and had been found with friends. Interviews with her friends suggested that "Shafi" had been arguing with her parents about an arranged marriage.

Six years later—long after the coroner's report, the inquest, and an inconclusive investigation—Shafilea's younger sister contrived to be arrested; in custody, she told police that her parents, Iftikhar and Farzana Ahmed, had killed her sister by suffocating her. It seems she had adamantly refused to accept the arranged marriage to a much older man; the intense pressure from her parents had driven her to despair. For them, her refusal and rejection of the intended husband would bring great dishonor to the family; and the deliberate damage to her throat had so weakened her that she was no longer desired as a bride. An honor killing was the solution.

At their trial, Justice Roderick Evans said: "You chose to bring up your family in Warrington, but although you lived in Warrington, your social and cultural attitudes were those of rural Pakistan and it was those you imposed on your children." He added, "She was being squeezed between two cultures: the culture and the way of life she saw around her and wanted to embrace, and that they wanted to impose upon her." Both parents were sentenced to life in prison.[1]

3.1 FORMS OF RELATIVISM

"Squeezed between two cultures"—Judge Evans's description implies a well-known truth: different cultures often have different customs or mores. While some variations concern the merely customary, such as traditional clothing or the color appropriate for funerals; others may constitute conflicts in what practices are seen as morally right and wrong, which acts are obligatory and forbidden. Anthropologists have provided vivid accounts of exotic moral practices from across the globe; along with historians, they have often done the same regarding cultures of the past. From their work, we have learned just how wide this variation is, including

approved practices such as polygamy, slavery, abandonment of infants, pederasty, cannibalism, modification of the human body, ritual sacrifice, and the eating of creatures we find disgusting or that we embrace as pets. In her classic work, *Patterns of Culture*, pioneering anthropologist Ruth Benedict (1887–1948) declared that great cultural diversity is evident even in moral matters where we might well expect human beings to agree.

> We might suppose that in the matter of taking life all peoples would agree on condemnation. On the contrary, in the matter of homicide, it may be held that one kills by custom his two children, or that a husband has a right of life and death over his wife or that it is the duty of the child to kill his parents before they are old. It may be the case that those are killed who steal fowl, or who cut their upper teeth first, or who are born on Wednesday. Among some peoples, a person suffers torment at having caused an accidental death, among others, it is a matter of no consequence. Suicide may also be a light matter, the recourse of anyone who has suffered some slight rebuff, an act that constantly occurs in a tribe. It may be the highest and noblest act a wise man can perform. The very tale of it, on the other hand, may be a matter for incredulous mirth, and the act itself, impossible to conceive as human possibility. Or it may be a crime punishable by law, or regarded as a sin against the gods.[2]

Few would deny that moral judgment and ethical practices do in fact differ from one culture to another—despite the affirmation of shared values by religious groups (in the previous chapter). These differences are both temporal and geographic: they are matters of both time and place. No doubt, the culture of ancient Greece differed markedly from the culture of Greece today, which in turn differs from the culture of, say, distant Bhutan.

Differences among people, especially differences in perception, opinion, judgment, practices, and forms of life, lead us to *relativism*. In its most general and abstract form, **Relativism** is the doctrine that a particular property, and therefore correct judgments about that property, vary in relation to something else. Fashion is a relativistic concept, for example, because what is fashionable varies in relation to time and place. This doctrine stands in contrast to **Universalism**, which asserts that the property is the same in all times and places. (The concepts of relative and universal judgments introduced earlier are the foundation of these doctrines.) The ethical theory we will now examine is called **cultural relativism**, because it asserts that morality is relative to culture.[3]

But now we come to a crucial distinction: relativism may be descriptive or normative. What historical and anthropological studies have shown us is that moral practices and judgments about what is right and wrong in fact vary in relation to time and culture. But that form of moral cultural relativism is *descriptive* only; it details actual differences in conduct and judgment. As such, these are facts about the world. There is a contrasting form of cultural relativism that is *normative*: it is the doctrine that what is *genuinely* right and wrong—not what people believe and do—varies in relation to culture. It is this normative form that is of interest in moral philosophy.

It is easy to imagine this distinction being invoked by advocates of Divine Command Theory, for example. They might acknowledge that cultures differ in their moral beliefs, but affirm nonetheless that there is a genuinely correct view, which is to adhere to God's commands, using their particular interpretation. Cultures which have different views are simply misguided and morally wrong or sinful, they might say.

The theory that most concerns us in this chapter, however, not only acknowledges the fact that cultures differ, but distinctively claims that *the genuinely correct, normative doctrine* is that morality is relative to culture. (Where needed for clarity, I may use the term *moral cultural relativism* as a reminder that we are discussing this normative form; but in most contexts, the focus on morality is obvious and I will simply refer to *cultural relativism*.)

3.2 MORAL CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism is not the only form of moral relativism, as we shall see; but we will focus on it because of its predominance in the social sciences, and much of the analysis would apply to other variations that may arise. In stark form, moral cultural relativism claims:

> "*X* is right" = "*X* is approved of by one's culture"; and
>
> "*X* is wrong" = "*X* is disapproved of by one's culture."

Also:

> "*X* is good" = "*X* is valued by one's culture"; and
>
> "*X* is bad" = "*X* is disvalued by one's culture."

The notion of "approval" and "disapproval" here refer to affirmation (and rejection) within the moral sphere of one's culture. Thus, right and wrong, good, and bad, the permissible and the forbidden are all determined by one's own culture—or by "my culture," where the "my" refers to whoever is making the judgment or claim.[4]

The first implication of this theory (as with all forms of moral relativism) is that there is no absolute or universal standard of right or wrong to which one may appeal. Culture creates and defines morality; there is no morality that transcends culture. There is no culturally-independent way in which one might define "*X* is right." The moral judgments of my culture have no force in a different culture—and *vice versa*. Second, it is essential to know one's cultural identity if one is to avoid moral confusion. Third, the same act or practice may be morally right or wrong depending on time and culture. So, slavery may have been morally acceptable in ancient Greece, but it is not in contemporary democracies; forced marriages may be morally acceptable in some cultures, such as rural Pakistan, but not in Warrington, England, today. To reiterate: this means that for moral cultural relativism, the same practice can be *genuinely* right *and* wrong, not just thought to be so.

Yet moral cultural relativism is an objective theory: what a culture approves is a public matter; it can be determined by empirical research: ethnographic studies, surveys and polls, and studies of morally-grounded laws are among the sources one might consult. Thus, a person who claims that a certain practice is approved of in a specific society makes a claim that is either true or false. Someone who is sincere in her moral judgment could nevertheless be wrong—even about her own culture. But although an individual or a group may be mistaken, the collective population of a society cannot be wrong.

There are many factors that contribute to the attractiveness of cultural relativism. The first is that the facts of cultural diversity *are* impressive. True, we cannot simply argue that because cultures differ, they must all be morally correct. But given such variety, it is surely a prejudice to believe that one's native culture owns morality, and all other societies are simply wrong. Perhaps in the days when cultures were isolated and travel was difficult, it was natural to believe that one's own morality was a universal morality. In today's global society, however, anyone who travels widely or even reads broadly encounters societies that seem quite content with moral standards different from the homeland's. Among this profusion, there seems to be no neutral and universal way of determining which cultures are morally correct.

Second, an open-minded person wants to avoid *ethnocentrism*, the judging of other cultures by the customs and standards of one's own. One

who acknowledges the moral equality of cultures shows respect for difference. Moreover, it often seems that the meaning of an act or a practice is understandable only within the context of its particular culture. (This view was articulated by one of the founders of anthropology, Franz Boas (1858–1942); it became a guiding principle of the field.) Relativism seems to promote *tolerance* and *understanding* in cultural interactions. These attitudes are so important, because intolerance and misunderstanding often lead to repression, conflict, and violence between cultures. Those who are skilled at conflict resolution, negotiation, and peace-making know how fundamental is the first step of giving each party a seat—an equal status—at the table. And the equal moral status of cultures is a fundamental claim of cultural relativism.

In addition, the theory seems initially plausible because our moral values are undeniably shaped by the culture in which we live. We imbibe the values of our society from infancy; even the terms in which we come to think about morality are culture-bound. Cultures are not just givens; they are formative in the shaping of moral agents and the ethical systems in which they think and act. It is questionable whether one could transcend one's culture, even if one earnestly wanted to and tried fervently to do so.

Shedding the absolutism and arrogance that we often associate with claims to a universal standard, relativism still offers an objective reference point, a ground for morality. Psychologically, this places responsibility for moral judgments not on individuals, but on an abstract function of a large group: culture. The individual need only conform to cultural norms. Yet it also urges personal sensitivity to cultural context when making moral judgments of others.

3.3 CRITIQUE OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Despite the attractions of cultural relativism, it has serious flaws. These include both conceptual difficulties and problems that arise in its application. It is even possible to challenge the descriptive moral diversity thesis which undergirds the theory. Let us survey these issues, beginning with the problematic key phrase: "one's culture."

(1) The first problem is *the ambiguity of "culture."* Cultural relativism seems to visualize a world in which tribal cultures are simple, homogeneous, and relatively distinct or isolated from each other. "One's culture" is the tribe within which one grew up and lived in adulthood. This does not describe the contemporary world. Today, cultures exist within and across nation states. Nation states are unifying political forces for their

citizenry, but they can remain culturally divided or multicultural: divisions may occur between urban and rural, between liberal and conservative religious groups, between socio-economic classes, between immigrants and residential groups, and between racial, ethnic, linguistic, and heritage groups. *Which culture is* my *culture?* Canada has certainly felt the cultural divisions among French-speaking Quebecois, the Inuit and Métis, the many First Nations (aboriginal groups), immigrants, and English-speaking others. In the United States, for example, the culture of Utah is certainly different from that of New York City. The point is that such divisions can represent moral differences, disparities in the approval or disapproval of certain practices. The natural move is to look to what the majority believes, what the dominant value of the culture is. Yet an American who wishes to know whether abortion is right or wrong will find that there is great division within the culture—many approve or at least find it permissible under certain circumstances, while many others disapprove under any circumstance. In such a case, where a culture is split over a morally significant issue, cultural relativism leaves us with no helpful answer.

Moreover, in a complex society, cultures are "nested": one person holds membership in a set of expanding spheres of culture. A single individual may be a member of Wall Street financial culture, the New York City culture, the Chinese-American culture, the culture of the United States, and the culture of a major world religion. The values and ethical judgments of these cultures are likely to differ in important ways. *Which culture's judgments are the morally relevant ones under cultural relativism?*[5]

In developed nations, many subcultures thrive within a single pluralistic culture: the Amish and ultra-Orthodox Jews, for example, live according to their respective lights as distinct subcultures within American culture. But what about cults? Are they morally relevant cultures? Consider two examples. Jim Jones was the leader of "The People's Temple," a cult formed in Indiana that launched an agricultural commune with socialist beliefs in Jonestown, Guyana. Under Jones's direction, 909 American members of the cult committed suicide by drinking cyanide on November 18, 1978. David Koresh believed himself to be the last prophet of the Branch Davidians; in his fortified commune in Waco, Texas, he gathered 80 men, women, and children. He practiced polygamy, including "spiritual marriages" involving forced sexual acts with underage girls. In a controversial move, federal authorities raided the commune, resulting in the deaths of four agents and six cult members. Koresh bargained for time to complete his religious writings, while the federal authorities treated the matter as a hostage crisis. *Can a charismatic leader establish not only a religious cult but a (moral) culture?*

There is a special problem, of course, for those who grow up in a bicultural family. *Intersectionality* is the term used to describe the interconnecting and overlapping identities one might have—for example, in being a Black, Jewish, gay man. The thrust of these complications is that cultural relativism is ambiguous and incomplete—at least in its basic and standard form. It lacks determinacy in specifying which culture is morally definitive. Our multicultural world is, in fact, problematic for cultural relativism, and further precision in specifying which is "one's own culture" seems somewhat arbitrary and will not remove the remaining problems.

(2) Even with further clarification, the theory presents *problems for travelers, refugees, and immigrants*. The old saying, "When in Rome, do as the Romans do," is easy advice, aimed no doubt at diplomatic politeness and respect. It seems to advocate temporarily replacing the practices of one's own culture with those of one's current location. But such encountered differences may be more than matters of custom: the local culture may violate one's own ethical principles and moral values. *How does one prioritize or integrate one's home culture and the local culture? Which culture was Shafilea Ahmed's culture?*

A professional woman from North America who must travel today to Saudi Arabia today will find that she cannot shop, eat in most restaurants, or even enter the country without a male escort. Saudi women are pressured to wear an *abaya* (an ankle-length, long-sleeved garment, preferably black). Those who stay with a Saudi family may not leave the country without the permission of the male head of household. Movie theaters and alcoholic beverages are prohibited. Until recently, females weren't permitted even to ride a bicycle, but as of 2018, women became eligible for automobile driver's licenses. Gender separation requires separate lines, counters, and eating areas in fast-food outlets.[6] In 2008, an American living in Riyadh with her husband and children sat in Starbuck's with a male business partner, drinking coffee in the "family section," which is the only section in which men and women may sit together. She was arrested and, she claimed, strip-searched and forced to sign false confessions. The local authorities were adamant: The Commission for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice publicly said her actions violated the country's Shariah law. "It's not allowed for any woman to travel alone and sit with a strange man and talk and laugh and drink coffee together like they are married," it said. It also accused her of wearing makeup, not covering her hair, and of "moving around suspiciously" while sitting with her colleague. Though her husband strongly defended her innocence, they soon needed to relocate for their own safety.[7] Male guardianship is a basic ethical principle: a female must

be accompanied by her *mahram*, a male chaperone, usually an older relative. In 2006, when a Saudi teenager reported she had been gang-raped, she was punished with a sentence of ninety lashes—more than her rapists received—because she had been in a car without a *mahram* when she was assaulted.[8]

On the other hand, a Saudi woman traveling in North America might well be appalled at the gratuitous display of the female body in advertising, at the harassment and sexual assault that women face in many workplace environments, and the disrespect for women this conveys. She might find shameful the attitude toward old age and the treatment of the elderly. She might be disgusted by the preoccupation with celebrity and pop culture icons, and by the crude discourse and commercialism of public life. She might be astounded at the numbers of people we incarcerate in various types of prisons. She might be baffled by our love of guns and the rate of gun violence. She would likely be anxious at the bigoted treatment many Muslims have received in the West, especially in the United States. Today, she might well be mistrusted or mistreated by customs or immigration officers, or even be insulted or harangued by bystanders.

How much of one's own culture—one's own moral commitments—should one retain regardless of local culture? Seasoned travelers expect different practices in exotic locations, and it is usually possible to tolerate them for short stays. Refugees and immigrants have a more difficult time: whether by choice or not, their stay is likely permanent. They can easily become, as the judge said, "squeezed between two cultures."

This problematic fact of cultural mobility, along with the first problem of multiculturalism and divided cultures has prompted the literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt (b. 1943) to issue a "manifesto," urging the establishment of "Mobility Studies." Indeed, he thinks these issues have been part of human life long before our Information Age society. He observes, "There is no going back to the fantasy that once upon a time there were settled, coherent, and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities." It would be unwise to adopt a theory that assumed this fantasy to be true. Yet, "At the same time we need to account for the persistence, over very long time periods and in the face of radical disruption, of cultural identities for which substantial numbers of people are willing to make extreme sacrifices, including life itself."[9] This tension between actual communities and cultural identities suggests great difficulty in attaching the meaning and justification of morality to cultures.

(3) The theory has *a problem with theoretical coherence*, because it contains a paradox that has a baffling practical impact. It seems that the cultural relativist must accept ethical universalism as equally valid for

those cultures that advocate it in some form. The practical impact is that we must, it appears, tolerate the intolerant.

Imagine two interacting cultures that differ severely in their normative judgments: Culture A, which holds a relativist ethic and views the morality of other cultures as equally valid for its members; and Culture B, which holds a universalist ethic, believing that only its own moral view is correct for all cultures everywhere. Members of Culture B may disapprove of Culture A; they may send moral missionaries to convert those in A to B's beliefs; if they are aggressive, they may colonize or seek to destroy A's culture. Culture B might be a racist culture, a terrorizing culture of religious fanaticism, or a culture that embraces slavery, sexism, homophobia, or cannibalism. It appears that the relativists of Culture A must accept all of this as morally valid, since they recognize no transcultural principle that would restrain B. If it came to warfare, Culture A's self-defense could be characterized merely as a defense against an equally justified cause.

Attempting to escape the paradox of tolerating the intolerant would only create a meta-paradox: treating relativism as a universalism. Suppose the advocate says: "Of course, relativism prescribes relativism, not universalism; tolerance advocates tolerance in others, not aggression." But that is to prescribe relativism for everyone, for all cultures: it is the universalist claim that anyone advocating universalism is wrong. There is a meta-paradox in claiming that relativism is a universalist principle. Thus, under either view—whether one claims relativism is right for my culture (but not necessarily for another culture), or one claims it is right for everyone in all cultures—one encounters threats to theoretical coherence.

(4) A general concern that follows from the above three is this: *cultural relativism offers no way to resolve cultural differences and conflicts.* How, besides violence, could Culture A and Culture B resolve their severe differences? It is true that an integration and unification of previously divergent cultures would resolve their conflicts, but this takes a long time and usually requires enormous patience in the face of residual conflict and injustice. Moreover, there is no moral basis for the relativist to advocate such mergers. Perhaps they reject resolution and simply avoid contact because of their moral hostility.

(5) Cultural relativism seems unable to absorb the internal dynamism of societies; *it cannot accommodate or motivate moral reform.* Western societies once accepted dueling as an honorable method of settling disputes between gentlemen, denied women suffrage, burned witches, enslaved Africans, displaced and devastated indigenous peoples, exploited child labor, and denied basic civil rights to many, including the LGBTQ population. These practices were "approved of" by our past cultures. Those who

then advocated change—the reformers, the suffragettes, the abolitionists, the civil rights activists—were in the minority, and so, according to cultural relativism, *they were in the wrong*. They persisted in their "wrongness," which would seem to deepen their immorality; however, they grew in numbers and influence, successfully translating their moral judgments into the protection of the law. We normally consider those who sustain a fight for moral reform to be among our most admirable people—not as advocates who urged others to adopt a wrong-headed belief. Once a majority was reached, according to cultural relativism (Voila!), *they suddenly were in the right!* But this transformation is very odd: the person whose added support shifted the balance of approval above fifty per cent changed the morality polarity from wrong to right!

Moreover, cultural relativism offers no support for reforming one's society. The Saudi women who risk their lives to protest social restrictions and advance women's rights simply do not have the sanction of morality—worse, they are immoral, violating the morality of their culture. The utter rejection of the effort at moral reform (until it is culturally embraced) is a serious defect. We might put the metaethical question this way: *Isn't what is morally right and wrong more stable than the latest poll?* Normatively speaking, *Are we wrong until we get a majority to agree with us? Don't we want to credit moral reformers with being pioneers in discerning the right—not just morally lucky in holding views that prevailed?*

(6) Finally, it is unclear how someone who holds moral cultural relativism can distinguish the merely customary from the moral. The customary and the moral both prescribe practices, and—according to the Cultural Relativist—both are created and defined by culture. On what basis could the two be distinguished *using only factors internal to the culture*? Why are capital punishment and gender separation moral matters and not simply customs? While the lines that describe the moral sphere may vary by culture—the eating of dog meat may be considered merely customary in one culture and a moral matter in another—the identification of the moral usually implies features that are transcultural.[10] Yet, for Shafilea's Pakistani parents, an arranged marriage was more than customary; it was a deeply moral issue. But breaking with custom and engaging in immorality are normally different; it is not merely that the latter is likely a more serious offense. They have different sorts of sanctions; punishment has different justifications. In short, while custom is clearly grounded in culture, morality seems to point beyond the traditions of culture.

For all of these reasons, cultural relativism has not been in favor among philosophers, and that has remained the case over the years despite many attempted replies by relativists to these concerns.

3.4 SUBJECTIVISM

There is yet an additional concern: the difficulties involved in individuating cultures tend to produce a cascade of ever finer-grained, like-minded subcultures, risking a slide down the slippery slope to **subjectivism**. Subjectivism features the smallest "group" of all: the individual. It is the theory that affirms:

> "*X* is right" = "*X* is approved of by me."

"Me" is whoever is making a moral judgment. Technically, this is *individual relativism*, yet because what someone sincerely approves is not objectively verifiable by others, the theory is subjective. We might imagine several variations of subjectivism, hinging on the interpretation of "approval." The phrase "approved by me" might refer to my thoughts, beliefs, emotions, or feelings about *X*. But in all these variations, the implication is that the rightness of *X* is not about *X* at all; it is about me. One's "approval" (as variously interpreted) defines its rightness. As long as one is sincere, one cannot be morally mistaken.

The theory does not mean that "what is approved of by *me*" applies to *all other* individuals. That would be a monomaniacal version of giving oneself an exceptional moral status! The theory means "what is approved of by me is right *for me*" and "what is approved of by you is right *for you*," and, by implication therefore, "what is approved of by *anyone* is right *for that person*." This explication reveals an odd sort of egalitarianism: each person creates morality, but only for him- or herself. Subjectivism resolves the problem of cultural individuation by giving up the attempt to identify one's culture. Indeed, it ignores the influence of culture on the determination of what is right and wrong, privileging instead the narrowest and unique identity: individuality.

Except for avoiding the problems associated with the concept of culture, subjectivism inherits and, in some cases, magnifies all the other problems associated with cultural relativism. For example, it exacerbates the problems of conflicting beliefs and tolerating the intolerant—since individuals are greater in number and diversity and brush against each other exponentially more frequently than cultures do. It offers no guidance or interest in resolving conflicts. It also provides no motivation for moral education or self-improvement. Changing one's mind is fine, but one stance is as good as another.

In truth, subjectivism ultimately represents the abandonment of the enterprise of moral philosophy. Reason, deliberation, consistency,

universalizability—none of these matter, because anyone's and everyone's moral views are correct as long as they are sincere and honest with themselves. Subjectivism endorses the absurd conclusion that our most inspiring moral figures and our icons of evil held equally valid moral views. Gandhi and Hitler are equally correct in their moral visions and judgments—and no one has ever accused either of being insincere.

Subjectivism is thus the most extreme version and the dead-end of relativism. Avoiding this slippery slope is an important task for moral relativism in any form, and especially for cultural relativism.

3.5 THE CASE OF AN HONOR KILLING

Given the strong and normally affectionate bonds between parents and their children, the moral obligation to kill one's child must surely require a strong sanction, one that overrides all other moral concerns. Abraham thought his obligation was created by a command from God. The parents of Shafilea Ahmed apparently thought they were obligated by their cultural mores—though in actuality they never admitted their guilt. Her tragic case displays many of the critical issues with cultural relativism.

The problem of cultural identification looms large in this case. Let us assume that arranged marriages are common in Pakistan and even standard practice in its rural areas. Assume also that, in the rural areas, a breach of such an arrangement, a refusal to marry, dishonors the family. Further, assume that an honor killing is considered the obligatory response to such dishonor. Pakistan is changing, of course, and these practices are not condoned in more urban, sophisticated areas, so we also need to presume that we can identify "rural Pakistan" as a viable culture. If we make all these assumptions, then such honor killings would be morally justified according to a relativism of culture. Shafilea's parents were simply doing what is right, fulfilling their moral obligations, in murdering their daughter—according to their home culture.

But of course, they lived in England. Shafilea was born in England and grew up there, though she was reared in a Pakistani home that prized its heritage culture. At least in some significant ways—such as marriage—Shafilea identified as British, as a member of a Western democracy. She rejected the institution of arranged marriages and all that follows from it. She clearly imagined a different, autonomous status for herself as a woman. Her family culture—her parents' culture—was not the culture with which she identified. At least, not fully.

About 55 per cent of the marriages in the world today are arranged unions in which two consenting adults are linked as a couple by a third party. They have a low divorce rate—globally, it is just 6 per cent. But *arranged* marriages are to be distinguished from *forced* marriages, in which one or both parties are married against their will. The United Nations claims forced marriage affects 15 million girls around the globe each year.[11] Refusals of marriage may precipitate honor killings. Force, coercion, and deception are usually involved, and in some cultures the bride may be selected by outright abduction, kidnapped off the street. In the Kyrgyz Republic, it is estimated, about one in three married women became a bride against their will through "bride kidnapping." They were forced to marry a man whom they often did not know, someone who abducted them, often violently.[12] Although these practices are considered sex crimes under the law in most countries, they occur on all continents; they are "traditional," however, in Central Asia, where the legal prohibitions and punishments are seldom enforced.

In any event, Shafilea Ahmed was killed in England, not Central Asia. The fact that her parents hid and denied their deed, forced family members to keep silent about it, and dismembered and sank her corpse, certainly suggests that they knew well they were doing something disapproved by the culture in which they lived as immigrants, the culture in which they had *chosen* to live.

Immigrants and first-generation children have a difficult time moving from one moral system to another. Cultural relativism endorses both cultures, even if one is repressive. In "tolerating the intolerant," we often find that intolerance involves the denial of equal status to women, certain races, and to homosexuals and transgendered people. This has led many—even anthropologists who elevate the equal status of cultures—to assert a principle of basic human rights as transcendent and universal. (We will discuss this view in the next chapter.) From this perspective, Shafilea was deprived of her right to make fundamental decisions that affect her future, to seek a mate of mutual choice, ultimately of her right to life. In murdering their daughter, therefore, her parents did something wrong in any culture—whatever rural Pakistanis may believe. But this assertion of human rights as the universal ground of acceptable cultural practices is essentially an abandonment of cultural relativism: it stakes the claim that morality is independent of culture.

On the one hand, cultural diversity like biological diversity makes the world a richer place. The preservation of threatened cultures can be a noble enterprise, on par with saving endangered species. On the other hand, the clash of cultures can destroy lives and oppress whole populations.

From a moral perspective, how much assimilation to their new culture should one demand of immigrants? What sorts of practices from the old country should immigrants be encouraged to retain? Does voluntary immigration entail acceptance of the moral values of the adopted culture?

One might argue that my account has been unfairly stacked against relativism. To open the discussion with such an outrageous practice of a non-Western culture immediately arouses antipathy and the need to defend ourselves against "barbarism." The account thus has focused on situations of extreme, even violent conflict, whereas cultural conflicts about the most fundamental moral values are rare. In the last chapter, I spoke of the surprising ways in which divergent religions converge regarding moral values; here, that point seems abandoned, as I have focused on deep differences. I would reply that no one has exclusive rights to the charge of "barbarism." Others may find some of the West's practices as "barbaric" as Westerners find theirs. But many of today's most pressing conflicts do derive from cultural differences regarding moral matters; that immigration and displacement raise acute concerns; that these problems have no solution from standard forms of relativism; and that violence is all too often the result.

3.6 RELATIVISM AND PLURALISM

Despite the criticisms of cultural relativism, its deepest concerns do resonate with aspects of contemporary life. We live in a postcolonial age that rejects and responds to the legacies of *imperialism*, the imposition of the values of colonizing cultures upon indigenous cultures. At the same time, an ascendant intercultural dynamic has raised ethical concern regarding *cultural appropriation*, the eager adoption and exploitation of aspects of one culture by another, more dominant culture. Instead of colonizing a native culture by asserting political control, global corporate powers simply take its music, clothing, art, and artifacts, turning them into fashionable commodities for the marketplace. Add to these two movements a third: *globalization*. Among the many meanings of this term—digital interconnectedness, a global marketplace, a focus on global problems, the rise of transnational agencies, and so on—there is the controversial notion that we are inexorably evolving a single, dominant culture. Various cultures use the same technology, the same media, hear the same music, see the same movies, and use versions of the same products. Major international cities look more and more alike, hosting the same retail stores and hotels. Cross-cultural marriages increase; more children are multicultural. The

result is a gradual, global, cultural integration. For many, this process threatens existing cultures that should be preserved and undermines the value of cultural diversity; it foreshadows a rootless, bland, uncultured life of global consumerism. For others, it is the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture that unites humanity. These three trends may reveal our deep concern for the status of distinct cultures; yet they also suggest the need for our moral practices to have a transcultural, transnational foundation.

Alongside the resonance of "culture," there is the resonance of "relativism." The American philosopher Richard Rorty (1931–2007) described our contemporary plight as one of irony: we are committed to the values and judgments of our culture, our community; but we also know full well that our community and our place in it are contingent. Had we been born in a different community, we would have acquired its values and judgments. We must hold both insights simultaneously. But it is culture in which we act; the language of our culture in which we describe our actions; the institutions of culture in which we frame moral meanings. This tension is expressed in an attitude of irony. Living in a world without God, we know that "finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings might derive the meanings of their lives from [nothing] except other finite, mortal, contingently existing human beings."[13]

There is another phenomenon that leads us to relativism. David B. Wong (b. 1949) has called this phenomenon *moral ambivalence*. He writes:

> We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different judgments than we are inclined to make about … [moral] conflicts, and any prior convictions we might have had about the superiority of our judgments get shaken. Moral ambivalence is the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized. In other words, the most discomforting kind of moral disagreement is not simply one in which both sides run out of reasons that are persuasive to the other but is also a disagreement in which coming to the other side brings along an appreciation of *its* reasons.[14]

Perhaps you have had this experience with religion: you grow up within a particular religious tradition, absorbing its doctrines and rituals, and other religions and maybe even their sacred structures seem uncomfortably alien. But as you get older and learn about other religions, perhaps through close friends, perhaps attending weddings or funerals or worship services, you learn something of their doctrines and experience their

rituals—and despite the difference, you come to appreciate their way, or to see some beauty in their practice. Wong allows that there are universal constraints on adequate moral systems, but these are rather loose, he believes, and allow for diverse views within an acceptable range. Among these are constraints that arise from a common human nature. Richard Rorty also proposed general constraints on moral communities: the rejection of cruelty, for instance, and the relief of suffering.

These reflections lead us away from a stark and simple moral relativism toward ***moral pluralism***. Cultural relativism grounds morality in culture, and defines "goodness" (and other moral terms) in relation to one's culture. Moral pluralism is the view that there is more than one "correct" morality; that morality cannot be captured by any one universal or absolute morality. Pluralists need not, however, accept every culture's moral system, or even identify moral systems with cultures; rather, they impose certain tests or filters which any acceptable moral system must pass. They would separate the values that must be shared from those that can vary. These required filters are grounded in something other than culture itself. Abjuring cruelty might be one such test. Respecting human rights might be another: a pluralist would then tolerate any moral systems that respect certain basic human rights.

Nonetheless, the move to a filtered pluralism would require moral constraints that are universal, that apply to each and every culture's system of morality. David Wong terms his version a "nuanced relativism" or "pluralistic relativism." In such an account, the acceptable range of diversity may be very wide, but "adequate" moral systems would need to endorse the same essential moral core. Not needing to justify a comprehensive, universal moral system admittedly would make the task simpler, but it would still require a universal grounding. (Wong proposes this grounding is found in aspects of human nature—an issue for Chapter 4.)

One last point—and it is a consideration that bears on the possibility of a universal moral core. I said earlier that it might even be possible to challenge the *descriptive* thesis of moral diversity. Though the facts about moral differences, the sort that Ruth Benedict recited, are impressive, we should be cautious about the meaning of such differences. If we probe an exotic practice, even one that seems bizarre, we may discover that the difference is more a matter of non-moral beliefs than of moral values. Consider the case of the Toraja people of Indonesia, who have elaborate funeral practices, including a ritual called Ma'Nene that takes place each year in August: they exhume the bodies of fellow villagers, especially those that died away from home; they retrieve those stored in "the house of the dead"; the corpses are cleaned and groomed, dressed

in new clothes, and ceremonially walked home and paraded around the village.[15] We likely find this a macabre desecration of human bodies; but the Toraja understand it as an act of deep respect and homecoming. These seem to be vast moral differences. Notice, however, that although we and the Toraja have conflicting beliefs—different beliefs about death and the proper treatment of dead bodies—we seem to share the deeper moral value that our family and friends deserve respect and should be honored, even in death.

I have noted that core moral values seem to be more convergent than religious beliefs and practices; they may be more convergent than cultural practices. American anthropologist Donald Brown (b. 1934) compiled a list of hundreds of "human universals"—features of culture and human psyche for which there are no known exceptions.[16] Mourning the dead is one such universal. We value life and grieve the loss of those who are close to us, though our grieving practices vary widely.

My point is that we need both to appreciate and to study our differences. There are many ways, various levels of thought, in which differences can mask similarity—and *vice versa*. When we encounter judgments and practices that are strikingly different, careful attention and dialogue may reveal that this difference is rooted in different beliefs about the world; we may approach the moral sphere with different facts. Differences in non-moral beliefs may be resolved differently—or at least debated differently—from differences in moral values.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1 What accommodations to their adopted culture should immigrants be required to make?

2 What is the best way to determine whether a culture finds a practice morally right, permissible, or wrong? Use as examples such practices as abortion or euthanasia.

3 Are the practices of Saudi Arabia described above matters of custom or matters of morality? Explain your reasoning.

4 Science fiction is a genre that abounds with plots that involve complex relations between cultures, usually human and alien cultures. Usually, the humans operate under ethical imperatives. The *Star Trek* series, for example, has explorer crews that operate under the "Prime Directive" of non-interference. The books in the Enders series by Orson Scott Card describe the interactions between humans and various aliens; in *The Speaker for the Dead*,

the "xenologists" work with the Porquinhos (the "Piggies") and struggle with the imperative of non-interference issued by the Starways Congress. Why does it become so difficult in such encounters to comply with an ethic of non-interference?

5 When, if ever, do you believe we would be morally obligated to intervene in another culture in order to discourage, prevent, or prohibit a practice which is approved by that culture? (Intervention might be through "educational programs," incentives, diplomacy, or military action.) How would you justify such an intervention?

6 If you were to adopt ethical pluralism, what filters or tests would you require of any morally acceptable culture? Suppose a critic claims that these constraints only represent your own cultural biases. How would you respond?

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION

1 You might wonder why Shafilea did not report her situation to the British authorities. Discuss her situation, and for background, read and this article by Emily Dugan in the *Independent* for July 16, 2015, on forced marriages in Britain: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/forced-marriage-how-hundreds-of-terrified-british-victims-of-the-tradition-are-being-failed-every-10394985.html.

2 What are your "nested cultures"? In your own life, which ones are more influential in guiding your decisions?

3 Is Rorty correct? Do you hold strong moral commitments of your own, but also know full well that, had you been born elsewhere, you would have believed something else just as strongly? Does this tension undermine the strength of your own commitments? What attitude do you think it promotes—irony, amorality, tolerance, uncertainty, confusion?

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NOTES

1 The case and quotations from Mr. Justice Roderick Evans reported in *The Guardian*, "Shafilea Ahmed's parents jailed for her murder," August 3, 2012; available at: http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2012/aug/03/shafilea-ahmed-parents-guilty-murder (accessed April 2016).

2 Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (1934; New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2005), 45–46.

3 Confusingly, forms of relativism are named in two different ways. (1) Relativism may take its name from the particular property that is being characterized: So *aesthetic relativism* refers to the view that beauty and related terms are relative concepts; *ethical relativism* refers to the view that ethical judgments and practices are relative. But, of course, one may ask, "Relative to what?" (2) To answer that question, relativism may also be named by the domain in relation to which the property varies. Thus, *cultural relativism* indicates the view that something, perhaps ideas of beauty or moral judgments, varies according to culture. To be precise in reference, one needs both names—though the context often makes the first obvious. To be precise, therefore, we have been speaking of *moral cultural relativism*: morality varies in relation to culture.

4 We could replace "culture" with "society" and call the theory Social Relativism. If one distinguishes between culture and society, this would be a different, but related theory. We could also vary this formulation as "X is right" = "X is approved by the culture in which the act occurred" with divergent results.

5 A related problem concerns the giving of moral advice to someone from a different culture: should one advise according to one's own moral beliefs or in terms of the advisee's culture?

6 Pressure from activist Saudi women and from the international community has grown, and with the additional incentive of economic factors, a new Crown Prince has begun to introduce reforms that may modify some of these policies. The situation is developing at this writing, but resistance and reversals are also possible.

7 For this incident, see: http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id=4261213.

8 Donna Abu-Nasr, "Rape Case Roils Saudi Legal System," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2006. Available at: http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/11/21/AR2006112100967.html (accessed April 2016).

9 Stephen Greenblatt, "Cultural Mobility: An Introduction," in *Cultural Mobility: A Manifesto*, eds. Stephen Greenblatt and Ines Županov (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2010), 2.

10 One could claim that this distinction between custom and morality is itself a cultural artifact of Western Culture; but, regardless, the problem of defining the boundary of the moral sphere exists for all cultures.

11 "Ending Child Marriage: Progress and Prospects," UNICEF, 2014; available at: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR..pdf (accessed May 2016).

12 See the astonishing report, "My Husband Kidnapped Me," by Daniel Burgui Iguzkiza; available at: http://www.dburgui.com/01/noviasKG_ENG.html (accessed May 2016).

13 Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989); quotation from p. 8. The original has a doubly negative usage, which I have altered by my insertion.

14 David B. Wong, *Natural Moralities* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), 5.

15 For an account of Toraja rituals, see "The Toraja people and the most complex funeral rituals in the world," *Ancient Origins*, January 24, 2014; available at: http://www.ancient-origins.net/ancient-places-asia/toraja-people-and-most-complex-funeral-rituals-world-001268?nopaging=1#sthash.MzUZtc9P.dpuf (accessed April 2016).

16 Donald Brown, *Human Universals* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991). A summary of the list is available at: https://condor.depaul.edu/mfiddler/hyphen/humunivers.htm (accessed April 2016).