Cultural Relativism 2.0

by Michael F. Brown

Cultural relativism continues to be closely identified with anthropology even though few anthropologists today endorse the comprehensive version of it first articulated by students of Franz Boas. A review of the progressive reduction of the scope of cultural relativism since the early decades of the twentieth century suggests that it should be regarded not as a comprehensive theory or doctrine but as a rule of thumb that when used prudently serves the limited but indispensable function of keeping anthropology attentive to perspectives that challenge received truth.

Anthropology owns the franchise on cultural relativism, yet anthropologists as a group seem to approach the subject with a mixture of ambivalence and ennui. As a comprehensive doctrine, cultural relativism has received surprisingly little attention in anthropology since the early 1990s. Much of the discipline's energy has been focused instead on efforts to reconcile relativism with support for human rights (see, e.g., Cowan, Dembour, and Wilson 2001; Goodale 2006; Merry 2006; Turner and Nagengast 1997; and R. Wilson 1997). Cultural relativism lives on in the undergraduate anthropology curriculum, of course, and those of us who teach introductory courses dutifully tackle it at least once a semester. This gives the subject something of the character of Valentine's Day cards exchanged between spouses: a ritualized expression of commitment more convincingly communicated in other ways. As much as anything, we fear that our students will think us negligent should we fail to discuss it.

Given the equivocal status of cultural relativism among professional anthropologists, it is startling to witness the contention that it continues to provoke beyond our disciplinary palisades. Shortly before he was named Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger denounced moral relativism, to which cultural relativism is often linked, as a major corrupting force in human affairs. In the wake of the 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center, the conservative cultural critic William Bennett declared that the spread of cultural relativism represented one of the greatest dangers faced by American society. Relativism, Bennett said, "implies that we have no basis for judging other peoples and cultures, and certainly no basis for declaring some better than others, let alone 'good' or 'evil'" (2002, 46). And without such distinctions, he says, Americans will be unable to resist terrorism. Bennett's denunciation follows in the footsteps of Dinesh D'Souza, whose book *The End of Racism* (1995) explicitly vilifies Boasian relativism for what its author sees as complicity in the perpetuation of American racial injustice.[1]

Less polemical work in other fields regularly revisits arguments against cultural relativism, often as part of broader reflections on the practical and ethical dimemmas of life in pluralist societies. Countless philosophers and political scientists have pronounced cultural relativism dead on logical or ethical grounds.[2] "Relativism's internal incoherence and its absurd and unpalatable consequences have long been clearly exposed," writes I. C. Jarvie (1993, 546) with characteristic tartness. Nevertheless, cultural relativism staggers on—neither fully endorsed nor completely repudiated—with what to its critics must seem like the affectless persistence of killer zombies in a low-budget horror film.

Nowhere is relativism's stock higher than among undergraduates. I am not alone in having observed a steady shift in student values toward uncritical acceptance of almost any behavior that can be justified in terms of the actor's culture (see, e.g., Cronk 1999, 111). The most common example, which will be familiar to many readers, is a classroom com-

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1. After offering a thumbnail sketch of the emergence of cultural relativism from the work of Boas and his students, D'Souza argues that the triumph of relativist thinking in American intellectual and political circles made it impossible to criticize features of African-American culture that D'Souza deems dysfunctional: "An initial openness to the truths of other cultures degenerates into a close-minded denial of all transcultural standards" (1995, 384). Citing the work of Elijah Anderson, D'Souza insists that a ubiquitous ideology of relativism keeps inner-city blacks caught in a conflict between "a hegemonic culture of pathology and a besieged culture of decency" within their own communities (p. 528).

2. For discussion of relativism and pluralism, see Appiah (2006), Howard (1995), Lukes (2003), Moody-Adams (1997), and Rorty (1986). Among those who judge cultural relativism to be intellectually bankrupt or at least gravely flawed I would include Arkes (1986), Aya (1996), Boudon (2004), Cook (1999), Gellner (1985), Jarvie (1984, 1993), Li (2006), and Zechenter (1997).

 0011-3204/2008/4903-0001$10.00. DOI: 10.1086/529261

ment on the order of "I was talking to my roommate about Aztec human sacrifice and he was, like, Who are we to say that it was wrong? It was their culture, right?" Noting similar attitudes in his own classes, Richard Handler (2005, 12) writes:

> Just as students are relentless in their anxiety about others' values, they are relentless at reinterpreting anthropological relativism as a rule of consumer choice (the world is made up of sovereign individuals, each of whom has the inalienable right to see the world from his or her point of view, and to act accordingly, without criticizing the views, or purchasing decisions, of others).

In a mordant rumination on the robustness of relativism in societies organized around conspicuous consumption, the English cultural critic Richard Hoggart (1998, 6) observes that relativism offers "perfect soil for their endless and always changing urges." According to Hoggart, relativism is as much a tool of the political right as of the left—perhaps more so, given the right's belief in the inherent sacredness of markets. It is enough to make one wonder whether the right's obsessive need to attack cultural relativism might be a form of overcompensation for its complicity in relativism's propagation at the level of popular culture.

A striking feature of critics' accounts is the extent to which they base their appraisal of cultural relativism on the anthropology of the 1940s and '50s, in particular the work of Melville J. Herskovits. It may be, as James Fernandez (1990) has argued, that the portrait of Herskovits's relativism conveyed in these books and essays misinterprets many aspects of what he was trying to convey. But that is less significant than the need to ransack the anthropology of a half-century ago to find a version of relativism suitable for analytical demolition. I find it tiresome to be held accountable for versions of relativism to which neither I nor most anthropologists of my acquaintance subscribe. Not only has anthropological theory evolved significantly since the articulation of the mid-twentieth-century version of cultural relativism but the social world itself has been transformed in ways that necessitate a recalibration of relativistic thinking away from the broad scope of earlier formulations. Above all, humanity is more interconnected. The relativist claim that each society represents an autonomous conceptual universe may serve as a useful metaphor, but it bears little resemblance to the everyday experience of most people.

My aim in this essay is to review briefly the history of classical cultural relativism with an eye toward documenting its progressive modification in anthropology since the early decades of the twentieth century. After considering arguments for abandoning cultural relativism altogether, I propose an amended, defensible version that is consistent with contemporary anthropological practice. In a notably fractious discipline, the latter goal may be a bridge too far, but I believe that it merits the effort. This project is directed to two broad audiences: first, to nonanthropologists, many of whom erroneously persist in seeing the work of Boasians such as Herskovits as the definitive expression of anthropological relativism prevailing in the profession, and, second, to my fellow anthropologists, whose continuing, if highly selective, allegiance to certain elements of cultural relativism may be undermining anthropology's historic role as the discipline best qualified to shed light on broad, transhistorical patterns in human social life. The latter concern has been voiced eloquently by Maurice Bloch, whose essay "Where Did Anthropology Go? or The Need for 'Human Nature'" (2005) tracks the steady and, from Bloch's perspective, regrettable withdrawal of anthropologists from forms of comparison and generalization that would allow us to balance the study of particular cultural histories with a vision of human nature in the broadest sense.

The Ascent and Decline of Classical Cultural Relativism

The story of the rise to prominence of cultural relativism, usually attributed to the work of Franz Boas and his students, has been well told by various scholars (see especially Hatch 1983), and here I will simply review its broad contours. Although Boas's position on cultural relativism was in fact somewhat ambiguous, he laid the groundwork for the full elaboration of cultural relativism by redirecting anthropology away from evolutionary approaches closely linked to nineteenth-century racial theory and by elaborating on Tylor's notion that culture was an integrated system of behaviors, meanings, and psychological dispositions.[3] The flowering of classical cultural relativism awaited the work of Boas's students, including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville Herskovits. Their articulation of a comprehensive relativist doctrine was appealing to intellectuals disillusioned by the pointless brutality of World War I, which undermined faith in the West's cultural superiority and inspired a romantic search for alternatives to materialism and industrialized warfare (Stocking 1992, 162–64).

As formulated by the Boasians, cultural relativism encompasses several axioms. First, each culture is said to constitute a total social world that reproduces itself through enculturation, the process by which values, emotional dispositions, and embodied behaviors are transmitted from one generation to the next.[4] These values and practices are usually perceived by members of a society as uniquely satisfying and superior

3. For discussion of the complexities and ambiguities of Boas's position on relativism, see Stocking (1968, 230–33) and Lewis (1999). Robert Lowie (1956, 1009) recalls that in his classes Boas "unremittingly preached the necessity of seeing the native from within." "As for moral judgments of aboriginal custom," Lowie writes, "we soon learnt to regard them as a display of anachronistic naïveté."

4. Herskovits (1972 [1955], 15) declares: "The principle of cultural relativism, briefly stated, is as follows: *Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation.*"

to all others—hence the universality of ethnocentrism.[5] Because understandings are relative to enculturation, the ethnographer must interpret a culture on the basis of its own internal web of logic rather than through the application of a universal yardstick. This principle applies to everything from language and kinship systems to morality and ontology. Accompanying sensitivity to cultural context is the combination of empathy and detachment that Robert Lowie (1981 [1960], 149) calls "seeing within." For a professional social scientist, says Lowie, "to bemoan the depravity of cannibals would be nowadays as much of an anachronism as it would be for a textbook in physics to introduce comments upon the benevolence of God into an exposition on gravity."[6]

Complementing the core principle of cultural coherence is insistence that societies and cultures cannot be ranked on an evolutionary scale. Each must be seen as sui generis and offering a satisfying way of life, however repugnant or outlandish particular aspects of it may seem to outsiders. Given the assumed integrity of each culture, anthropologists are obliged to show a tolerance for the traditional practices of other peoples and to encourage similar tolerance among their fellow citizens. "We must recognize that the pluralistic nature of the value systems of the world's cultures . . . cannot be judged on the basis of any single system," insists Herskovits (1972 [1958], 109).

Finally, critics have noted that proponents of classical cultural relativism are inclined to contradict their own axioms by subjecting the institutions and social practices of Western industrial societies to criticism deemed unacceptable when assessing non-Western, preindustrial ones. As Lévi-Strauss (1972 [1955], 384) declares, the anthropologist is fated to serve as "critic at home and conformist elsewhere." The justification for this sensibility is that the technological and economic dominance of the West gives it a vastly greater capacity to impose its own varieties of ethnocentrism on others (Herskovits 1972 [1958], 103).

So far, so familiar. Reviewing the debates of Herskovits's time, however, I am struck by the extent to which, even then, prominent anthropologists balked at embracing all of these precepts. As Clyde Kluckhohn makes clear in his 1955 essay "Ethical Relativity: *Sic et Non*," as early as the 1940s Ralph Linton questioned cultural relativism's denial of ethical universals, arguing instead for the recognition of ethical principles formulated at a high enough level of abstraction to encompass the considerable ethical variability that ethnographers observe throughout the world (1955, 668–72). Kluckhohn concluded that "neither extreme relativism nor extreme absolutism is tenable as a guiding hypothesis for further empirical enquiry" (pp. 676–77). Even the clinical detachment promoted by Lowie—dismissed perhaps too cynically by Stanley Diamond (1974, 111) as a "bedside manner"—seemed to be on the wane by the late 1950s and early 1960s, pushed aside by memorably affectionate ethnographies by Jules Henry, Colin Turnbull, Elizabeth Marshall Thomas, and others.[7]

Thus far this discussion has had a distinctly North American emphasis. Clearly, however, the Boasians crystallized relativistic thinking with deep roots in European social theory.[8] The eighteenth-century thinker Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1802) is known as the author of an important strand of cultural relativism. Elements of Herder's ideas were refined by Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) and more influentially by Edvard Westermarck (1862–1939), who asserted that morality was rooted not in universal principles but in culturally conditioned emotions.[9] British anthropology, which maintained closer ties to academic philosophy than its American counterpart, directed considerable energy to the so-called modes-of-thought issue, rooted in the work of Lévy-Bruhl, Malinowski, and Evans-Pritchard and culminating in the 1970s and 1980s in vigorous debates about the transcultural status of rationality.[10]

There is, however, a characteristically American flavor to classical cultural relativism. First, it built on and complemented the culture concept, whose influence was far greater in North America than elsewhere. Second, the U.S. legacy of slavery and racial segregation and the ongoing challenge of assimilating large numbers of immigrants into a hybrid society gave cultural relativism—and in particular its theme of intercultural tolerance—a political resonance that it lacked in much of Europe until late in the twentieth century.

Classical Cultural Relativism and Human Rights

A pivotal moment in the trajectory of classical cultural relativism was the American Anthropological Association's criticism of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (AAA

5. The coining of the term "ethnocentrism" is conventionally attributed to the sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910). For discussion of how ethnocentrism and relativism fit into Sumner's work, see Shone (2004).

6. Kroeber (1952, 137) invokes a similar analogy when he states, "Reference in this matter is to values as they exist in human societies at given times and places; to values as they make their appearance in the history of our species; in short, to values as natural phenomena occurring in nature—much like the characteristic forms, qualities, and abilities of animals as defined in comparative zoology."

7. For more detailed discussion of pluralism in American anthropology with respect to Herskovits's ideas about cultural relativism, see Lewis (1999, 720).

8. As early as the 1830s, Auguste Comte (1976 [1830–42], 89) argued that one of the ways positivist sociology differed from theology and metaphysics was that it had a "tendency to render relative the ideas which were at first absolute." This transition from the absolute to the relative was for Comte a decisive step in the creation of social science.

9. On Herder, see, for example, Denby (2005); on Bastian, Koepping (1995); on Westermarck's moral relativism, Stocking (1995, 156).

10. Two much-cited collections that pursue this line of investigation are Wilson (1970) and Hollis and Lukes (1982).

1947).[11] Today critics call the AAA's resistance to the Universal Declaration embarrassing or even shameful. Mark Goodale (2006, 25) states that the impact of the discipline's response to the Universal Declaration was that anthropology became "synonymous with cultural relativism, and cultural relativism became synonymous with the categorical rejection of universal human rights." Nevertheless, Goodale and other careful observers note that some concerns expressed by the Universal Declaration's opponents in anthropology were legitimate and needed to be aired publicly. The most significant was the document's privileging of individual rights over those of groups ("cultures"). Whether the AAA's response to the Universal Declaration was tactically sound is a question I leave to historians, but it can reasonably be seen as having contributed to the gradual shift in human-rights discourse from domination by Western legal experts to broad-based discussion that includes thinkers from developing countries in general and indigenous peoples in particular (Merry 2001, 34–39).

The standing of cultural relativism in public debates about human rights was further eroded when human-rights violators themselves began to appropriate its logic to defend their questionable policies and practices (Messer 1993, 240–41). Glendon (2001, 222) notes that during deliberations related to the adoption of the Universal Declaration, "Saudi Arabia made the isolated claim that freedom to marry and to change one's religion were Western ideas ill suited for universal application," a position that garnered little support at the time. More recent appeals to the notion of "Asian values" have been equally unsuccessful in slowing the shift toward universalized views of human rights. The attenuation of classical cultural relativism and its replacement by a more modulated strain makes this rhetorical gambit harder to sustain.

Today anthropologists are significant actors in global human-rights debates, whether they contribute as ethnographers, policy makers, or political activists. When reviewing factors that contributed to the discipline's move from wary mistrust to active endorsement of global human rights, it would be hard to overstate the impact of feminist scholarship. One has only to revisit Gayle Rubin's essay "The Traffic in Women" (1975) to be reminded how decisively early practitioners of feminist anthropology blew apart the normative vision of culture that prevailed in the work of Herskovits, Kroeber, Benedict, and other Boasians. Rather than being seen as morally homogeneous wholes, societies (even small-scale "tribal" ones) were reimagined as sites of contestation in which men and women often found themselves locked in conflicts over gendered interests and gender-based inequality. This, in turn, led to increased sensitivity to the rights of minorities within larger social units.

The rapid globalization of the women's movement has prompted debates that echo earlier discussions about whether the concept of human rights is inherently ethnocentric. Should the rights of women be cast in individualistic terms such as a right to formal education, a right to choose marital partners, a right to protection from domestic violence, and the like, or are there group-based cultural rights that benefit women particularly and therefore warrant equal attention? Such questions continue to be debated vigorously today.[12] In these discussions anthropology has had a dual role that reflects the legacy of the 1940s debate over the Universal Declaration. On one hand, anthropologists are well represented among those calling attention to the suffering experienced by women as a result of patriarchal customs as well as the destructive impact of neocolonialist policies. On the other, anthropologists stand ready to question simplistic moralizing that invokes the rhetoric of universal human rights. The latter kind of intervention is exemplified by Lila Abu-Lughod's cautionary essay on Muslim women (2002), which challenges ill-considered assumptions about the oppressed status of women in the Muslim world. Abu-Lughod asks her readers to be "respectful of other paths toward social change that might give women better lives" (p. 788), paths that may have Islamic variations difficult for non-Muslims to envision. A more controversial example is Richard Shweder's (2003) critique of the global movement against female genital mutilation. Emulating the double-negative logic of Geertz's (2000) "anti anti-relativism," Shweder does not defend female circumcision; he simply argues against an "imperial liberalism" that campaigns against it by marshaling questionable facts and excluding the voices of those who hold different views.[13] Even those unconvinced by Shweder's argument must acknowledge that his call for open dialogue and scrupulous attention to evidence should be taken seriously, especially when seen against a backdrop of the West's previous efforts to impose its moral vision—too often colored by economic and political self-interest—in Africa and elsewhere.

Where human rights are concerned, then, anthropology has moved a great distance from the positions it enunciated in the late 1940s. As an occupational community, anthropologists have taken a strong stand in support of global efforts to protect basic rights on both the individual and the communal level. What remains is a downsized relativism that constrains the facile invocation of human rights to justify external intervention (Dembour 2001) and, more broadly, helps to counterbalance the civilization-versus-barbarism rhetoric that has been granted a new lease on life by recent terrorist attacks in North America and Europe.

Many have noted that support for human rights and humanitarian interventions is difficult to square with the broad tolerance advocated by proponents of classical cultural relativism. Alison Dundes Renteln (1988) argues that tolerance

11. Many recent works consider the debate within anthropology about the Declaration of Human Rights, including Messer (1993), Engle (2001), and Glendon (2001).

12. For an informative discussion of this issue, with particular attention to the status of women and minorities, see Nagengast (1997).

13. For recent essays arguing against claims of moral (or liberal) imperialism, see Stoll (2006) and R. Wilson (2006).

has no necessary connection to relativism, even if the two are closely linked in the work of Herskovits and others. A recent critique of liberal tolerance by the political theorist Wendy Brown (2006, 7) goes beyond this to identify what she sees as the pernicious implications of tolerance talk, which among other things may serve "not only to anoint Western superiority but also to legitimate Western cultural and political imperialism."[14]

A full consideration of tolerance and its political implications is beyond the scope of my analysis. It should be clear, however, that tolerance is easier to advocate when the stakes are low than when cultural differences seriously threaten powerful interests, a point made long ago by Diamond (1974, 109) when he remarked that the relativism of the 1970s was "in accord with the spirit of the time, a perspective congenial in an imperial civilization convinced of its power." Today our no less imperial civilization seems uncertain about the degree of difference that can be accommodated within its own borders or in the global markets central to its continued prosperity. This insecurity guarantees that the scope and limits of tolerance will remain a vexing issue.

Unpacking Cultural Relativism's Component Parts

Relativistic thinking has a viral tendency to spread beyond its zone of legitimate usefulness. In the face of mounting evidence that the implacable logic of relativism was deployed too liberally by the Boasians, many scholars have tried to distinguish among cultural relativism's component parts with the goal of demonstrating that some have more merit than others.[15] The number of subvarieties of relativism that have been posited in these analyses is dizzying. One philosophical work lists 20 kinds of relativism in its index, including conceptual relativism, historical relativism, objective relativism, ontological relativism, relativistic metaethics, and vulgar relativism (Meiland and Krausz 1982, 259). In general, however, the most important elements of classical cultural relativism fall into three broad categories: methodological relativism, cognitive or epistemological relativism, and ethical or moral relativism.

Few philosophers and even fewer social scientists object to methodological ("descriptive") relativism, the practice of suspending judgment until a belief or practice can be understood within its total context. The most resolute antirelativists, however, insist that methodological relativism is not relativism at all: for Jarvie (1993, 540) it is "contextualism," whereas Tilley (2000, 520–21) prefers to call it "situationism." Ironically, supporters of methodological relativism rarely note that it is the expression of relativism infused with the greatest professional self-interest. Fieldwork would be impossible to accomplish if anthropologists felt free to voice dismay whenever confronted by practices that struck them as illogical or repugnant. As outsiders and guests, we suspend overt judgment out of respect for our hosts and, it must be said, to be allowed to complete our research. Regardless of its ethical complexities, methodological relativism is likely to remain an uncontested feature of anthropological practice, just as variations on it have been incorporated into professions such as psychology, medicine, and law.

Cognitive relativism holds that members of different societies live in different and incommensurable knowledge worlds. Encompassed by this general principle are two interrelated subthemes, one claiming that societies may exhibit ways of thinking that are radically different from our own, the other challenging the assumption that positivism and the scientific method have transcultural validity. Both have taken a beating on empirical grounds over the past three decades. The work of cognitive scientists has shown that many features of human cognition are universal, presumably because they are based on a shared neural architecture even though the expression of that architecture is significantly inflected by cultural forces. In one of his several critiques of relativism, Ernest Gellner (1985, 86; see also Spiro 1986, 265–69) observes that "no anthropologist, to my knowledge, has come back from a field trip with the following report: *their* concepts are *so* alien that it is impossible to describe their land tenure, their kinship system, their ritual." Elsewhere Gellner (1992, 58–60) argues that the relentless spread of science and technology throughout the world is the strongest evidence of positivism's transcultural validity. Key elements of science may have arisen in the West, but its logic is available to members of all societies and is generally recognized by them as superior (materially, if not morally) when they become fully conversant with it.

From a more distanced vantage, the persistence of cognitive relativism in the face of so much contrary evidence illustrates a figure/ground dilemma characteristic of the relativism debate. It is conventionally held that perfect translation from one culture to another is impossible or at least so compromised by issues of relative power that we should regard it with skepticism.[16] Yet, as Gellner observes, by dint of hard work we can approximate such perfection or at least come close enough to achieve a high level of mutual understanding. One would expect that on an increasingly interconnected planet claims of radical cultural difference would be ever harder to sustain. But there is little evidence that such claims are declining in frequency, and some scholars hold that "radical worlds" (Povinelli 2001, 320) continue to proliferate de-

14. Coming from a different theoretical milieu from Wendy Brown's, MacIntyre (2000, 153) insists that "[tolerance] is not in itself a virtue and too inclusive a toleration is a vice."

15. Representative discussions of major categories of relativism can be found in Hatch (1983) and Spiro (1986).

16. Clifford and Marcus's *Writing Culture* (1986) is arguably the most influential meditation on the political dilemmas of intercultural translation. Of particular relevance is a chapter by Talal Asad (1986, 164) that dissects Gellner's optimistic claims of translatability and concludes that "the anthropological enterprise of cultural translation may be vitiated by the fact that there are asymmetrical tendencies and pressures in the languages of dominated and dominant societies."

spite the myriad forces pushing humanity toward greater cultural similarity. It is difficult to resist the conclusion that this is primarily a political rather than an ontological process—and a thoroughly modern one at that. Purveyors of strategic otherness are resisting the efforts of outsiders to translate their values and sentiments, an act of commensuration inseparable from power relations (Harrison 2003). In this context, radical alterity is a rhetorical tactic that says, in effect, "We are ultimately unknowable, at least by you"—the rejoinder to which is "If you are so impossible to understand, why should we talk at all?" It is hard to see how strong claims of cognitive incommensurability can be justified in the face of evidence that countless human beings cross formidable cultural barriers on a daily basis.[17]

Nevertheless, to deny the absoluteness of differences between groups is not to declare that we are all the same. Radical sameness is just as implausible as radical difference. With refreshing common sense, the philosopher Amélie Oksenberg Rorty (1989, 418) observes that when relativists and antirelativists debate, they tend to traffic in exaggerations, "with relativists denying the possibility of cross-cultural understanding and their opponents denying the possibility of systematic untranslatability." Under these circumstances, she notes, their views are at the same time irreconcilable and "wildly implausible." The challenge of the anthropologist is to cultivate a suppleness of mind that facilitates navigation through the ample terrain lying between these two equally untenable extremes.

If cognitive relativism pits one anthropologist against another, moral or ethical relativism—the insistence that each people's values are sui generis and self-validating, requiring that outsiders assess them by that group's own standard rather than by a universal one—would seem to pit anthropologists against everyone else. It would be a herculean task to inventory the books and essays in which an author glibly claims that anthropologists will defend any practice because it has been deemed customary by some community or subculture. It proves surprisingly hard to find one of these anthropologists, however. Instead, sentiment in the discipline seems closer to that expressed in Richard Shweder's pithy maxim "What is moral is not anything, but it is more than one thing" (1990, 217).

Arrayed against ethical relativism is a range of alternative positions. One is unapologetically absolutist and anti-Enlightenment ("Universal moral rules come from God and are laid down in Holy Book X"). As such, it may be the subject of anthropological research but not a logic with which anthropology can engage directly.[18] A more sophisticated universalist position insists that the psychic unity of mankind implies a shared morality, a set of natural-law principles found everywhere, although they may be unevenly applied and imperfectly understood in specific societies. The moral principles offered by universalists tend to be sufficiently abstract that they flirt with triviality, as in "Societies everywhere hold that human life is sacred and cannot be taken without justification."[19] A statement such as this is not exactly wrong, but it is not particularly useful either, given the range of circumstances that qualify as justification in diverse cultural settings. A context-sensitive application of natural law would require heroic feats of casuistry to encompass the varied circumstances of humankind. The result, I suspect, would begin to look a lot like—relativism.

Lest the latter comment be dismissed as too flippant, let me offer an example: People in many societies believe that sorcery is a real phenomenon and that sorcerers blamed for the deaths of their alleged victims are murderers, plain and simple. If we attempt to apply the natural-law principle "It is immoral to take an innocent human life" to such cases, we face a maze of contingent moral complexities. Prior to the imposition of state power in remote regions, communities had no police force or judiciary that could permit an alleged sorcery murder to be adjudicated and some alternative to capital punishment imposed. Families were left to their own devices, with no monopoly on the use of force. The presence of an active sorcerer in the community was perceived by some as an ongoing threat, since the sorcerer could easily kill again. Not only were family members of a sorcery victim under powerful moral pressure to settle accounts with the alleged killer but also they felt obliged to protect their surviving kin from new magical assaults. Under such circumstances, a reluctance to act was regarded as a moral failure as unforgivable as the negligence of, say, American parents who allow their children regular contact with a known pedophile.

To the best of my knowledge, few anthropologists accept the literal truth of magical assault. Whatever truth inheres in sorcery beliefs lies at another level—the social and political,

17. Henrietta Moore (2005, 54) puts the question more tactfully when she asks, "If truths are actually incommensurable then what is the purpose of cross-cultural understanding and comparison?" Likewise, Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006, 31) asks, "And without a shared world, what is there to discuss?"

18. Fundamentalists consistently reject cultural relativism for its allegedly nihilistic assumptions, calling to mind the declaration of Terry Eagleton (2003, 214) that "fundamentalism is fearful of nihilism, having failed to notice that nihilism is simply the mirror-image of its own absolutism."

19. The latter approach can be sampled in a work by the political scientist Hadley Arkes in a chapter entitled "The Fallacies of Cultural Relativism; or, Abbott and Costello Meet the Anthropologist." Arkes declares: "The truth . . . is that in all these societies, distant as they have been in time and space, there has ever been but *one* set of moral premises, *one* understanding of the logic of morals." He continues (pp. 154–55): "If these societies have not been in agreement, I have suggested that the causes are to be found in matters far less portentous than a difference in moral premises. The disagreements can be attributed, without pretension, to faulty or incomplete reasoning from right premises, or to an insufficiently cultivated sense of the canons and requirements of moral reasoning."

perhaps—or in views about the covert powers of this or that category of people.[20] Killings based on a fundamentally erroneous belief are regarded as a human tragedy of major proportions. On those grounds, I expect that few anthropologists would protest if governments vigorously suppressed sorcery accusations and killings provided that such intervention were undertaken evenhandedly and with sensitivity to local conditions—admittedly, a tall order.

A fair-minded proponent of natural-law morality would be obliged to note that, as disturbing as sorcery killings may be, they are driven primarily by a mistaken understanding of the world rather than by unvarnished moral depravity. Once one accepts the reality of sorcery, the execution of sorcerers can be justified by reference to such natural-law axioms as the right of self-defense, loyalty to kin, and the obligation to defend one's dependents. Moreover, in the absence of any overarching authority structure that can restore order and weigh competing claims, sorcery-related violence is notoriously difficult to control once unleashed. Unless the version of natural law being applied is one that opposes killing under all circumstances, including self-defense, it is hard to see how our advocate of natural law would find sorcery killing morally equivalent to garden-variety homicide in the industrial West. It is murder, it is deplorable, and it should be discouraged whenever possible, but its distinct moral valence is defined by a particular cultural context that has to be reckoned with. That brings the natural-law account reasonably close to the variety of ethical relativism that prevails in anthropology today.

So far I have emphasized the case against ethical universals. Yet if anthropologists support the idea of universal human rights, we must subscribe to *some* principles close to this level of generality—ideas, say, about fundamental fairness, equality, compassion, and shared responsibility. As Todorov (2000, 138) points out, if humanity did not share basic ethical concepts, we would be incapable of recognizing the moral content of religious teachings from other places and times. The scarcity of anthropological attempts to formulate these principles in an explicit way says a great deal about the paralyzing effect of classical cultural relativism long after it has ceased to be a coherent doctrine or theory.[21] An exception to such timidity is the final chapter of Elvin Hatch's history of anthropological relativism. After concluding that classical cultural relativism is no longer defensible, Hatch (1983, 133–44) offers a set of standards by which the morality of other cultures can be judged. The most important of these is the "humanistic principle," based on the idea that successful institutions promote human well-being as measured by such indices as fairness toward others, the absence of physical coercion, and so forth. Hatch clearly seeks a functional model of morality rather than one based on natural law, his hope being that this will produce reasonably objective metrics that can be applied cross-culturally.

Hatch draws the line at attempting to make summary judgments about whether one society is more successful than another with respect to the promotion of human well-being: "The ledger sheets on which we tote up the pluses and minuses for each culture are so complex that summary calculations of overall moral standing are nearly meaningless" (1983, 139). To return to our sorcery example, we might be tempted to bask in our moral superiority as members of a society in which reason has largely triumphed over belief in witchcraft. And yet, as Michel de Montaigne (2004) famously observed four centuries ago in "Of Cannibals," "We may then call these people barbarous, in respect to the rules of reason: but not in respect to ourselves, who in all sorts of barbarity exceed them." Our own barbarity manifests itself in extremes of inequality and social alienation that continue to shock members of many indigenous societies.

Robert Edgerton (1992) reframes the project of distinguishing better from worse societies by attempting to identify exemplars of "sick societies." His goal is to debunk classical cultural relativism's claim that all societies are equally successful and, more specifically, the common belief that tribal peoples are happier and healthier than their counterparts in industrial societies. While Edgerton has no problem identifying instances in which cultures have gone awry, he shares Hatch's reluctance to rank societies with respect to well-being or adaptive success. Instead, he argues for additional research on shared human "needs and predispositions" that can be used to "distinguish what is harmful for human beings from what is beneficial to them" (p. 208).

If strong versions of ethical relativism are untenable or at least highly questionable and natural-law principles of morality have only limited utility, with what are we left? One promising approach, which reflects global changes since the time of Herskovits, might be called *dialogical morality*. This approach rejects the cultures-as-discrete-worlds model of classical relativism in favor of one that envisions societies as part of an expansive moral community. "We have become moral contemporaries, caught in a net of interdependence," writes the philosopher Seyla Benhabib (1995, 250), "and our contemporaneous actions will also have tremendous uncontemporaneous consequences." This circumstance creates what she labels a "community of interdependence," which in turn obliges us "to translate the community of interdependence into a community of conversation across cultures." Benhabib's position invokes both Kant and Rawls but avoids the temptation to impose first-principles morality by fiat, arguing instead that robust regimes of fairness can emerge only after a democratic dialogue that invests them with legitimacy. An emphasis on interdependence highlights the complex moral

20. The question of where the truths of sorcery should be seen to lie is far knottier than I can deal with here. For a subtle, epistemologically nuanced attempt to do justice to these questions, see West (2007). The ethical dilemmas faced by ethnographers when confronted by socially destructive witchcraft accusations are vividly depicted in Wesch (2007).

21. A much-cited example of a highly formalized attempt to define such concepts as fairness, equality, social responsibility, and the contours of a well-ordered society is Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971).

links between apparently distant places. Such links include but are by no means limited to the distorting effect that colonial relations have had on the values and practices of subordinate communities.

The dialogical approach admittedly raises difficult questions. Imagining morality as a yet-to-be-defined set of principles emerging from global consensus leaves a great deal unsettled—too much, perhaps. Globalization (and the technological progress with which it is intertwined) may offer new opportunities for the forging of moral links between communities, but it also generates new ethical challenges as fast as older ones can be dealt with. The injustices associated with the global traffic in human organs suitable for transplantation come immediately to mind, but it is easy to think of others. More insidious is the tendency for the scale and complexity of modern institutions to hide ethically flawed policies from public view. On balance, however, it strikes me as a potentially productive avenue for rethinking transcultural morality after so many of cultural relativism's axioms have proven unsustainable. Dialogical morality is consistent with the "relationalism" identified by Mark Taylor (2007), a scholar of religion, as a key element in an emerging, globally networked moral order that duels with absolutes rooted in exhausted dichotomies: God and Satan, right and wrong, individual and group, cooperation and competition. Taylor is convinced that absolutes must be replaced by "creative co-dependence" and fluid decision making that embrace the relatedness of everything and promote an "ethic of life."

Dialogical morality makes little sense without an underlying conviction that humanity as a whole is moving toward greater equality, compassion, and justice (Ignatieff 2001, 3–5). Anthropologists have long wrestled with the question of whether moral progress is evident in cultural evolution (see, e.g., Hatch 1983, 106–26), and it is fair to say that we remain more skeptical than other occupational groups about the moral virtues of life in large-scale, hierarchically organized societies. That said, the involvement of so many anthropologists in human-rights work suggests an implicit belief that moral progress is a possibility worth striving for.

A commonly noted logical contradiction inherent in both cognitive and ethical relativism can be framed as a question: If members of all societies are ethnocentric by definition, isn't cultural relativism itself just another form of ethnocentrism? Should we care that relativism is a sensibility more often associated with "rootless cosmopolitanism" (Denby 2005, 62) than with the place-based communities whose cultures it claims to defend?

Such questions underscore one of classical cultural relativism's persistent ironies—that it validates the integrity of particular cultures while establishing, however tacitly, the superiority of the relativist's universalizing mission. The implications of this discursive legerdemain have engaged poststructuralist scholarship for decades in a debate that generates more heat than light.[22] But perhaps it is a less egregious contradiction than it appears. The claim that cultural relativism is a *scientific* doctrine has receded into anthropology's past, and with it some of the concept's presumed institutional legitimacy.[23] Today, in fact, it is more likely to be portrayed as antiscientific. Equally doubtful is the notion that cultural relativism is a unique product of Western intellectual history. Its canonization by the Boasians may have broken new ground, but some facets of cultural relativism date back to Herodotus, and it is not hard to find expressions of folk relativity in ethnographic accounts from Asia, Africa, South America—nearly anywhere, in fact, that different societies have rubbed elbows amicably for long stretches of time. One could probably make a case that ideas about the relativity of cultures are almost as widely distributed as ethnocentrism, although on balance they tend to be more muted and deployed less consistently.

Nature, Culture, and Universals

Edgerton's call for attention to human universals, alluded to earlier, leads to another major complaint about cultural relativism: that by explaining human thought and behavior exclusively with reference to particular cultures it has marginalized the study of human nature in the broadest sense. This theme is developed at length by Donald E. Brown (1991), whose brief for universals advances several points. First, although classical cultural relativism asserts the inherent plasticity of human values and practices, comparative research has shown that this plasticity has definite limits. An understanding of these limits helps to frame research on cultural difference. Second, recognition of panhuman tendencies or predispositions clarifies situations in which such behavioral default settings are reshaped by culture. Brown, along with others who advocate the study of human nature, insists that efforts to understand and improve human institutions will never succeed until they reckon with innate drives or psychological forces that influence behavior. The problem, of course, is that because cultural relativism is primarily directed to *differences*, it tends to undervalue universals, which are treated as constants and therefore of limited utility in the interpretation of behavior in specific settings.

The search for these innate drives or shared behavioral dispositions seems to have been largely abandoned by anthropologists, leaving the field open to scholars from other disciplines. Their work has produced a wave of books—many

22. For discussion, see Webster (1995) and, in a more general way, the observations of Latour (2004) on the excesses of contemporary critical theory. Strang (2006) argues that the distinction between indigenous and anthropological knowledges has been exaggerated. Anthropologists and their subjects, she argues, have long been engaged in a dialogical process that in her view is heading toward a common synthesis.

23. The obvious exception to this statement is methodological relativism, which continues to hold sway in anthropology and other social sciences.

with the words "morality," "brain," and "evolution" in their titles—declaring that cultural relativism has been rendered obsolete by research in cognitive science, sociobiology, or evolutionary psychology claiming to demonstrate that moral thinking is a hard-wired legacy of our primate heritage. This makes it a natural rather than a cultural aspect of human behavior, explainable in terms of its survival value (see, e.g., Hauser 2006 and Joyce 2006).

The notion that morality is in our genes and activated by specific parts of our brain—thus qualifying as a "universal moral grammar" (Hauser 2006, xvii) or as "a gadget, like stereo vision or intuitions about number" (Pinker 2002, 270)—excites book reviewers, who can be relied upon to hail it as revolutionary. However exalted these claims, though, they prove to be of limited utility when trying to make sense of everyday moral practice in a given milieu. If we all have the same moral or ethical substrate, why do values differ so much between human groups? Must we conclude that some moral principles are genuine because they are encoded in our genes, while others are spurious because they have arisen within specific cultural systems?

I do not doubt that evolutionary psychology attracts its share of sober-minded scholars committed to substantiating their theories with evidence that meets accepted scientific standards. Nevertheless, the field seems afflicted, as was sociobiology before it, by a swaggering triumphalism designed as much to provoke as to illuminate. Anthropologists have responded to this challenge in many venues, offering withering critiques of evolutionary psychology that focus on its limited and highly selective use of evidence, its sanctification of psychological mechanisms whose existence is inferred but unproven, and the troubling correspondence between its universalizing theories and the principles underlying modern capitalism.[24] These are typically framed by declarations that anthropology does not, in principle, reject empirically grounded attempts to generalize about human social behavior. Yet there is something disingenuous about this claim given our field's intensifying commitment to particularism and its retreat from comparison (Yengoyan 2006). We have, as Maurice Bloch (2005) observes, largely abandoned the territory now claimed by evolutionary psychology and are therefore ill-equipped to offer anything more substantive than critique. This is unfortunate, because nuanced, nonreductionist evolutionary approaches (see, e.g., Bloch and Sperber 2002; Richerson and Boyd 2005) ask important questions that warrant wider attention in our discipline and beyond.

To offer a convincing vision of the human condition, we must be able to strike a judicious balance between elements common to most cultural systems and those that make each group distinctive.[25] Anthropology's reluctance to do this contributes to the much-lamented disappearance of anthropologists from among the ranks of public intellectuals. Consistent with our long-standing role as "merchants of astonishment," (Geertz 2000, 64), we can be relied upon to defend the identity claims of particular communities or subcultures. Yet when asked to articulate a vision of how multiple distinct identities and value systems can be knit together into a viable national society, we are typically reduced to trafficking in bland platitudes about the virtues of tolerance. Debate about the range of behavioral diversity that can be accommodated within a liberal state has largely been ceded to political scientists and legal scholars, just as we have left discussion about human nature to evolutionary psychologists. If anthropologists wish to contribute effectively to public debates on these issues, we will have to recover from our disciplinary ancestors a double vision that attends simultaneously to the values of specific societies and those of the large-scale political and moral communities in which they are embedded.

Conclusions: Relativism within Reason

Classical cultural relativism, an all-encompassing doctrine that embraces methodological, cognitive, and ethical components, has been debated by scholars for more than a half-century. Today's consensus is that, as originally conceived, cultural relativism has significant flaws. It tends to exaggerate the internal coherence of individual cultures. It overstates differences between societies and underestimates the possibility of transcending these differences. Its totalizing quality invites moral minimalism and fosters hostility to comparative analysis. The logic of relativism is so inherently powerful that when used indiscriminately it can subvert almost any argument.

If these shortcomings were all that cultural relativism had to offer, I would argue for its immediate abandonment. Yet there is much to be said for the clarity and conciseness of classical cultural relativism's claim that cultures constitute distinct life-worlds, as long as it is not taken too literally. Innumerable ethnographers report decisive moments in their fieldwork when they suddenly encounter beliefs and behaviors lying beyond the pale of immediate comprehension. These might be expressed in the avidity with which one's hosts consume a local delicacy that by the visitor's standard is repulsive beyond measure, in lives tragically undone by violation of taboos or rules of decorum that to an outsider appear trivial, or in the dawning recognition that the people among whom one is living experience the landscape around them in

24. A recent example is McKinnon and Silverman (2005), which offers more than a dozen essays that challenge various universalizing claims—largely coming from evolutionary psychology—that the authors deem reductionist. See also McKinnon (2005).

25. Herskovits (1972 [1958], 57) acknowledged the legitimacy of empirically grounded work on human nature. "As far as I know," he wrote, "there is no relativist who would exclude from the anthropological repertory the study of values, or who would deny to human behavior its common psychological base. Nor do relativists deny the importance of research which would refine our knowledge of the nature and functioning of this common base . . . ."

ways that defy conventional description. It is this, the shock of the truly different, that classical cultural relativism helps us to understand, if not always to encompass within our own view of logic or morality.

In keeping with my revisionist approach, I wish to offer an amended statement of cultural relativism—Version 2.0—that retains defensible elements of the classical formulation while correcting those assumptions that have long since been abandoned by most practicing anthropologists. This is presented in the hope that, if we are to be denounced by relativism's critics, it will be for the relativism to which we subscribe, not the obsolete relativism of anthropology's adolescence.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM 2.0

1. Enculturation fosters the conviction among members of a society that their values and practices are uniquely satisfying and superior to others. Anthropologists have concluded that this widespread tendency, conventionally labeled ethnocentrism, is difficult but by no means impossible to transcend. Indeed, in the twenty-first century it is reasonable to assume that much of humankind is enmeshed in at least two overlapping cultural systems simultaneously.

2. Cultural systems are morally charged fields of action and meaning that demonstrate considerable coherence even if they are never truly closed systems. Because of this, institutions and practices must be understood first within their own context. This principle does not militate against the judicious use of cross-cultural comparison if it advances understanding of the broader human condition.

3. The ethnographic record demonstrates that the vast majority of stable societies, no matter how isolated or challenged by environmental constraints, have been able to provide rewarding lives for their members, lives that permit the expression of all human emotions, allow for some level of personal freedom and self-expression, and offer individuals satisfying social roles. This general observation does not preclude the assessment of particular practices as dysfunctional with regard to their ability to promote human well-being. Experience has shown, however, that such assessments should be entertained with caution.

4. All societies demonstrate internal diversity with respect to behavior and ideology; conversely, no society lacks some degree of internal tension along such fault-lines as gender, social rank, sexual orientation, or religious persuasion. Ethnographers should be reluctant to accept at face value any claim that long-established customs are an uncontested part of the society in question or that dominant practices transparently express cultural norms.

5. Interactions *between* cultural systems have complex, far-reaching effects, especially when relations are characterized by significant inequalities of power. A key element of the contextual sensitivity central to cultural relativism is systematic attention to the ways in which intercultural contacts challenge or distort a society's internal dynamics.

6. Although human social and psychological dispositions are exceedingly plastic, they are not infinitely so. There may therefore be legitimate reasons to study broadly distributed, perhaps even universal aspects of human cognition, family life, sexual expression, ethical values, or ideological production. As has often been observed by scholars committed to comparative work, universals are of limited use in accounting for cultural differences. Nevertheless, a willingness to keep universals in mind is not, in principle, inconsistent with the tenets of cultural relativism.

Despite its flaws, and revised along the lines proposed here, cultural relativism is a set of ideas worth keeping—not as a comprehensive philosophy or doctrine, a status it cannot sustain, but as a rule of thumb or an intellectual tool. The limits of its usefulness, like those of other tools, are determined by the problem at hand and the skill of the person who wields it. But what are those limits? I cannot offer easy answers, only an appeal to judgment and a willingness to submit questions to close scrutiny and the weight of evidence. This leaves substantial gray areas about which anthropologists will continue to argue, as we should.[26]

Above all, we must remember cultural relativism's important historical role in encouraging cross-cultural understanding and contributing to an expansion of human freedom, which of course is what Herskovits and other Boasians intended when they articulated it. Relativist thinking has produced concrete benefits for indigenous peoples, who have used it effectively to broaden the range of evidence that courts are willing to accept in cases involving land claims and the free exercise of religion (Cove 1999, 113). More broadly still, the simplicity of cultural relativism's axioms acts as a useful brake on analytical complacency. Alasdair MacIntyre (1985, 17–20), no friend of the relativist claim that social worlds are incommensurable, finds himself grudgingly accepting relativism's role as a check on conclusions that otherwise seem self-evident. Rationality, he insists, must stand ready to "accept, and indeed to welcome, a possible future defeat" of existing theories by "some alien and perhaps even as yet largely unintelligible tradition of thought and practice."

The flaws of cultural relativism are redeemed by a productive paradox: By forcing us to act as if the human social world were divided into discrete islands, cultural relativism disciplines the imagination, prompting us to observe carefully while avoiding the temptation to take much for granted. In so doing, it lays the foundation for bridges between these islands and, eventually, to a recognition that they are not islands after all.

26. A recent example is the lively debate provoked by Daniel L. Everett's (2005) assertion that the language of the Pirahã people of Brazil lacks certain grammatical features that many linguists believe common to all human languages.