right and society is wrong. When we contemplate social reform, we think of such moral exemplars as Martin Luther King, Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Susan B. Anthony, all of whom agitated for justice and moral progress. But one of the consequences of cultural relativism is that social reformers could *never* be morally right. By definition, what society judges to be morally right is morally right, and since social reformers disagree with society, they could not be right—ever. But surely on occasion it's the reformers who are right and society is wrong.

There is also the serious difficulty of using cultural relativism to make moral decisions. Cultural relativism says that moral rightness is whatever a culture or society approves of, but determining which culture or society one truly belongs to seems almost impossible. The problem is that we each belong to many social groups, and there is no fact of the matter regarding which one is our "true" society. Suppose you are an African American Catholic Republican living in an artists' colony in Alabama and enjoying the advantages of membership in an extremely large extended family. What is your true society? If you cannot identify your proper society, you cannot tell which cultural norms apply to you.

Some people may be willing to overlook these problems of cultural relativism because they believe it promotes cultural tolerance, an attitude that seems both morally praiseworthy and increasingly necessary in a pluralistic world. After all, human history has been darkened repeatedly by the intolerance of one society toward another, engendering vast measures of bloodshed, pain, oppression, injustice, and ignorance. The thought is that because all cultures are morally equal, there is no objective reason for criticizing any of them. Tolerance is then the best policy.

Cultural relativism, however, does not necessarily lead to tolerance and certainly does not logically entail it. In fact, cultural relativism can easily justify either tolerance or intolerance. It says that if a society sanctions tolerance, then tolerance is morally right for that society. But if a society approves of intolerance, then *intolerance* is morally right for that society—and the society cannot be legitimately criticized for endorsing such an attitude. According to cultural relativism, intolerance can be morally permissible just as tolerance can. In addition, though moral relativists may want to advocate universal tolerance, they cannot consistently do so. To say that all cultures should be tolerant is to endorse an objective moral norm, but cultural relativists insist that there are no objective moral norms. To endorse universal tolerance is to abandon cultural relativism.

ETHICS AND RELIGION

How is ethics related to religion? One obvious connection is that historically religion has always had moral content—mostly in the form of moral precepts, codes, or commandments to guide the conduct of adherents. In Western civilization, this content has been so influential in moral (and legal) matters that many now take for granted that religion is the fundamental basis of morality. Secular or nontheistic systems of ethics (for example, the ethics of Stoicism, Confucianism, Buddhism, utilitarianism, and contractarianism) have also shaped how we think about morality. But for millions of people, religion is the fountainhead of the moral law.

Many religious people, however, do not embrace a moral theory related to a religious tradition. They are comfortable being guided by one of the nontheistic systems. Others prefer the very influential moral perspective known as *natural law theory* (discussed in Chapter 2)—a view that comes in both secular and religious versions but has been nurtured and adopted by the Roman Catholic Church. Still others accept the pervasive idea that morality itself comes from God.

An important query in ethics is whether this latter view of morality is correct: whether morality depends fundamentally on religion, whether—to state the question in its traditional

form—the moral law is constituted by the will of God. The view that morality does have this kind of dependence is known as the **divine command theory**. It says that right actions are those commanded by God, and wrong actions are those forbidden by God. God is the author of the moral law, making right and wrong by his will.

But many people—both religious and nonreligious—have found this doctrine troubling. Philosophers have generally rejected it, including some famous theistic thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1710), and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

The problem is that the theory presents us with a disconcerting dilemma first spelled out in Plato's *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Socrates asks a penetrating question that is often expressed like this: Are actions morally right because God commands them, or does God command them because they are morally right? In the first option, God creates the moral law (the divine command theory); in the second, the moral law is independent of God's will so that even God is subject to it. Critics of the divine command theory have argued that the first option implies the moral law is entirely arbitrary. The second option denies the theory.

The arbitrariness is thought to arise like this: If actions are morally right just because God commands them to be so, then it is possible that any actions whatsoever could be morally right. The murder and rape of innocents, the oppression of the weak, the abuse of the poor—these and many other awful deeds would be morally permissible if God so willed. There would be no independent standard to judge that these acts are wrong, no moral reasons apart from God's will to suggest that such deeds are evil. God would be free to establish arbitrarily any actions whatsoever as morally right.

Defenders of the divine command theory have replied to the arbitrariness charge by saying that God would never command something evil because God is all-good. But critics point out that if the theory is true, the assertion that God is all-good would be meaningless, and the traditional religious idea of the goodness of God would become an empty notion. If God makes the moral law, then the moral term *good* would mean "commanded by God." But then "God is good" would mean something like "God does what God commands" or even "God is what God is," which tells us nothing about the goodness of God. Likewise, "God's commands are good" would translate as "God's commands are God's commands." This attempt to escape the charge of arbitrariness seems to have intolerable implications.

Theists and nontheists alike find this horn of Socrates's dilemma—the idea of an arbitrary, divinely ordained morality—incredible. They therefore reject the divine command theory and embrace the other horn, the view that right and wrong are independent of God's will. Moral standards are external to God, binding on both God and mortals. If there are divine commands, they will conform to these independent moral norms. The religious may then claim that God is good—good because he abides perfectly by the moral law and guides the conduct of believers accordingly.

If moral standards are not grounded in the divine will, if they are logically independent of religion, then morality is a legitimate concern for the religious and nonreligious alike, and everyone has equal access to moral reflection and the moral life. The best evidence for the latter is ethics itself. The fact is that people *do ethics*. They use critical reasoning and experience to determine moral norms, explore ethical issues, test moral theories, and live a good life. The results of these explorations are moral outlooks and standards founded on good reasons and arguments and assented to by reflective people everywhere.

In bioethics, the informed opinions of religious people are as relevant as those of secularists. But all parties must be willing to submit their views to the tests and criteria of critical reasoning and evidence.

But even if ethics does not have this independent status, there are still good reasons for religious believers to know how to use the critical

tools that ethics offers. First, like many secular moral rules, religious moral codes are often vague and difficult to apply to conflicts and issues, especially in complex fields such as bioethics. Getting around this problem requires interpreting the codes, and this task involves consideration of broader norms or theories, a typical job for ethics. Second, like everyone else, believers must deal with moral conflicts of all sorts—including clashes between the moral beliefs of religious adherents, religious leaders, and religious traditions. What is often needed is a neutral standard and critical analyses to arrive at a resolution—tools that ethics can easily provide. Third, public debate on ethical issues in a diverse society requires ground rules—chief among them being that positions must be explained and reasons must be given in their support. Unexplained assertions without supporting reasons or arguments are likely to be ignored. In this arena, ethics is essential.

MORAL ARGUMENTS

Critical reasoning is something we employ every time we carefully and systematically assess the truth of a statement or the merits of a logical argument. We ask: Are there good reasons for believing this statement? Is this a good argument—does it prove its case? These sorts of questions are asked in every academic field and in every serious human endeavor. Wherever there is a need to acquire knowledge, to separate truth from falsity, and to come to a reliable understanding of how the world works, these questions are asked and answers are sought. Ethics is no exception. Critical reasoning in ethics—called *moral reasoning*—employs the same general principles of logic and evidence that guide the search for truth in every other field. So we need not wonder whether we use critical reasoning in ethics but whether we use it well.

Argument Fundamentals

Most critical reasoning is concerned in one way or another with the construction or evaluation of arguments. As you may have guessed, here *argument* denotes not an altercation but a patterned set of assertions: at least one statement providing support for another statement. We have an argument when one or more statements give us reasons for believing another one. The supporting statements are *premises*, and the supported statement is the *conclusion*. In critical reasoning, the term *statement* also has a technical meaning. A statement (or claim) is an assertion that something is or is not the case and is therefore the kind of utterance that is either true or false.

You need to understand at the outset that *argument* in this sense is not synonymous with *persuasion*. An argument provides us with reasons for accepting a claim; it is an attempted "proof" for an assertion. But persuasion does not necessarily involve giving any reasons at all for accepting a claim. To persuade is to influence people's opinions, which can be accomplished by offering a good argument but also by misleading with logical fallacies, exploiting emotions and prejudices, dazzling with rhetorical gimmicks, hiding or distorting the facts, threatening or coercing people—the list is long. Good arguments prove something whether or not they persuade. Persuasive ploys can change minds but do not necessarily prove anything.

So we formulate an argument to try to show that a particular claim (the conclusion) should be believed, and we analyze an argument to see if it really does show what it purports to show. If the argument is good, we are entitled to believe its conclusion. If it is bad, we are not entitled to believe it.

Consider these two simple arguments:

Argument 1

Law enforcement in the city is a complete failure. Incidents of serious crime have doubled.

Argument 2

It's wrong to take the life of an innocent person. Abortion takes the life of an innocent person. So abortion is wrong.