Steven Sample

Paper on Mary Midgley, “Trying Out One’s New Sword”

Since the beginning of time man has pondered whether we can judge other cultures. One side of this debate is known as moral isolationism. The famous philosopher Mary Midgley disagrees with moral isolationism. Her father was the son of the eminent judge Sir Thomas Scrutton, and she was married to another philosopher, Geoffrey Midgley. In this paper I will summarize her arguments against moral isolationism, raise an objection, and show how she could respond to the objection. I will conclude that Midgley is right, and moral isolationism is false.

Moral Isolationism is the view that we can never understand any culture except our own, so we cannot make moral judgments about other cultures. “They feel that the respect and tolerance due from one system to another forbids us ever to take up a critical position to any other culture.” (Midgley, 25) Midgley has several different arguments against moral isolationism. First she gives the example of a Samurai trying out his new sword by cutting someone else in half. The moral isolationist would say that we can’t judge the Samurai because we are not living in medieval Japan. (Midgley, 25) Then Midgley says that if moral isolationism is right, other cultures can’t blame us either. The anthropologist mentioned in the *Guardian* article said that the South American Indian criticized the white Brazilians, but he had only been in town about two weeks. And can we praise them. Praise and blame go hand in hand. (Midgley, 26) Next Midgley says, “if we can’t judge other cultures, can’t we really judge our own?” She also says “But there is much that we don’t understand in our own culture too.” (Midgley, 26) That means that moral isolationism leads to moral skepticism. If we don’t fully understand our own culture, then we can’t judge it. But then we can’t make any moral judgments at all, and “essentially, this is the programme of immoralism, and it carries a distressing logical difficulty.” (Midgley, p. 26) Midgley finally points out that moral isolationists aren’t really skeptics because they want to defend the ancient Japanese. “He will probably talk of the lower value which the ancient Japanese placed on individual life generally”, Midgley writes (p. 27). So the moral isolationist is contradicting himself. Midgley thinks that moral reasoning is impossible if we can’t understand our own culture. If we can’t understand our own culture, then we can’t reason, and then we can’t give ourselves moral guidance in our own lives. We need moral reasoning to survive, so moral isolationism is wrong.

An objection to Midgley might be that we do understand a lot about our own culture. A moral isolationist might say that we can judge our own culture because we can understand it, even though there is much we can’t understand. Judging a culture doesn’t mean that we have to understand everything about it, just that we have to understand some things. So Midgley is wrong and moral isolationism doesn’t mean that there can be no moral reasoning. There can be moral reasoning as long as we understand some things about our own culture. Another objection is that Midgley says “the obstacles which often prevent it are simply those of ordinary ignorance, laziness and prejudice.” (Midgley, 27) But sometimes if someone does not understand another culture it’s not because of those things. Sometimes we need knowledge that comes from experience of another way of life. Someone who immigrates to a new country might not understand at first why they eat in a certain way or why it is not polite to discuss certain topics. But after a while they will gain that knowledge and become more understanding of the new country. It doesn’t mean they were lazy or prejudiced. So Midgley is not being fair to those who do not understand other societies.

Midgley might agree that the objection is right, and that moral isolationists could think that we can judge our own society even though we do not understand it completely. So she would agree that moral isolationism does not mean that moral reasoning is impossible. But she might say that if a moral isolationist admits that we can judge a society without fully understanding it, they must also admit that we can judge other societies. Take the example of the immigrant in the last paragraph who has just recently arrived at their new home. They might partially understand the new society in which they live, but not fully. They might decide that some of the practices and customs in their new country are unfair or cruel, or that some other practices are fair and just. Since they have partial understanding of the new country, they are able to make this new judgment according to the moral isolationist. But that means that the moral isolationist is contradicting himself again. He started off saying that we can’t judge other cultures, and now he is saying that we can. So Midgley is right after all.

I believe Midgley is right. The moral isolationist view is contradictory and illogical. However, I personally disagree with Midgley, because in the end there is no way we can really judge other cultures and their morality. What’s right for one person might not be right for another person. To truly know what is right for yourself, you are the only person who can decide. We should try to understand others but not to judge them.

**Bibliography**

Midgley, Mary. “Trying Out One’s New Sword.”