CHAPTER 19

Ethical Relativism

Moral Skepticism

Each of us has our doubts about morality. Some of these doubts focus on its content—we aren't sure of what morality allows, and don't know where our duty lies. This is a common worry, absolutely familiar to most of us.

But there is another kind of doubt, of a less usual, but no less disturbing sort. Indeed, this kind of worry can undermine all of our confidence in morality. This sort of puzzlement is not about, say, whether lying is ever acceptable, or whether we may break a death-bed promise to a loved one. Rather, it is a "deeper" worry, one that puts aside all specific debates about what is right and wrong, and asks instead about the entire enterprise of morality. The worry, specifically, is that **moral skepticism**[1]—the denial of objective moral standards—is correct, and that morality therefore lacks any real authority.

The notion of **objectivity**[2], like so many others that we have seen in these pages, is ambiguous. Objective moral standards are those that apply to everyone, even if people don't believe that they do, even if people are indifferent to them, and even if obeying them fails to satisfy anyone's desires. Moral claims are objectively true whenever they accurately tell us what these objective moral standards are, or what they require of us.

There are millions of objective truths. Here are three, at random: The planet Jupiter has a greater mass than Mercury. John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost*. Galileo is dead. It doesn't matter what you think of these claims, and it doesn't matter what I think of them. It doesn't matter whether I care about these claims, and it doesn't matter whether believing them satisfies

any of our desires. Neither personal opinion nor conventional wisdom makes these claims true. They are true and would continue to be so even if no one believed them.

But are there any objective *moral* truths? That's not so clear. There are plenty of reasons for doubt; the most popular and important of these will be the focus of our final chapter. If such doubts are correct, then **ethical objectivism** must be false. Ethical objectivism is the view that some moral standards are objectively correct and that some moral claims are objectively true.

Before having a look at these criticisms of ethical objectivism, let us consider the alternatives. This requires that we sort out the various forms that moral skepticism can take. (And it means just a little more jargon.) There are basically two forms of moral skepticism: **moral nihilism**, and **ethical relativism**.

Moral nihilism is the view that there are no moral truths at all. Taking a close, hard-nosed look at what is real and what isn't, nihilists place morality squarely in the latter camp. The world contains no moral features. Don't be fooled by our common talk of genocide's immorality or a murderer's evil nature. That sort of talk is either just plain false, or a disguised way of venting our feelings (of hatred, disgust, etc.)

According to the moral nihilist, when we take a step back from the issues that engage our emotions, we can see that nothing is right, and nothing wrong. The world will one day be fully described by science, and science has no need of moral categories. In the words of the brilliant Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776), we *gild* and *stain* a value-free world with our feelings and desires. When we declare a murderer wicked or a relief worker good and kind, we are expressing our anger or our admiration. We are not stating a fact. We couldn't be, since there is no moral reality to describe. As a result, no moral claims are true.

By contrast, ethical relativists claim that some moral rules really are correct, and that these determine which moral claims are true and which false. Many are true. People sometimes get it right in ethics, and they do that when their beliefs agree with the correct moral standards. Crucially, these standards are *relative to* each person or each society. A moral standard is correct just because a person, or a society, is deeply committed to it. That means that the standards that are appropriate for some people may not be appropriate for others. There are no objective, universal moral principles that form an eternal blueprint to guide us through life. Morality

is a "human construct"—we make it up, and like the law, or like standards of taste, there is no uniquely correct set of rules to follow.

These two brands of moral skepticism are quite different from each other. It pays to treat them separately. We'll keep the focus on ethical relativism in this chapter, and turn to moral nihilism in the next.

Two Kinds of Ethical Relativism

As you may already have noticed, ethical relativism isn't just a single doctrine. It actually comes in two varieties: **cultural relativism** and **individual relativism** (usually referred to as **ethical subjectivism**, a name I'll use from now on). Cultural relativism claims that the correct moral standards are relative to cultures, or societies; ethical subjectivism claims that the correct moral standards are those endorsed by each individual. The difference amounts to whether society, or each person, has the final say about what is right and wrong. This is undoubtedly an important difference, but as we'll see, both the advantages and the drawbacks of cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism are remarkably similar.

Consider subjectivism first. It says that *an act is morally acceptable just because (a) I approve of it, or (b) my commitments allow it. An action is wrong just because (a) I disapprove of it, or (b) my commitments forbid it.* My commitments are the principles I support, the values I stand for. In this line of thinking, personal conviction is the ultimate measure of morality. Right and wrong are wholly in the eyes of the beholder.

Subjectivists think that there are right answers in ethics, but that these are always relative to each person's moral standards. There is no superior moral code that can measure the accuracy of each person's moral outlook. If subjectivism is correct, each person's moral standards are equally plausible.

Cultural relativism instead locates the ultimate standard of morality within each culture's commitments. It says that *an act is morally acceptable just because it is allowed by the guiding ideals of the society in which it is performed, and immoral just because it is forbidden by those ideals.*

Both subjectivists and relativists regard people as the authors of morality. In both of these views, morality is made by and for human beings. Before we were around, nothing was right and wrong. If our species ever becomes extinct, morality will cease to exist. The fundamental difference between these two views is whether each person, or each society, gets to have the final say in ethics.

Despite their disagreement about whose views are morally authoritative, both ethical subjectivism and cultural relativism share a number of similar elements that make it easy to evaluate them in tandem. Let's now have a look at some of the most important features of these views.

Some Implications of Ethical Subjectivism and Cultural Relativism

Moral Infallibility

Subjectivism and relativism occupy a middle ground between moral nihilism and ethical objectivism. There are legitimate moral standards (contrary to nihilism), but their legitimacy depends crucially on our support (contrary to objectivism).

But subjectivists and relativists do not always see eye to eye. Subjectivists are suspicious of cultural relativism because of their belief that societies can be deeply mistaken about what is right and wrong. If a social code can contain some serious moral errors, then cultural relativism is in trouble, since it says that whatever society holds most dear is morally right.

Relativists admit that some social beliefs can be morally mistaken. These are the ones that clash with society's most cherished ideals. But if relativists are right, those ideals can never be mistaken, since they just are the ultimate moral standards for each society.

And yet societies are sometimes based on principles of slavery, of war-like aggression, or of sexual, religious, or ethnic oppression. Cultural relativism would turn these founding ideals into iron-clad moral duties, making slavery, sexism, and racism the moral duty of all citizens of those societies. The **iconoclast**—the person deeply opposed to conventional wisdom—would, by definition, always be morally mistaken. This has struck many people as seriously implausible.

But subjectivism is not in the clear here. It faces a similar problem. The cultural relativist makes societies morally infallible—incapable of error—at least with regard to their foundational principles. Yet subjectivists make *each person's basic commitments* morally infallible. True, subjectivism allows that people can make moral mistakes, but only if they fail to realize the implications of their own commitments. When it comes to the basic commitments themselves, subjectivism denies that these can ever be false or immoral.

If morality is in the eye of the beholder, then everyone is seeing things equally well. Millions of people have very sincerely endorsed programs of

ethnic cleansing, male domination, and chattel slavery. Subjectivism turns these prejudices into moral truths.

Moral Equivalence

Subjectivists grant that your moral values, which very likely oppose the ones just mentioned, are also correct. The biased and the bigoted have no monopoly on the truth. Ethical subjectivism is a doctrine of moral equivalence; everyone's basic moral views are as plausible as everyone else's. This can sound liberating and tolerant, and can be put to good use in cutting arrogant people down to size. Such people usually claim to have found the Truth, and often think that they have a special license to force this Truth on others. If subjectivism is correct, the views of such zealots are no better than those of their intended victims.

But they are no worse, either. If ethical subjectivism is correct, then the moral outlooks of Hitler or Stalin are just as plausible as those of a Nobel Peace laureate. And, as we will see in the final chapter (have a look at argument 5, pp. 312–314), if all moral views are on a par with one another, then this is a threat to tolerance, rather than support for it, since those with intolerant outlooks would have a moral view as good as that of their opponents.

Cultural relativists fare a bit better here. They will deny that everyone's moral views are equally plausible. Some people are much wiser in moral matters than others, since some people are better attuned to what their society really stands for. But when it comes to evaluating the basic codes of each society, relativists must allow that every code is equally good. Since the ultimate moral standards are those endorsed by each society, none is better than any other. That may sound egalitarian and open-minded, but what it means in practice is that social codes that treat women or ethnic minorities as property are just as morally attractive as those that don't. That's not an easy thing to accept.

No Intrinsic Value

Here is an ancient moral question: Is something good because we like it, or do we like things because they are good? Ethical subjectivism goes for the first option. There is nothing intrinsically good about promise-keeping, generosity, kindness, or caring. Subjectivists think that these things are valuable, if they are, only because people approve of them. Were our tastes to change, the morality of such actions and character traits would change with them.

That might strike you as suspicious. If it does, then cultural relativism might seem a good alternative. For in that view, moral standards do not depend on the possibly fickle choices of any single person.

Yet cultural relativism faces the same worry. For the relativist, the value of something depends entirely on whether a society's guiding ideals approve of it. When these ideals change, the moral code changes with them. If societies place no value on tolerance, or sexual equality, then in those societies such things have no moral value at all. An open, tolerant society that eventually became a fascist tyranny would not be falling into moral error. If relativism is true, then a society's basic moral ideals (no matter what they stand for) are correct. They are not correct because they measure up to some independent standard. They are correct because a society embraces them.

The problem with such a view is that the ultimate moral principles—whether fixed by each individual or by each society—can be based on prejudice, ignorance, superficial thinking, or brainwashing, *and still be correct.* According to both kinds of relativism, the origins of our basic moral beliefs are irrelevant. No matter how we came by them, the relativist claims that our ultimate moral beliefs cannot be mistaken.

Questioning Our Own Commitments

If subjectivism is correct, then I know what is right so long as I know what I approve of. That's because my approvals (according to subjectivism) are the ultimate test of morality. But what about the situations where I want to know whether my commitments are worthwhile? In these cases, I know what I like, but am still up in the air about its value. This sort of puzzlement *seems* to make sense. I have been in such situations before, where I am unsure of whether I am right to like someone so much, or wrong to be so critical of some action. But if subjectivism is true, this *cannot* make sense, since my approvals and disapprovals are the ultimate test of right and wrong.

The same sort of problem faces cultural relativism. There is no room in this theory to second-guess the guiding ideals of one's own society, since (by definition) they are the correct moral standards of that society. And yet it sometimes does seem to make sense to ask whether the basic principles of one's society are also morally acceptable. If relativism is correct, however, such questioning reveals a confusion about what morality is all about.

Moral Progress

It seems that both individuals and societies can make moral progress. We can do this when our actions become morally better than they used to

be. But I am thinking here of progress in our moral beliefs. This occurs when more of them are true and, in particular, when our most fundamental beliefs change for the better.

The gradual reduction in racist and sexist attitudes in the United States seems to represent this sort of moral progress. The kind of repentant self-examination that German society undertook (and continues to undertake) after World War II also seems a clear improvement over Nazi ideology. When I examine my own life, I see several moral views that I held when I was younger that I now regard as seriously mistaken. I am probably not alone in this.

The problem for relativism and subjectivism is that it does not seem to be able to make sense of the most basic kind of moral progress. If a person's or a society's deepest beliefs are true by definition, then they *cannot* change for the better. They can change, of course. But if subjectivism or relativism is true, then this change cannot represent moral progress.

To measure moral progress, you need a standard. In ethics, that standard is the ultimate moral rule (or rules, if we are pluralists). If subjectivism is correct, that ultimate rule is personal opinion. If relativism is correct, that ultimate rule is given by a society's basic ideals. These cannot be mistaken. If a society gradually eases out of its deeply sexist attitudes, for instance, that cannot be moral progress. That can only be a change to a different moral code. And if relativism is correct, different moral codes are not better or worse than one another. They are morally equivalent.

According to these views, moral improvement is possible only if our more specific moral beliefs line up better with our deepest moral convictions. But these deepest convictions can never improve. No change in them can ever represent moral progress, since they are the ultimate standard by which any such progress could be measured.

If subjectivism is correct, then inmates who experience a deep change of heart while in prison, who adopt new aims of charity and repentance, cannot be showing moral progress. If relativism is correct, then a society that rejects its earlier ideals of racial purity and genocide cannot be making moral progress. That is difficult to believe.

In sum, both forms of relativism encounter some serious difficulties. They make the deepest commitments of each person or society morally infallible, no matter whether such commitments reflect ignorance, bias, sloppy thinking, etc. They are doctrines of moral equivalence, and so deny that compassion, kindness, and benevolence are morally superior to treachery, betrayal, and violence. In rejecting the idea that any

actions or character traits are intrinsically good, they make morality subject to the whims of individuals or societies, as changeable as personal or social opinions. When we search for guidance in examining our most basic commitments, both forms of relativism have nothing to offer. Indeed, they think that such questioning is confused, since (by their lights) things are good only because we value them, and not the other way around. Finally, neither form of relativism can make sense of fundamental moral progress, understood as an improvement in our deepest moral beliefs.

Contradiction and Disagreement

A final problem for both theories is one that you've probably already thought of. It is the problem of contradiction. A contradiction occurs when a statement is said to be both true and false at the same time. It's a contradiction, for instance, to both assert and deny that the Empire State Building is in New York. Theories that generate contradictions are incoherent. They can't be true; they are muddled and inconsistent.

It looks like subjectivism leads to contradiction. For consider its test of truth and falsity:

> (S) A moral judgment is true if it accurately reports one's feelings or commitments, and is false otherwise.

If S is correct, then people on opposite sides of a moral debate are both saying something true. The pro-choicer is speaking the truth when saying that abortion is morally right. And the abortion opponent is also speaking the truth when saying that it is immoral. But abortion can't be both right and wrong. That is a contradiction. Since subjectivism generates contradictions, it must be false.

There is a solution to this problem, but it has its costs. The solution implies that we usually don't mean what we say in our moral debates. What we say are things such as:

- The death penalty is immoral.
- Abortion is wrong.
- Eating animals is okay.

But what we *mean* is:

- The death penalty is wrong, according to me.
- I disapprove of abortion.
- As I see it, eating animals is okay.

And just like that, the contradictions disappear! Suppose that you and your friend disagree about whether eating animals is wrong. You say it is; she says it isn't. As the subjectivist sees things, you are saying that you disapprove of meat-eating; she says that she approves of it. These claims don't contradict each other. This sort of strategy will work across the board, for all moral claims, and so we can save subjectivism from contradiction.

Here are the costs. First, subjectivists have to accuse nearly everyone of misunderstanding their own moral claims. And second, such a view eliminates the possibility of moral disagreement.

To illustrate the first problem, consider this conversation:

ME: Genocide is immoral.
SUBJECTIVIST: What I'm hearing is—you disapprove of genocide.
ME: Yes, I disapprove of genocide. But that's not what I'm saying. I'm not talking about my attitudes, I'm talking about genocide. You're changing the subject.

Subjectivists can't make sense of my reply here. It's not that my reply might be false. Rather, my reply is unintelligible, since it assumes that moral talk is about something other than my own commitments. Most of us assume precisely that. If subjectivism is right, we are badly mistaken.

In order to avoid the problem of contradiction, subjectivists have to say that our moral assertions report facts only about our own commitments. When I say that genocide is wrong, I am not saying that it has a certain feature—wrongness. I am saying that I disapprove of it or that my principles forbid it. I am talking about myself. That's not what most people think they are doing when they make their moral judgments.

The second problem is even more serious. Subjectivism is unable to explain the existence of moral disagreement. In order to avoid generating contradictions, subjectivists have to understand all moral judgments as reports of whether I approve of something or not. The claim that meat-eating is wrong becomes the claim that I disapprove of meat-eating. The judgment that bravery is a virtue becomes the claim that bravery is something I admire. And so on. But on this line, moral debates that seem to involve intense disagreement become something completely different. In fact, it now becomes *impossible* for people to morally disagree with one another.

To see this, imagine an earlier dispute.

YOU SAY: It's wrong to eat meat.
AND YOUR FRIEND SAYS: It's okay to eat meat.

The subjectivist translates this as follows:

YOU: I disapprove of eating meat.
YOUR FRIEND: I approve of eating meat.

The contradiction has indeed disappeared. But so has the disagreement. If you are both taking this seriously, you'll agree with your friend's claim, and she with yours. If all that moral judgments do is report people's outlooks, then there is no way to morally disagree with anyone—except to charge them with insincerity. But that seems plainly wrong.

Subjectivism reduces all moral talk to autobiographical reports. Disagreement is impossible, because there is no common subject matter to disagree about. Those who debate the merits of abortion may think that they are discussing abortion, and whether it is has a certain feature—namely, that of being morally acceptable. Not so. They are instead talking about their attitudes of approval and disapproval. If that were true, there would be no point in debating morality at all.

But there certainly seems to be a point (or rather, many points) to engaging in moral discussion. And the appearance of moral disagreement is very vivid. Perhaps such appearances are all illusions. And perhaps moral debate really is pointless. It would indeed be pointless if all we could possibly talk about were our own thoughts about things, rather than about the moral features of the things themselves.

In short, subjectivism faces a dilemma. If we take moral claims at face value, then subjectivism generates contradictions, and so it must be false. If we reinterpret all moral claims to be focused on our attitudes, then the contradictions disappear, but so, too, does moral disagreement.

Cultural relativism faces the same dilemma. It says that *a moral judgment is true just because it correctly describes what a society really stands for*. For instance, if different societies disagree about the appropriate political status of women, then each is speaking the truth when it asserts (or denies) female moral equality. But that is impossible. The statement that women are deserving of full political equality cannot be simultaneously true and false.

Relativists can escape this problem in familiar ways. They will claim that moral judgments are true only relative to social agreements. In this line of thinking, moral judgments are just like legal ones. It isn't contradictory to say that smoking marijuana, for instance, is both legal and illegal, so long as we qualify things to note that it is legal in some areas and illegal in others.

Relativists will say that all of our moral claims have to be understood by reference to social agreements. When you say that meat-eating is right, and your Hindu friend from Calcutta says that it is wrong, what is really being said is:

YOU: Meat-eating is accepted by my social customs.
YOUR FRIEND: Meat-eating is forbidden by my social customs.

And again, both of these claims can be true. The contradiction disappears. There is no single judgment that is both true and false.

But then the existence of cross-cultural moral disagreement also disappears. If the ultimate moral standard is each society's ethical code, and our moral judgments are attempts to describe what our society believes, then the only way to criticize someone is to say that he has mistaken what his society really stands for. It doesn't seem as if that is what serious, engaged moral debate is all about. For instance, it appears possible to note that a society approves of making wives domestic slaves and yet to disagree with the morality of that policy. But that's not so if relativism is to escape the contradiction problem.

So the cultural relativist faces the same dilemma as the subjectivist. Indeed, the relativist is in one way more vulnerable than the subjectivist here. For the cultural relativist may be unable to escape contradiction after all.

People who are members of subcultures—smaller cultural groups located within larger ones—often face a familiar problem. They are forced to choose between allegiance to the larger society and to their particular subculture. They are members of at least two societies, and when their ethical codes conflict, these unfortunate people are faced with contradictory moral advice.

This isn't some philosopher's fiction. Such cases happen all the time. We could easily multiply examples, but this famous one from my home state should be enough to make the point.

Consider the facts of *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, a case resolved by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1972. Wisconsin then required regular school attendance of all children up to the age of sixteen. The sons of three Old Order Amish families had stopped going to school after the eighth grade, in obedience to their parents' beliefs that continued schooling would conflict with their religious values. The students were found guilty of violating the state law, but the verdict was overturned by the State's Supreme Court.

Wisconsin then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which sided with the Amish families.

In its decision, the Court's majority announced that:

> They [the Amish families] object to the high school, and higher education generally, because the values they teach are in marked variance with Amish values and the Amish way of life; they view secondary school education as an impermissible exposure of their children to a "worldly" influence in conflict with their beliefs. The high school tends to emphasize intellectual and scientific accomplishments, self-distinction, competitiveness, worldly success, and social life with other students. Amish society emphasizes informal learning-through-doing; a life of "goodness," rather than a life of intellect; wisdom, rather than technical knowledge; community welfare, rather than competition; and separation from, rather than integration with, contemporary worldly society.

The schoolchildren lived in (at least) two societies at once: their Amish community and the larger state of Wisconsin. If relativism is correct, then the morality of your actions depends entirely on whether they are allowed by the standards of the society they are performed in. But if you live in different societies, and their ethical codes clash, then your actions will be both moral and immoral. That is a contradiction.

We could solve this problem if we could figure out which society's code is more important. But relativism doesn't allow us to do that. By its lights, no society's moral code is any better than another's. We might be tempted to let the children decide, and say that the social code that takes priority is the one that the children prefer. But this would undermine cultural relativism, since such a move would make the morality of their actions depend on personal choice. They would get to pick the code that is to govern their lives. That is subjectivism, not relativism.

Indeed, critics of cultural relativism often say that the doctrine eventually collapses into subjectivism. When your views and society's views clash, why think that society is always right? If morality is created by humans, then it is hard to justify the claim that moral wisdom always lies with the masses rather than with individuals. The majority may have the power to force the minority to do as it says. But might doesn't make right.

Subjectivists claim that in conflicts between personal and social commitments, the individual is always morally wiser. Cultural relativists take the opposite line. But perhaps things are not so cut and dried. Sometimes individuals have the upper hand; sometimes societies do. And sometimes,

perhaps, both individuals and societies are mistaken, even in their deepest commitments. If that is ever so, then we must look elsewhere for an account of morality's true nature.

Ideal Observers

There is a natural way to fix some of these problems for the subjectivist and relativist. We should guarantee that those who create the moral law (whether each individual or whole societies) are not choosing from ignorance, but are equipped with full information. We should also make sure that they are reasoning clearly and avoiding logical errors. In other words, rather than allow us as we actually are (warts and all) to have the final word in morality, we should make the desires and choices of **ideal observers** the ultimate standard of morality. Ideal observers can survey the scene more dispassionately, more knowledgeably, more rationally. They are better suited to inventing the moral law than we mere mortals are.

According to this new and improved version of subjectivism, an act is morally right just because I *would* favor it were I fully informed and perfectly rational. The relativist version says that acts are morally right just because a society *would* approve of them were its members fully informed and rational.

This will surely correct some of the problems that we have noted: (1) Even the core moral beliefs of individuals and societies may now be mistaken, as their views may fail to measure up to those of the ideal observers. (2) Further, the views of individuals and societies will *not* be morally equivalent, since some will more closely approximate those of the ideal observers. (3) The sincere endorsements of slavery and genocide will not automatically be morally authoritative, since such endorsements are almost always based on ignorance and irrationality. (4) Moral progress will now be possible, and will occur when the moral views of individuals and societies more closely reflect the attitudes of ideal observers. (5) There will be real disagreement between conflicting moral views, since moral judgments will not be reports of personal opinion or cultural consensus, but will rather be claims about what ideal observers will approve of.

These are real improvements. But ideal observer views are not problem-free. In fact, there are two serious concerns. The first occurs if there is ever any disagreement among ideal observers. The ideal observer view says that perfectly rational and intelligent people create morality through their choices. If that is so, then if such people make conflicting

choices, this will cause contradictions. And contradictions fatally undermine any theory that contains them.

Perhaps perfectly smart and rational people will never disagree about anything. But why the optimism? Those who know all there is to know about embryology, for instance, might still morally disagree about abortion. After all, in the ideal observer views, such geniuses are not trying to understand the morality of the actions they are assessing. Before they make their decisions, there is no morality. Ideal observers don't respond to a world with moral features. Their preferences and choices create morality. But then there doesn't seem to be anything to prevent them from having conflicting attitudes. If they do, contradiction results.

I think that there is a successful solution to this problem. We can borrow a strategy we've seen before,[3] when discussing a similar problem that arose for social contract theories and virtue ethics. The strategy tells us that an action is morally required or forbidden only if *all* ideal observers agree in their attitudes about it. If all ideal observers endorsed an action, then it would be morally required. If they all opposed it, it would be forbidden. And if they disagreed on the matter, then it would be morally permitted—neither required nor forbidden. By making morality depend on the attitudes of all ideal judges, rather than each one individually, this theory can indeed avoid contradiction.

But another problem cannot be handled so easily. The view on the table says this: Nothing is intrinsically right; things become right just because an ideal observer would favor it. But what if such people thought that killing off the mentally ill was a great idea? What if they thought that sadism was preferable to compassion? What if they approved of apartheid policies? You might think such a thing impossible. But why? Evil people need not be factually ignorant or illogical. Vast knowledge doesn't guarantee a sympathetic nature. Greater logical skills don't automatically translate to greater kindness. Even the most rational and well informed among us can be biased, hateful, and cruel.

Recall how we got here. Subjectivism and cultural relativism allow the basic views of individuals or societies to determine the ultimate moral standards. But such basic views can be the product of ignorance, bias, and poor reasoning. We tried to fix this problem by changing the theories so that the authors of morality were ideal versions of us. They would be people with perfect information, and perfect logical skills. And yet, as we've seen, this modified view has troubles of its own, and fails to solve the worry that led to its creation. The very smartest people can also be the coldest and cruelest.

This is a deep problem for ideal observer views. In fact, the problem should be a familiar one, since it is the same one that threatens the divine command theory.[4] The divine command theory says that no acts are intrinsically right or wrong; their morality depends entirely on whether God approves of them. In this view, acts are morally right just because God insists that we do them, and wrong because He loathes them.

The basic problem is that actions don't become right just because someone (even God) happens to favor them. Think back to our earlier discussion of the Euthyphro dilemma.[5] Either God has reasons for His commands or He doesn't. If He doesn't, then the commands are arbitrary, and can't provide the basis for a legitimate morality. But if God does have reasons for His commands, then these reasons, rather than God's say-so, are what explain why various actions are right. God can ratify the moral standards. He can know every one of them. He can convey them to us. But He cannot be their author, on pain of resting morality on arbitrary foundations.

The same line of reasoning works to undermine all of the views we have considered in this chapter. Subjectivism, cultural relativism, and ideal observer theories all share the same basic structure. On these views, nothing is right or wrong in and of itself. Actions have the moral status they do only because I or my society actually approve of them, or would approve of them if we were perfectly intelligent. How can the decisions of any such person or group be so powerful as to transform a valueless activity into something good or right?

These morally all-powerful people either are or aren't basing their decisions on good reasons. If there are no good reasons to back up their decisions, then the decisions are arbitrary, and cannot be the basis of a morality worthy of our respect. But if there are good reasons to back up the decisions, then the reasons, rather than the decision, determine the morality of the actions in question.

Suppose, for instance, that I (or my society or an ideal observer or God) have reasons that support my disapproval of torture. And these are the reasons: the pain it imposes, its unreliability as a source of valuable information, the disrespect it reveals, and the way it renders its victims utterly powerless. If these really are good reasons, then they are all that's needed to make torture wrong. My disapproval doesn't add anything to these reasons. If I am really wise, then my disapproval can be very good *evidence* of something's immorality. But the approval cannot turn a morally neutral action into a forbidden one.

Socrates's argument against the divine command theory is just as powerful when brought against subjectivism, relativism, and ideal observer theories. If his line of reasoning is correct, then personal approval is not enough to make something right. Acts are right because they are supported by excellent reasons, and not because individuals or groups just happen to favor them.

Conclusion

Both cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism are popular ways of challenging the idea that morality is objective. But as we've seen, both theories face a similar set of problems. They make all moral views or all social codes morally equivalent. They make the deepest commitments of each person or each society morally infallible, even if the commitments are based on ignorance or prejudice. Neither theory offers a way to evaluate our guiding ideals, since these ideals are correct because we endorse them, and not the other way around. Neither theory allows for fundamental moral progress. Both theories generate contradictions, and can eliminate this worry only by making moral disagreement impossible.

This laundry list of complaints explains why cultural relativism and ethical subjectivism have found little favor among philosophers. For those with doubts about the objectivity of morality, nihilistic alternatives may have more to offer.

Notes

1. The term "moral skepticism" sometimes refers to the view that gaining moral knowledge is impossible. (That's the way I used the term in chapter 16, for instance.) I am going to use the term here in a different way, noted above—namely, to refer to all theories that deny the existence of objective moral standards.
2. All terms and phrases that appear in **boldface** are defined in the glossary at the end of the book.
3. See chapter 14; see also chapter 17, pp. 254–256.
4. See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of the divine command theory.
5. See pp. 60–65, and the related discussion in chapter 17, pp. 256–258.