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ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Jay NEWMAN

THERE are two ways in which one can go about defending ethical relativism ; one is empirical and the other is theoretical. The empirical defense of ethical relativism involves the citation of any number of personal, social and cultural differences in moral behavior or moral belief. Those who offer the empirical defense, like Professor Westermarck in his classic study, *Ethical Relativity*,¹ do not concentrate on actions and beliefs that are almost universally regarded as barbaric, such as those of Heliogabalus, Hitler or the Huns, but on actions and beliefs which, while different from those of the relativists' readers, are more or less regarded as civilized. The empirical data that ethical relativists collect would seem to be more the anthropologist's concern than the philosopher's, but it is, nevertheless, something that the ethical theorist must come to grips with, and we shall return to it later in the study.

The theoretical defense of ethical relativism is *unquestionably* a problem for the moral philosopher, and it is not, in fact, unlike other appeals to relativism that have been made by philosophers, such as the appeal to metaphilosophical historicism and the appeal to aesthetic subjectivism. Perhaps it is best, then, to begin our analysis of the ethical relativist's position by considering this theoretical defense.

I

Ever since the time of the Greek philosophers, it has been obvious to ethical theorists that the explanation of behavior must somewhere come to an end ; it might be reasonable on certain occasions to ask for an explanation of an explanation of certain behavior or a justification of a justification of a certain action, but we clearly do not want to have on our hands infinite regressions of explanations and justifications which will prevent us from acting. As John Henry Newman remarks in the *Grammar of Assent*, "Life is for action. If we insist on proofs for every thing, we shall never come to action. . . ." ²

¹ Edward WESTERMARCK, *Ethical Relativity* (New York : Harcourt, Brace 1932).

² John Henry NEWMAN, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, ed. Charles Frederick Harrold (New York : Longmans, Green, 1947), p. 72.

If the chain of ethical explanations, justifications or reasons must somewhere come to an end, then some moral principles, beliefs or values must be *without justification*.³ And if these "primal" moral principles, beliefs or values differ significantly from person to person, society to society or culture to culture, then we are faced with ethical relativism, an indissoluble variation in fundamental moral attitude or outlook.

Let us set out this theoretical defense of ethical relativism a bit more formally. The reason or justification for doing act ϕ is moral principle (belief, value) A (or moral principles $A_1, A_2, A_3 \dots$, coupled, perhaps, with factual beliefs a, b, c. . . .), and the reason or justification for holding or accepting moral principle A (or $A_1, A_2, A_3 \dots$) is moral principle B (or $B_1, B_2, B_3 \dots$, coupled, perhaps, with factual beliefs c, d, e. . . .). Now, there is either (1) an infinite regression of moral principles, beliefs or values justifying or supporting other moral principles, beliefs or values; or (2) some basic moral principle, Z, or set of moral principles, $Z_1, Z_2, Z_3 \dots$, such that Z or any component principle of the set is unjustified (and no reason can be offered for accepting Z or any component principle of the set). If the first alternative is correct, then human beings are saddled with moral impotence; the person faced with a moral decision will never be able to make that decision because he will have to involve himself in a process of perpetual justification, going on and on, justifying moral principles with higher-order moral principles. If the second alternative is correct, then we are no better off, for we are forced to see ethical reasoning as breaking down somewhere along the line into basic principles that are arbitrary and relative — being, as they are, unreasoned or primal.

Neither of the alternatives is desirable; the first leads to moral impotence and the second leads to the arbitrariness of fundamental moral principles and ethical relativism. Ethical relativists, especially those of the academic variety, are not usually wicked men plotting the destruction of Civilization; they do not seem to see ethical relativity as a phenomenon that threatens our morality. But perhaps they are simply myopic; while they are not concerned with Heliogabalus, Hitler and the Huns, we *must* be, and if fundamental moral principles are simply arbitrary and relative, then our dissatisfaction with barbarism may be unwarranted. For this reason, we must try to offer an answer to the ethical relativist, and that answer must be one which will not saddle us with moral impotence.

II

The ethical relativist's "theoretical" argument seems to have three steps:

1° A moral principle (belief, value) can only be justified by another moral principle (or other moral principles; or another moral principle or other moral principles coupled with one or more factual beliefs or facts).

³ When I say that these principles, beliefs or values are *without justification* or *primal*, I do not mean to suggest that they are *unjustified* or that *they ought not to be held*. I mean simply that they are not justified or supported by *some other reason*.

2° There cannot be an infinite regression of moral principles (beliefs, values) supporting or justifying other moral principles.

3° There must be at least one moral principle (belief, value), Z , which is primal, and if Z is rejected by one or more people in favor of another primal moral principle, Z_1 , then moral principles Z and Z_1 are "relative."

The first premise of this argument, argument K , establishes the chain of moral principles justifying other moral principles. Consider, for example, the moral principle, belief or value, "Stephen should not lie to his mother about his grades." The moral philosopher or ethical theorist, if he takes his work seriously, wants to show that this principle, belief or value is derived rationally — by reasoning or inference — and is not merely "intuited," an immediate synthetic a priori cognition, or the manifestation of an emotional attitude. But what sort of premises is the wrongness of Stephen's lying to be deduced from? If the ethical theorist argues that a moral principle can be deduced from a series of factual or empirical propositions, then he thereby commits himself to the view that "ought"—principles can be derived from "is"—propositions and indirectly commits some form of what G. E. Moore has described as the "naturalistic fallacy." To avoid doing so, the ethical theorist must allow that at least one moral principle must be included among the premises from which the wrongness of Stephen's lying is derived. The "inference" whose conclusion is that, "Stephen should not lie to his mother about his grades," may involve a whole set of premises, but at least one of those premises must be a moral principle, belief or value, say, "One should never lie." This new moral principle is, we might say, a "higher-order" moral principle than the one about Stephen's lying, because it is being cited in support of or as a justification of the latter.

What, now, of the new moral principle? The higher-order principle or "general rule" must itself be justified. The rational person, the man of practical wisdom, should be able to offer a defense of the new principle when he is faced with an adversary who regards it as unreasonable and refuses to abide by it. If the rational person cannot offer this defense, then he is not *reasoning* any more than his adversary, and he is being no more rational. He must invoke, then, a still higher-order moral principle, such as the principle of utility or the categorical imperative. If the adversary accepts this new principle, then the man of practical wisdom will have been successful in reasoning out the matter with his adversary. But say now that the adversary does not accept the new principle; what can the man of practical wisdom do now? He might offer a still higher-order principle. But perhaps he cannot; the chain, as we have seen, cannot go on and on. There is something about principles like the categorical imperative that makes them seem *final*. It would seem that at this level of belief or valuation, the two disputants have arrived at Z and Z_1 , the primal principles.

We are thus brought to the second premise of K . The man seeking to defend his constant lying might ask the man of practical wisdom to defend his principle of utility, categorical imperative or other "universal" principle. What is the man

of practical wisdom to do if he cannot offer any further reasons or justifications, if he cannot, so to speak, reason any further? (1) He can resign from the argument, admitting that he has no more intellectual tools at his disposal and that the matter is purely relative; (2) he can insist that the adversary is being insincere when he claims that he does not understand or accept the "universal" principle; or (3) he can express his faith that the chain of justification can be lengthened, admitting at the same time that his own inability to offer further moral principles is a personal failure. If he does any of these things, he has, I fear, for all intents and purposes, lost the argument. He has not altered his adversary's position on the question of lying, and, even worse, he has made it appear that in the end his own position is no more *rational* than the liar's.

It might actually seem to be in the moral man's favor to invoke the second premise of *K*, the premise that there cannot be an infinite regression of moral principles justifying other moral principles. A line must be drawn somewhere. And (3), there must consequently be at least one moral principle, *Z*, which is primal. If his adversary objects to this conclusion of *K*, then his adversary has committed himself to the impotence that we considered earlier. The adversary has even rendered it impossible for himself to make a *bad* decision, for in demanding *perpetual justification*, the adversary has rendered it impossible to make *any* decision on the matter. But even if the liar were to accept premise 2 and conclusion 3 of *K*, the liar would still not be defeated in his attempt to "justify" his lying by showing the moral man's original principle, belief or value (say, *A*) to be no more reasonable than his own original principle of action (*A*₁). "I agree with you that there must be some *primal* moral principle (or principle of action)," he can say to the moral man, "but I do not agree with you that it is what you claim it is. You admit that you cannot justify or offer reasons for accepting your primal principle, *Z*. *Any* candidate for the *primal* principle is as good or reasonable as any other, and my primal principle of action, *Z*₁, is as good or reasonable as yours, *Z*." The existence of primal moral principles, then, turns out to be no boon for the moral man in this instance. Although he can reason or argue rationally with someone who shares his "general rules" or "universal" principle, he cannot reason with a person who does not, and this is no more the *fault* of his adversary than his own.

This is the point where the problem of ethical relativism comes in. If the moral man is to show the liar that his lying is wrong, he must first show the liar that his own candidate for the ultimate principle, *Z*, is somehow better or more reasonable than the liar's candidate, *Z*₁. But how can this be done? *Z* is, after all, the *primal principle* for the moral man. The moral man has himself admitted that the chain of justifications and supporting reasons cannot be carried any further. It would seem, then, that ethical relativism has set in, ethical relativism of a troublesome sort.

The moral man might try to show that the primal moral principle, *Z*, is "justified" in a different sense or a different way than lower-order moral principles (*A*,

A₁, B, etc.). He might try to show that principle, belief or value Z is empirically true, analytically true or true in some other way. If Z is an empirical or factual proposition, then, as we saw earlier, the moral man has committed some form of the naturalistic fallacy and derived an "ought"-principle (A) from an "is"-proposition (Z). This derivation is not likely to satisfy most modern ethical theorists, much less a clever rogue. If Z is an analytically-true proposition, then whatever can be derived from it must be very trivial. The moral man might be very tempted to argue that the truth of Z is "intuited," and that it involves an immediate synthetic a priori cognition. But this sort of appeal is no longer *rational* in the significant sense of the word. If all the moral man can tell the liar is that the latter is not intuiting properly or has a defective moral sense, then he deserves to be told by the liar that his own moral sense has simply led him to intuit *differently* from the moral man, and not *incorrectly*. This response would underscore both the limitation of any appeal to intuition and the continuing presence of the problem of relativism.

The religious person believes that the justification of certain moral principles is at least in part the Word of God. It would be neither surprising nor unfair for the religious person to direct the attention of a liar or thief to the authority of the Scriptures. Were he to do so, he would not cause the problem of ethical relativism to disappear; he would, however, cause it to take on a somewhat different form. For one thing, appeals to the authority of the Scriptures are much stronger and much more sincere than appeals to intuition. If the liar rejects the religious man's appeal to the authority of the Scriptures, to the Word of God, then his disagreement with the religious man is not merely an ethical matter, but a religious matter, metaphysical matter, etc. And the religious person will want to support his *ethical* position with arguments that are not strictly ethical, notably, metaphysical arguments, historical arguments and even empirical arguments. Hence, the conflict between the religious man and the liar is more complex than the conflict between the moral atheist and the liar; the religious person really is not confronted with a pernicious form of ethical relativism, but with a pernicious form of religious disbelief. The problem of ethical relativism gives way here to the broader problem of metaphilosophical historicism. The only problem of strictly ethical relativism which arises for the religious man involves ethical disagreement among those who share his religious beliefs. Two theologians, for example, might disagree on an exegetical matter, and this might lead to an ethical disagreement in a particular situation.

III

The ethical relativist's position draws its force from the existence of substantial disagreement on ethical questions. The truth of the principle of non-contradiction might not be *demonstrable* in any strict sense of the word, but it is nevertheless the most certain principle of all. Ethical reasoning is usually successful because the two participants in a moral argument usually have common ground on which to

argue ; they share a "general rule" or a "universal" principle. The problem of ethical relativism rears its head when the common ground is not there, and ethical relativists insist that this is actually the case more often than we realize.

If the force of the ethical relativist's position is derived from the empirical phenomenon of disagreement on moral questions and difference in moral attitude, then what is the significance of the "theoretical" defense ? The answer is, I think, that the theoretical defense justifies the disagreement. Two people can disagree, after all, on an empirical question ; one can believe the Taj Mahal to be in China while the other (rightly) believes it to be in India. If the former is a reasonable person, he will eventually come around to agreeing with the latter (on the basis of encyclopedia articles, direct observation, etc.) that the Taj Mahal is in India. Disagreement on empirical questions, no matter how substantial, does not in itself show that empirical beliefs are "relative" in any but a very trivial sense. Hence, while it is the actual phenomenon of disagreement on moral questions and difference in moral attitude that makes the issue of ethical relativism an important issue, it is the theoretical consideration which makes the empirically-oriented ideals of "objectivity" and "verification" vanish.

Now, the empirical defense of ethical relativism rests for the most part on the data gathered by anthropologists (or the data gathered by philosophers, historians or sociologists engaged in anthropological work). Instances of difference in moral attitude can be observed by any man in the course of everyday life, but the data that professional and amateur anthropologists gather is more dramatic and more impressive. Consider these two examples cited by Westermarck :

We find, for instance, among many peoples the custom of killing or abandoning parents worn out with age or disease. It prevails among a large number of savage tribes and occurred formerly among many Asiatic and European nations, including the Vedic people and peoples of Teutonic extraction ; there is an old English tradition of "the Holy Mawle, which they fancy hung behind the church door, which when the father was seaventie, the sonne might fetch to knock his father in the head, as effete and of no more use." This custom is particularly common among nomadic hunting-tribes, owing to the hardships of life and the inability of decrepit persons to keep up in the march.⁴

And the second :

Hardly any pagan practice has been more revolting to the moral feelings of Christians than that of human sacrifice, which is found not only among many savages, but occurred in early times among all Indo-European peoples, the Semites, and the Japanese, and in the New World among the Mayas and the Aztecs, who practised it on an enormous scale. The gods were supposed to be gratified by such offerings. . . .⁵

These cases, while dramatic enough, offer too much of a contrast between civilized men and "savages." Consider, however, this third example :

⁴ WESTERMARCK, p. 184.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-188.

Whilst human sacrifice has shocked the feelings of Christians, there are other cases in which Christian morals and legislation have treated as most horrible crimes acts which most peoples have looked upon with considerable moral indifference, if not as altogether blameless. One such case is suicide. It is not often that savages are reported to attach any stigma to it ; if they deny self-murderers the ordinary funeral rites or bury them in a separate place, they do so for fear of having anything to do with them or in order to prevent them from mixing with the other dead, because their ghosts are looked upon as dangerous. In China and Japan suicide is in many circumstances regarded as an honourable act. Among the Hindus it has always been considered one of the most acceptable rites that can be offered to their deities. In none of the few cases of suicide mentioned in the Old Testament is any censure passed on the perpetrator of the deed, nor is there any text that forbids a man to die by his own hand. The Greek tragedians frequently give expression to the notion that suicide is in certain circumstances becoming to a noble mind.⁶

In this third case, the contrast between civilized man and savage is not present ; we cannot simply dismiss Japanese culture, for example, as "savagery" or "barbarism." Cases of this sort probably constitute the backbone of the empirical defense of ethical relativism.

The question that is before us now is to what extent, if at all, those concerned with philosophical aspects of morality should concern themselves with anthropological data that illustrates difference in moral attitude. A broad survey of the history of philosophy would suggest that most great moral philosophers have not seen empirical anthropology as relevant to their intellectual project ; none of the great Western moral philosophers seem to have known very much about the moral codes of Asian and African peoples or of primitive peoples. Classical moral philosophy, like classical political philosophy, seems to be culture-bound. And in this century, an age in which anthropology has emerged as a major science and anthropological studies have come to be widely-read even by laymen, empirical data concerning difference in moral attitude has still for the most part been neglected by philosophers.⁷ Philosophers still treat ethics as something very abstract ; they still see the central concern of the moral philosopher as being "theory," a theory which is somehow unaffected by and unrelated to what moral principles different people in different places have actually lived by. This attitude is especially apparent in recent English and American moral philosophy ; following such thinkers as G. E. Moore, most English and American moral philosophers have drawn a sharp line between "meta-ethics" and "normative ethics," and have treated the latter as "casuistry" which it is not the business of the moral philosopher to concern himself with.

Philosophy cannot be reduced to anthropology. Nevertheless, in ignoring the data that Westermarck and the anthropologists have amassed, moral philosophers have ignored a problem which suggests that the work of moral philosophers is of

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190.

⁷ There are, to be sure, exceptions to this rule. *Vide*, e.g., John LADD, *The Structure of a Moral Code* (Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1957).

very limited value. The force of the ethical relativist's position, as we have seen, is not derived from the theoretical defense alone, but from the theoretical defense *together with* empirical evidence of substantial disagreement on moral questions and substantial difference in moral attitude. It is hard to believe at the same time that philosophers can arrive at the way in which men ought to live without having any realistic conception of human behavior.

IV

Having now seen the seriousness of the implications of ethical relativism and considered the theoretical defense and the empirical defense of the position, what are we to do? Must we accept ethical relativism as a philosophical truth? Must we regard human sacrifice, torture and genocide as merely "historical" phenomena which cannot be evaluated in terms of trans-cultural and trans-societal standards?

I think that there is a way out of our most serious difficulty, and I also think that one place where we may find that way out is in, of all places, Westermarck's *Ethical Relativity*. Westermarck makes the following interesting observation:

When we study the moral rules laid down by the customs of savage peoples we find that they in a very large measure resemble the rules of civilized nations. In every savage community homicide is prohibited by custom, and so is theft. Savages also regard charity as a duty and praise generosity as a virtue, indeed their customs relating to mutual aid are often more exacting than our own; and many of them are conspicuous for their avoidance of telling lies.⁸

This observation is singled out by Professor Morris Ginsberg, who in his Huxley Memorial Lecture, *On the Diversity of Morals*, is attempting to show that "there is no necessary connexion between the diversity of morals and the relativity of ethics":⁹

Relativists generally stress the great diversity of morals. Yet the similarity is far greater. Westermarck — himself, be it noted, a relativist — concluded on the basis of his elaborate survey that "the moral rules laid down by the customs of savage peoples . . . in a very large measure resemble the rules of civilized nations" (Westermarck 1932, p. 197), and, so far as I can judge, later anthropological work strongly confirms his conclusion. The higher religions converge in their teaching of the inward nature of morality and the universality of love and its obligations. The philosophers, after the manner of their trade, emphasize their differences from each other. But in their accounts of the good for man they move within a restricted circle of ideas — happiness, wisdom, virtue, fulfilment. These are, except on superficial analysis, interrelated, and, taking large stretches of social life, none can be attained or maintained without the others.¹⁰

⁸ WESTERMARCK, p. 197.

⁹ MORRIS GINSBERG, *On the Diversity of Morals* (London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1953), p. 1.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

Ginsberg warns us, of course, that "the differences of view are no less real,"¹¹ and he places great emphasis on the phenomenon of the "expansion of the range of the persons to whom moral rules are held to apply,"¹² as does Westermarck :

[T]here is at the same time a difference between the regard for life, property, truth, and the general well-being of a neighbour which displays itself in savage rules of morality and that which is found among ourselves : it has, broadly speaking, only reference to members of the same community or tribe A stranger is in early society devoid of all rights. And the same is the case not only among savages but among nations of archaic culture as well.

When we pass from the lower races to peoples more advanced in civilization we find that the social unit has grown larger, that the nation has taken the place of the tribe, and that the circle within which the infliction of injuries is prohibited has been extended accordingly.¹³

Westermarck and Ginsberg are making several proposals here, the most fundamental being that moral codes and moral attitudes are substantially and significantly similar. Attitudes towards homicide, theft, charity and generosity are not significantly "relative," and basic ideals of happiness, wisdom, virtue and fulfillment pervade the spiritual and social life of almost all cultures. There is, without a doubt, an important diversity of morals, but there is, at the same time, *common ground*. Now, the existence of a stable core of moral principles, beliefs and values is not in itself a proof of the *objective truth or rightness* of those principles, beliefs and values. Nevertheless, it is hard to believe that the patterns of similarity are purely coincidental. The existence of common ground may very well be linked to the fact that human nature is itself largely fixed and uniform throughout all ages and all places. It is not, to be sure, *totally* fixed ; but it is fixed to a great degree. That it *is* so fixed has been a presupposition of the inquiries into morals of such great moral philosophers as Aristotle and Hume. The author of the *Nicomachean Ethics* was too great a biologist and the author of *A Treatise of Human Nature* too great an historian and psychologist to see considerations of human nature as irrelevant to the philosophical enterprise.

But an appeal to human nature is not enough. For one thing, such an appeal presupposes that the abnormal is bad, that the rare is to be despised. This presupposition has frightening implications. Socrates, Thomas More and Bonhoeffer were rare men. Their behavior must be regarded as abnormal, or, at very least, "different," and yet, they are paradigms of the *good* man. On the other hand, it is hard to believe that our strongest argument against a Heliogabalus or a Hitler is that his outlook or his behavior is *strange*. The appeal to human nature has still another drawback. Evil seems to be just as much a part of human behavior as good ; every generation has its theft and its lying, its war and its brutality. It is well enough to

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹³ WESTERMARCK, p. 197.

say that bad men "fall short" of humanity, and are, so to speak, "inhuman." But such a view creates too great a gap between the ideal and the real, and the appeal to human nature is saturated by an almost fatalistic optimism.

For these reasons, it is significant that Westermarck and Ginsberg retain a distinction between the savage or barbarian and the civilized man. Civilization does not reduce to conventional behavior for them, and they do not regard savagery and barbarism as mere "abnormalities" or "rarities." Rather, they approach civilization and civilizing as phenomena to be approached *scientifically*, phenomena which must be explained. And the explanation which they offer, by way of a general proposal, is that height in the scale of civilization is a function of a culture's conception of the "social unit" or "tribe." The more advanced a culture or society is, the wider is the range of persons to whom its moral rules are held to apply. Now, I am not sure how much empirical evidence can be adduced in support of this thesis. I do believe, however, that we have here what is, at very least, an exciting *philosophical* theory. I would like to elaborate on this theory by drawing an analogy between *being civilized* and *loving*. When a person is profoundly and sincerely concerned with the interests of a fellow human being, then, at least in one important sense of the word, he *loves* that fellow human being. The more people whose interests one is profoundly and sincerely concerned with, the more people he loves. Similarly, societies and peoples who live by moral rules are to some extent "civilized."¹⁴ The more altruistic and less egoistic the rules of a society are, the more civilized is the society. The relative altruism and egoism may manifest themselves in two ways, within the society and beyond the society. There may be greater or less concern with the interests of "members of the tribe," and there may be, at the same time, greater or less concern with the interests of those "outside the tribe."¹⁵ Ideally, the concept of the "tribe" will be identical with our concept of the human race, and there will be universal love and universal civilization; all men will be profoundly and sincerely concerned with the interests of all their fellow human beings. The ideal I am holding up here, of course, is easily recognizable as an ideal of all of the great religions and philosophies.

Now, when one person loves another person, it is a *fact* that he loves that person. Interests may vary and love may manifest itself in different ways. The love of a mother who buys her son a ticket for the opera is in one sense different from the love of a husband who does not demand that his wife go with him to the opera house to sit through a performance of *Parsifal*. But both actions are manifestations of love, of a profound and sincere concern with the interests of a fellow human being. And just as the manifestations of love are empirically *observable* in these

¹⁴ For purposes of the analogy, it is assumed here that "being civilized" is a characteristic of societies or peoples, or of individuals insofar as they are *members* of a society.

¹⁵ There is, in effect, a "qualitative" aspect to being civilized (which is a function of the depth of altruism of the moral rules that govern members of the tribe) and a "quantitative" aspect (which is a function of the number of people seen to be members of the tribe).

situations, the existence of love in these situations is a *matter of fact*. One is either concerned with the interests of a son or a wife (or Peruvians or Buddhists or all his fellow human beings), or not. There are, admittedly, peculiar borderline cases which pose problems. Can one love someone, for example, and do something for that person which that person (perhaps mistakenly) does not himself see as being in his own interest? There are, I am sure, many such cases, but it is not our business here to concern ourselves with them, and besides, discussions of love always become academic drivel beyond a certain point.

What is important for our analysis is that the concept of civilization is best understood along the same lines. Either men are willing (or prepared) to extend their moral rules to others,¹⁶ or not. The broader the "social unit" — the range of people to whom we extend our moral rules — the more civilized we are. And the parallel between being civilized and loving should not be at all surprising, for, after all, are not both ultimately involved with human interests, and are not both in some abstract sense ultimately identical? ¹⁷

V

Ethical theories like intuitionism and emotivism do not solve the problem raised by the ethical relativist; they simply absorb the problem: intuitions, emotional attitudes, etc. themselves become relative. In order to deal with the thesis advanced by the ethical relativist, we must play the ethical relativist's game of examining human behavior and drawing conclusions from the observations. The patterns of similarity which can be detected are no less real than the differences which the ethical relativist cites. When we relate the patterns of similarity to the possibility of a partially fixed moral or social nature in men and to the phenomenon of the expansion of the "tribe" or "social unit," we have something which mitigates the harshness of the theoretical aspect, as well as the empirical aspect, of the ethical relativist's argument. Granted, infinite regressions must be cut off, and explanations must come to an end; but the primal principles, values or beliefs that we are left with are far from arbitrary. Ethical relativity is a fact, but ethical relativism is not, as significant similarities stand side by side with significant differences.

I cannot believe that there is anything here which the anthropologist could take serious objection to. Appeals to human nature and social phenomena are surely not mystical. Yet, philosophers may demand that we go further. Ethical and social behavior does not exist in a vacuum; ethical principles, beliefs and values both *influence* and *are influenced* by other principles, beliefs and values. Earlier in

¹⁶ That is, see their moral rules as applying to the interests of others.

¹⁷ Every member of a tribe (capable of being moral) is an individual (capable of loving). Ideally, all human beings will see themselves as being in one sense members of the same tribe. Under these circumstances, *socialized* altruism (based on moral rules) will be no different from *personal* altruism.

our inquiry we touched upon the relation of metaphysical and religious outlook to ethical outlook. History teaches us that this relation is not merely theoretical, but real. Social scientists may well be satisfied with talk of human nature and social phenomena, but surely my anthropologist friends would be unfair if they regarded me as naive or arrogant for believing that the metaphysical imagination will be satisfied with no theory of morals that does not hold up the hope of Ultimate Purpose.