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**PART III: RETHINKING CULTURE: GLOBALIZATION AND  
THE CHALLENGES OF INTERCULTURALITY**

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**A Cultural Critique of Cultural Relativism**

*By* XIAORONG LI\*

ABSTRACT. This chapter explores a certain line of critical analysis according to which one can proceed to undermine the claim that judgments approving freedom, and standards upholding human rights, are culturally relativistic and cannot possibly have any universal validity. This exploration begins with a scrutiny of common assumptions about the nature of culture itself. The author tries to demonstrate that common misunderstandings of culture have provided ammunition to cultural relativists. Seeking clarity helps strengthen the philosophical objections to normative cultural relativism. The author refers to such a line of analysis as the “cultural critique of cultural relativism.”

I

**Introduction**

THE RECOGNITION THAT CULTURE has an ethical significance need not undermine the plausibility of universal moral values and ethical principles. The fact that cultures are different and particularistic does not entail cultural relativism. To support these two propositions, I will begin this chapter by discussing the controversies surrounding the troubled relationship between culture, on the one hand, and the claim to universal moral principles, on the other. More specifically, I will examine those arguments that seek to undermine the philosophical efforts to defend these universal principles. I shall argue that a careful

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scrutiny of common assumptions about culture helps to clarify certain misunderstandings that have provided ammunition to cultural relativists in the past, and it also helps to strengthen the philosophical objections to normative cultural relativism. In what follows, I shall refer to this line of analysis as the “cultural critique.”

## II

**The Trouble with “Culture”**

THE UNIVERSALISTIC PRINCIPLES of human rights prohibit, for instance, certain customary practices (e.g., honor killing or female circumcision). However, without being cultivated into a *cultural capital* in the form of particular customs or habits, such universal ethical norms as “equal respect for humanity” or “equal treatment of all as free and autonomous human beings” cannot be realistically implemented without the implementer using some highly coercive force that undermines the very norms that he or she seeks to implement. Also, the ideas upholding the human rights principles have evolved as integral parts of specific cultural traditions. These traditions, in turn, differ significantly from those traditions in which the above-mentioned customary practices (e.g., honor killings), as well as the ideas behind them, have evolved. Just as basic human rights principles protect freedom of expression and thought, they must also allow for cultural diversity and promote pluralism. Thus, the *culture factor* cannot be ignored or put on the back burner in any serious ethical thinking. Critical analysis of substantive ethical proposals benefits from a scrutiny of common assumptions about “culture,” and it also benefits from an assessment of the extent to which culture is relevant to ethics.

“Culture” is generally spared the kind of careful scrutiny that such concepts as “personhood” or “human rights” are subjected to. Cultural relativists and universalists alike typically assume that “culture” is a self-evident or commonly agreed upon concept. “Culture,” “tradition,” or “community” are often used interchangeably as if they refer to the same thing. Moreover, an individual’s understanding of these concepts informs, to a large extent, his or her substantive views about the relevant ethical topics under consideration. This normative ethical thinking, therefore, must begin with a rigorous analysis of how

culture, tradition, and community are, or should be, understood. For example, it must begin by considering how, if at all, different cultures can commensurate or cohere with each other, or how their values and moral norms can be criticized and evaluated according to commonly held standards.

To avoid any lengthy digression into matters of definition, I shall argue below that what I term the *minimalist consensus* view about culture is the most promising alternative in clarifying these and other matters of normative importance. I understand “minimalist consensus” to be the view that most cultural anthropologists and sociologists seem to accept or could be reasonably expected to accept.<sup>1</sup> This is the view that *a culture is an inherited body of informal knowledge embodied in traditions, transmitted through social learning in a community, and incorporated in practices.*<sup>2</sup> This consensus view emerges from, but also transcends, the long disputes in the contentious fields of cultural theories and culture studies.

For some background on this issue, the main points of contention within these debates are worth mentioning briefly. At the risk of simplification, I shall describe the main disputes as being those among the *classic school* and the *contemporary school*. The classic school believes that culture is largely a bounded entity, homogeneous, holistic, and time-insensitive.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary school believes that culture is open and influenced from outside—its borders, if any, are porous and fluid; it changes over time; and it is internally heterogeneous. Suffice it to say that recent ethnographic work does not seem to favor the classic view.

The “minimalist consensus” view is attractive for my purpose here because it accommodates some incongruent insights of both the classic and contemporary schools. First, it gives “culture” a more definitive and concrete form as a body of informal knowledge, which the contemporary school does not. The contemporary view comes too close to simply dissolving culture altogether for comfort’s sake. A borderless, changing, and internally divided body of knowledge would be too undefined and amorphous to be a “body” at all. Thus, unlike the classical view, the consensus view does not consider visions that are privately intuited or ideas solitarily contemplated as being genuinely “cultural.” Moreover, it specifies culture as *historically*

inherited over generations, rather than as newly minted. By contrast, the contemporary view would allow admission into “culture” by any knowledge that is untested by time and experiences. Third, the consensus view further narrows culture down to a body of knowledge that is incorporated into practices and turned into lived experiences, for example, by being embodied in customs, expressed in symbols, implemented in institutions, or codified in rules. It is not confined to those modes of transmission and circulation carried out by books or in classrooms. Fourth, people who are interconnected in a *collaborative* entity, such as a community, are the main actors who are both learning and practicing creatively the teaching, whereas authorities and elites are not the exclusive interpreters and authors of such instruction. The consensus view is thus more balanced and, as such, it can accommodate the contradictory social phenomenon that the term “culture” is intended to characterize.

Now, the consensus concept of culture, being minimalist, is also general in that it allows incongruent interpretations about what culture is, and permits one to characterize culture(s) in contradictory terms. This, however, may not necessarily argue against adopting the consensus concept. It may be that culture is characteristically incongruent or contradictory. For lack of a better phrase, I use “paradoxes of culture” to tease out the incongruence and contradictions. Three “paradoxes” are particularly relevant here. The first occurs when we see on the one hand that a culture can be unique to a community but on the other hand that it can also overlap and be compatible with other cultures. The second arises when we see that a culture can be uniform or have unity but that it can also have its own internal heterogeneity and permit individualization in the community. The final paradox comes into view when we see that a culture has its own roots, continuity, and conservation but that it also permits self-criticism by the members of the community, leading to (potential) transformations within it and to the formation of hybrid traditions with different origins or histories. These paradoxes have important implications for normative thinking about the compatibility of cross-cultural ethical norms and local cultural rules.

Consider the first paradox. It is common to cite cultural uniqueness as an obstacle to conceptualizing and validating cross-cultural moral

principles. If moral universalists may be said to have a tendency to deny cultural uniqueness, cultural relativists tend to overemphasize it. Yet relativists are mistaken in insisting that uniqueness entails incommensurability. A body of knowledge can be unique if it has no exact copy elsewhere. Nevertheless, each overlapping body of knowledge can also be unique—each may have unique formations of mosaic and eclectic patterns in spite of having shared elements. Two overlapping eclectic patterns can be commensurable in spite of their uniqueness.

Consider the second paradox. Cultural uniformity is not necessarily present in a territorially finite community. Yet the sense of unity can surprisingly rise to the occasion. When the members of a community perceive an external discrimination made against them as a group, their sense of unity restores the community, leading them to embrace their common heritage for the purpose of solidarity. Cultural identity is historically fluid. One must balance unity with fluidity and internal diversity. Fluidity and diversity are constant and ubiquitous, while solidarity is occasional and contingent.<sup>4</sup> Intra-cultural diversity, despite unity, opens the possibility for intercultural communication and penetration, because internally divided groups can find common causes across boundaries.

The third paradox recognizes profound transformation as well as historical continuity. It does not assume that changes make culture into something ephemeral, having no durable reality and possessing only the fleeting moments of an illusion.

We must then fine-tune the consensus view with an important clause. *A culture is a body of informal knowledge that is historically inherited, transformed, embodied, and contested in traditions, incorporated and innovated in practices, and transmitted, altered through social learning, in a community of evolving and porous boundaries.*

This working concept helps clarify some of the confusions concerning what it means to speak of a cultural “tradition” or “community.” It entails that a *cultural community* is a paradoxical social context—a socially organized population group with a shared identity, within which a body of informal knowledge is socially transmitted and contested. Being “paradoxical,” this social context has identifiable yet contested and porous boundaries. It is unique yet commensurable with other social contexts. Its members have mixed feelings and

clashing views about their inherited practices and rules. They relate to their heritage differently. Their heritage means different things and invokes different feelings in them. A cultural community differs from the simple notion of any given historical population; it also differs from an idealized, bounded, internally harmonious, and timeless group or society.

The working concept also entails that *cultural tradition* is the embodiment of paradoxical informal knowledge. The substance of a tradition consists in competing and clashing rules, customs, symbols, rituals, habits, and practices. This concept emphasizes renovation in spite of a people's inheritance of beliefs and the impact of their changing experiences. Philosophers tend to employ two notions of "tradition": one narrow and the other broad. The working concept favors the latter. The narrow view recognizes only intellectual or spiritual discourses, in which the educated elite deliberates and disputes the norms, rules, or standards. The broad view sees tradition as reflected knowledge, which has been reinterpreted, recreated, and enacted in the cultural practices of a community. On this broad view, tradition is not merely an intellectual discourse or its products but also contains practices and customary rules or ideas lived by people. Social learning, through which informal knowledge is transmitted and contested, involves more than understanding and reflection. It involves practicing acquired knowledge through experiences and internalizing it into habits, dispositions, and skills.

This scrutiny of "culture," I contend, helps elucidate its relevance or significance to ethics and, more specifically, it helps clarify some common presumptions about morality's relativity to culture.

### III

#### **The Ethical Significance of Culture**

DOES CULTURE JUSTIFY or explain moral actions or judgments? If yes, how? If culture can explain or justify moral judgments or actions, I will consider culture *relevant* to, or *significant* for, morality or ethics.

The working concept of culture entails a twofold assessment of culture's presumed legitimating (normative) and explanatory (heuristic) significance. First, a paradoxical body of informal knowledge can

potentially justify different positions concerning a moral problem because this body is internally conflicted and changes over time. Second, a paradoxical body of informal knowledge cannot provide a causal explanation of moral decisions made by those raised in or identified with it. This is because a member's moral views and motives are likely to have been developed under the influence of, or associated with, one of several contested visions within the culture or shared with those in other cultures. Factors other than cultural ones also play decisive roles. Hence, there exists no apparent causal chain whereby one can trace a person's moral decisions to his or her culture, either as a whole or alone. To spell out these implications of the working concept is to take an *analytic* approach to culture's ethical significance.

To proceed with this analytic approach, I will first consider two views of explanation: (1) explanation functions to identify a causal relationship between what explains and what is being explained; and (2) explanation functions to illuminate or confer intelligibility and coherence on what is being explained. I refer to (1) as a *strong* explanation and (2) as a *weak* one. If culture is able to perform function (1), it has a *strong heuristic significance* for ethics, and if it is able to perform (2), it has a *weak heuristic significance*. (I also assume, for later discussion, that if culture is able to *justify* moral views or actions, then it has a *normative significance* as well.)

First, I acknowledge culture's weak heuristic significance. As I see it, the acknowledgment of a weak heuristic significance agrees with the intuition that, to the extent that culture provides a source of informal moral knowledge, it shapes the judgments of moral agents, motivates them to act, and is therefore able to play a weak heuristic role in making sense of their actions or judgments. Next, I proceed to undermine culture's strong heuristic significance by *disaggregating culture* into some of its key components or entities, with which we tend to use "culture" interchangeably. Specifically, I examine "tradition" and "community." This exercise allows greater accuracy in identifying where and how culture might be ethically significant in the strong heuristic sense.

To what extent can we trace different judgments to their agents' distinctive cultural *traditions*? Tradition understood under the working



concept of culture does not provide the *cause* of, or determine, the views (or judgments) of its practitioners. Individual members of the same tradition may have very different experiences, which can lead them to different moral judgments or motivations to act. As a result, even if the members of a community are raised in the same tradition—for example, their moral education is under Islamic law—this does not determine the same unanimity in their moral judgments, say, about the custom of amputating a thief's arm.<sup>5</sup>

An action may have multiple causes or diverse sources of impetus, including reasons or motives that do not spring directly or solely from a person's tradition. The man who saves a drowning child may have several possible motives. A person raised in the Inuit tradition may disagree with fellow members about the necessity for collective survival of leaving the elderly, who are too frail or sick to work, to die in the wilderness. Even if someone cites the Inuit tradition that allows this practice, that alone does not help determine the cause of this person's judgment about it. Likewise, an uncaring or greedy son's action in compliance with this custom may not be shaped or motivated by the tradition at all. Even when a group of people engages in a common action, they may do so for multiple, sometimes incongruent, motives and reasons.

Can one's "embeddedness" in a cultural community cause or determine one's moral judgment? The working concept of culture has implications for addressing this question, and hence it also has implications for assessing the communitarian contentions that communally "embedded" persons act or must act in accordance with the ends and commitments of their communities. Communitarians often criticize the liberal conception of the "self" for its unrealistic portrayal of persons. Some of them argue that liberalism is wrong to promote institutions or policies that shape "disembodied" individuals and allow autonomous choices.<sup>6</sup> In so arguing, they assume that "embeddedness" in community causally determines most people's ends and that their judgments or actions can always be traced back to their communal duties, loyalties, and purposes. In other words, people's judgments and actions can be explained with certainty in a causal nexus.

The working concept of culture entails that judgments and actions of communally "embodied" persons cannot always be exclusively

traced to any shared norms in their own communities. Within any such community, there are likely to be diverse, conflicting, critically contested, and changing goals and commitments. Its members' reflections and debates about competing objectives are often influenced by ideas that have originated in other communities. The communitarian notion of the "self" as acting for some preset ends, which are adopted in the local community, is insensitive to the reality of diversity and to the activity of critical reflection and autonomous choice, as well as to the diverse interpenetrations of ideas across communities.

Is it plausible, then, to require that members must always judge or act according to communally adopted ends and commitments? But the members' judgments and actions cannot be meaningfully evaluated by norms found exclusively within their own community, in part because there is often a diversity of norms within any given community. Thus, the same judgment might be considered right according to some norms but wrong according to others. Because of this shared interpenetration among communities as well as the diversity within each one, the insistence that the members' moral decisions must always be determined by norms accepted within an agent's own community looks to be a false claim.

These considerations raise serious doubts about the strong heuristic, ethical significance attributed to any cultural community. So far, I have tried to raise some doubts about the strong heuristic claim in order to undermine its assumption about the members' *equal* "embeddedness" in a traditional community; in my view, cultural "embeddedness" is always "uneven." Members of the same community do not equally share traditional teachings, identify with authorities and fellow community members, make the same choices, or reflect in the same way on inherited customs. Membership in a community is no guarantee that all members acquire the same proficiency in learning the tradition. Moreover, the same enculturation is no guarantee of the same convictions or motives to act accordingly.

While it is perhaps true to say that no one is completely "disembodied," that is, not embedded in any cultural community, people nonetheless achieve different levels of enculturation. Their relationships with fellow members and authorities in their communities differ

both in strength and durability. “Embedded” persons in a community are always capable of being *individualized in their “embeddedness.”*

We may thus conclude that a person’s judgments and decisions to act are not determined exclusively by his or her membership in a community. To confer on a community a weak heuristic significance to ethics, one must recognize and assess the unevenness of their “embeddedness” in the community. The unevenness in a community’s embeddedness means that people are able to form autonomous judgments, which are not determined exclusively by their community’s prescribed ends.

#### IV

#### **A Cultural Critique of Cultural Relativism**

TO ADDRESS THE QUESTION as to whether or not culture has *normative* ethical significance, we must first revisit the issue of normative cultural relativism. What does the working concept of culture imply about the evaluation of cultural relativism? If “culture” were naturally relativistic, then any logical argument that seeks to refute cultural relativism would not be sound. Thus, cultural relativism may have a shelter in cultural studies. If this were the case, then philosophers would have to scrutinize the presumptions and empirical claims about “culture,” and especially consider morality’s presumed relativity due to culture.

Normative cultural relativism differs from descriptive cultural relativism.<sup>7</sup> This differentiation is sometimes blurred in the relevant discussions. *Descriptive cultural relativism* (DCR) describes a relativity of moral agents’ judgments to their culture.<sup>8</sup> It describes the *differences* between cultures in their moral views and standards. By contrast, *normative cultural relativism* (NCR) requires that moral judgments and standards be considered valid or invalid only relative to an agent’s own culture; in other words, his or her moral views or actions ought to be considered right if and only if they are judged so according to the cultural standards of the community. DCR alerts one to problems concerning the *feasibility* and effectiveness in implementing ethical principles. It challenges one to consider the question: Given the cultural differences in the world, how is it feasible to motivate compliance and implement ethical norms, such as human rights? In

comparison, NCR poses a different set of questions: For example, since a judgment can only be valid or invalid according to standards in the culture in which it is found, should one assess the judgment by persons from other cultures by appealing to one's own cultural standards? Should one use only the local culture's standards?

I am primarily interested in developing a cultural critique of NCR.<sup>9</sup> NCR assumes that culture has normative ethical significance in providing moral justification. Without this assumption, the relativist would not be able to claim that the rightness of moral judgments and actions must be relative to the moral agents' own culture, and that culture must be the exclusive source of the standards for judging the rightness of its members' views and practices.

Philosophers tend to rely on the classical understanding of "culture."<sup>10</sup> They tend to refute normative relativism (NR) in its general form, rather than in its cultural variety form, NCR. Three influential arguments refuting NR can be strengthened to help refute NCR by considering critically the nature of culture.

Let us consider the first argument that NR commits the "naturalistic fallacy," in other words, the fallacy of arguing from "is" to "ought," or from observed states of affairs to normative principles or general laws. From observing how people behave, the relativists imply that people make moral judgments and use standards that they find in their own society, history, or culture, and that these standards are self-justifying. From these observations, NR makes the following normative proposition: One *should* judge people's moral beliefs based on their social norms, and it is wrong to use one's own social standards to judge others. According to this argument, for example, from the mere fact that some people value cultural diversity, we cannot infer that diversity must be valued and ought to be respected by all.<sup>11</sup>

In everyday life, however, we are more trusting of our observations than we are in the claims of the social sciences. Those who arrive at normative relativism from observations may argue that such a commonsensical trust is all that we have to go on in morality. Many people find nothing terribly wrong if somebody reasons in the following fashion: When it is repeatedly *observed* that "outsiders" criticize a local population on what they consider right and claim that it is wrong according to their own (outside) standards, the result has often been

destructive. Based on this observation, then, the relativists claim that we *should* adopt a rule stating that we should always refrain from judging others according to our own standards. This sort of reasoning, even if strictly speaking it commits the naturalistic fallacy, is nonetheless appealing in everyday life and persuasive to many. Practically speaking, what this means is that to simply charge NR with the “naturalistic fallacy” is not as effective or persuasive as philosophers have commonly thought. In a cultural context, moral rules and principles are acquired from lived social experiences. We learn how to judge views and behaviors in different cultures through experiences that interact with them. If we are to specify any universal ethical rules that govern judgment making across cultures, we may have nothing more than such lived experiences as our guide. To abandon them would leave us impoverished when it comes to making our own ethical judgments and to setting our own norms.

Let us now consider the second argument, that NR is internally inconsistent. NR prescribes the following: (1) never judge someone else’s views according to standards of one’s own, or (2) judge others’ views according to their own standards only. These two standards state prescriptions that the relativists use to judge other peoples’ moral judgments universally; they are thus universal judgments.<sup>12</sup>

The relativist may try to respond, however, by revising (1) to the effect of (1\*): Never judge others according to one’s own standard, *except* when one’s own standard is the one laid out here: (1); hence, one can judge others according to (1). Further, she can revise (2) to (2\*): Judge others’ views according to one’s own standards, except when judging the behavior of making judgment about others, where the standard laid out here, in other words, (2), applies. Hence, according to (2\*), one can use standards that are not the others’ when judging these others’ behavior of making judgment about other people. This revision has been suggested as a way to get out of the apparent self-contradiction. But it does not work. Neither (1\*) nor (2\*) alters the paradox of the relativist, who still has to use a universal standard or remain self-contradictory. Moreover, as some critics point out,<sup>13</sup> the relativist needs to give substantive arguments defending the provision of exception in (1\*) and (2\*) in order to avoid arbitrariness.

The relativist may try to avoid arbitrariness by restricting (1\*) to (1\*\*): Those in my own group (in which NR is accepted) should never judge morality in other groups (where NR is not accepted, including the universalists) according to our own standards as laid out here, that is, (1\*). Now, (1\*\*) may not appear to involve the troubling self-inconsistency, and it may not appear to make arbitrary exception. One price the relativist adopting (1\*\*) is willing to pay, however, is a significant restriction on the scope of applicability of (1); for (1\*\*) presumably no longer applies to anyone outside members of the group who are relativists. However, normative relativism still does not save itself from self-contradiction and arbitrariness. A relativist who adopts (1\*\*) cannot say that her standard is true or her inferences from that standard are sound. If she makes any claim at all about her standard, then she is saying that the standard has truth-value. If there is truth-value to her standard, then that claim implies the opposing standard is false. She is still judging the universalists. In this case, the relativist remains caught in a self-contradiction. The only way out of the contradiction is to claim that “no claim I make is true,” and then she is obviously caught in the liar’s paradox!<sup>14</sup>

Finally, let us now consider the third argument, that NR violates the generality requirement. According to this argument, ethical propositions are *by nature* general or universalistic.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, anyone who makes moral judgments is also making general claims applicable to anyone, anywhere, in similar moral situations. Accordingly, the relativist is mistaken about the nature of moral judgment making when she demands of us that we never make judgments across social and cultural boundaries. Some philosophers thus argue that relativists are unable to criticize past wrongs (e.g., slavery) and wrongs in other lands (e.g., fascism and neo-Nazism). This critique exposes the relativists’ insincerity or hypocrisy. It has this effect, however, only if the relativists have claimed to be capable of criticizing such wrongs. The relativists may reply, with courage, that their point is precisely that no one is able to criticize “wrongs” in other societies or cultures, whether they are historical or are foreign “wrongs.” To point out her inability to do so thus does not effectively reject her NR position—one also needs to go after the problem with the relativism’s claim to its inability to make any judgment, which disqualifies relativism as a normative theory.

To enhance the effectiveness of the first argument above (the one involving the naturalistic fallacy), a “cultural” critique of cultural relativism questions the empirical claim that moral views and standards *are* “relative” to culture, namely, that they vary from culture to culture, that they are incommensurable, and that they are applicable only to the culture of their origin. The crucial premise for the inference made from the observations of cultural “relativity” to NCR will be seriously undermined if it is shown that such observations are defective and that they are contradicted by observations of commensurable judgments and standards that are found in different cultures. Even if the naturalistic fallacy does not suffice in persuading us to distrust observations in everyday moral judgment making and norm setting, the philosophers can still fault NCR’s observation about morality’s cultural relativity because their descriptions of moral decision making and behavior are inaccurate.

To enhance the second argument discussed above against relativists, the cultural critique advises us to reject (1\*\*) by challenging its presumptions about the “cultural other.” In particular, we can challenge its implicit assumptions about the clear-cut division between cultural groups—between a “relativists’ culture” and a “nonrelativists’ culture”—and the counterintuitiveness of this divide. By requiring members of the cultural relativist’s own “cultural community” not to judge outsiders according to their own cultural standards, as discussed above, the relativist must assume that she is able to tell apart the members of her own culture from “outsiders.” She must assume that there are clear borders between the “insiders” and “outsiders.” She could therefore assume that a certain standard (i.e., NCR-1\*\*) is uniquely applicable in her own “cultural community,” and that all members in this one share this standard. These are implausible assumptions given the paradoxical nature of culture as discussed earlier in this essay.

To enhance the third objection against NCR, the cultural critique advises us also to challenge NCR’s presumptions about “other cultures,” as if cultures were impenetrable and incommensurable such that it would be impossible to apply any general standards to judging moral views and behaviors across their boundaries. For instance, one can pursue this line of critique by demonstrating that, due to the



paradoxical nature of culture, Confucian moral views have found believers in dominantly Christian societies, that the Confucian morality has evolved, become internally divided, and been mixed with other schools of moral thought, such as Aristotelian virtue ethics, and that many in the once dominantly Confucian societies such as China, Japan, and other southeast Asian societies have accepted Christian or Islamic moral views.

In this manner, the *cultural critique* of NCR draws upon the working concept of “culture” to undermine the plausibility of morality’s presumed cultural relativity. Its main insight is this: if there cannot always be any agreed upon moral standard inside a culture, and if nonlocals may share local standards, then one cannot plausibly prescribe NCR. Likewise, if the rightness of moral judgments cannot always be decided exclusively by standards found in a local culture, then it makes little sense to demand of people that they use local standards exclusively.

The cultural critique challenges NCR’s key inference: since there cannot be any transcultural standards, then one should not accept any proposed transcultural standards. Moreover, since there can only be local cultural standards, then one ought to judge moral views or actions by standards in the moral agent’s local culture. In so inferring, NCR assumes the impossibility of transcultural standards and incommensurability of standards found in different cultures. The validity of NCR is contingent on the validity of these assumptions. If these assumptions are invalid, that is, if there *can* be transcultural standards and if standards found in distinct cultures are commensurable, then NCR’s foundation is weakened.<sup>16</sup> According to the cultural critique, the ambiguity of the cultural identities of moral agents and moral standards makes it difficult and sometimes impossible to apply NCR to judging the ways in which persons make moral judgments about others.

When a moral position, X, is judged both right and wrong according to opposing local standards in a culture Y, or if it is also judged right or wrong according to standards in other cultures, the rightness or wrongness of X, then, is not particularly relative to culture Y or to the other cultures. *To establish the relativity of moral judgments and standards to culture, one must establish a correspondence between*



*variation in moral judgments/standards and variation in the cultures of their agents and, vice versa, one must establish that any such variations are so radical that the varying judgments and standards are incommensurable.*

*Cultural relativity* as such cannot be taken for granted. Given that a culture may contain conflicting judgments or standards, the variations among them do not correspond to one set variation from culture to culture. Given that two cultures may contain similar standards, their members may make similar judgments, and the variation from culture to culture does not correspond to any set variation in standards or judgments. This means that one cannot forecast or otherwise statistically infer how people will make their moral judgments and establish their moral standards; yet the variations continue to uphold general norms recognized and accepted by diverse societies.

The cultural critique effectively dissolves the presumed problem of morality's relativity to culture or the cultural relativity of morality. It demonstrates that, in moral judgment making and norm setting, there is no real problem of cultural relativity as such, though there can be problems with cultural misunderstanding, insensitivity, discrimination toward differences, and denial of inner-culture differences and similarities between cultures.

Is it possible to make concessions to the key points about the nature of culture while holding on to the thesis of cultural relativity? Let us suppose that the relativist admits intra-cultural diversity and intercultural connectedness, and that she tries to adjust NCR to the effect of NCR-1. NCR-1 states the following: *It is wrong to judge moral views or practices in a culture according to one's own standards and, accordingly, one should only apply standards in the cultures of those whom one judges, even if these cultures have internally divided moral views or externally shared views with other cultures.* NCR-1 departs from NCR because NCR-1 abandons the position that the *only* acceptable standard is *exclusively* found and uniformly shared in the moral agent's *own* culture. According to NCR-1, it is permissible to use standards that are disputed in the local culture or shared by some people in other cultures.

NCR-1 may be able to survive the cultural critique. But if one adopts NCR-1, which embraces this critique's basic insight about culture's

internal heterogeneity and intercultural commensurability, then the relativist for all practical purposes leaves behind her insistence on morality's relativity to culture. Indeed, NCR-1 makes such important concessions that it no longer seems to qualify as a genuinely relativist position, for it no longer insists on a neat *correspondence* between variation in morality and variation in culture. Rather, NCR-1 states a position about the particularity of a local culture. It prescribes that the particular set of local standards should be considered, even though these are shared elsewhere and disputed locally.

Conceivably, the relativist may respond to the cultural critique by insisting that the relativity thesis can still apply to cultures that are bounded and homogenous, no matter how few there are, or how small they may be. For instance, the relativists may say, we can concede that in a local context there is agreement about the rightness of honor killing because those in agreement are all members of a bounded and homogenous culture. They can make this concession and still claim that such a "culture" may not be the same for all the tribes, villages, or communities where this practice is found, due to the internal disagreements about this practice in their social contexts. Accordingly, those who disapprove of this practice, whatever their social, religious, or national identities are, simply do not belong to such a "culture." The relativist may then claim that morality's relativity with respect to culture is salvaged in such cases since, wherever a moral disagreement occurs, a different "culture" or subculture would form among those who would agree.

This conceivable scenario allows for an exit, a kind of cultural secession, to those who do not accept the moral position of the fellow members in their group. The boundaries around the new group are supposedly unambiguous, and the makeup of the group is allegedly homogenous. This response by the relativist allows that a "culture" may consist in a very small group of like-minded individuals (or even one solitary individual) who agree about a single moral issue—a troubling ethical position, to say the least! It allows dividing any group into "cultures" along the lines of their disagreements or agreements over various moral issues.

If moral differences from culture to culture are understood, however, as belonging to groups of like-minded moral agents, this

does not necessarily entail incommensurability among them. Moreover, it is not the case that cultures can be understood in such a schizophrenic portrayal of the social landscape in any real-world scenario. Cultural relativism, based on this portrayal of culture and its insistence on cultural incommensurability, collapses into its extreme form—individual relativism or solipsism: each person judges and acts “morally” only according to his or her own standards. Such an eventuality shows the impossibility of this view.

One may respond to this cultural critique by saying that it does not constitute a categorical rejection of NCR; rather, it merely demonstrates NCR’s unrealistic or faulty presumptions about culture. One may try to show that it is possible to prescribe norms governing how we ought to judge others’ moral views found in other people’s “cultures”—even though “cultures” as such may not exist—just as it is possible to prescribe norms governing what we ought to do with regard to Meinong’s hypothetical “golden mountain,” for instance, by thinking of norms to either preserve or deplete it. One may make such a case, but my response is that norms governing behaviors toward nonexistent objects or in nonexistent contexts have little, if any, application in the real world. It is no trivial accomplishment if we can establish that NCR has little application in the real world, where cultures are internally divided and mutually commensurable and penetrable.

In our world of “creolized,” hybrid, evolving, and internally clashing cultures, it is difficult, to say the least, to identify to which culture(s) exactly a moral agent’s judgments or standards are relative. Along the lines of critical analysis pursued in this paper, we can proceed to undermine the claims that judgments approving human freedom and standards upholding human rights are culturally relativistic or cannot possibly have any universal validity.

#### Notes

1. This consensus has become the standard textbook concept today, that is, the view that “culture” is “distinctly human; transmitted through learning; traditions and customs that govern behavior and beliefs” (Kottak, C., *Anthropology: The Exploration of Human Diversity*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991), 17); or as “the system of knowledge more or less shared by members of a society” (Keesing, R., *Cultural Anthropology: A Contemporary Perspective*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 509).

2. One survey conducted half a century ago found over 150 diverse definitions of culture. Cf. Kroeber, A., and C. Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Random House, 1963), 357.

3. The classic views were popular among the postcolonial anthropologists like Franz Boas and his students Ruth Benedict, Melville Herskovits, and Margaret Mead. They were inspired by the 18<sup>th</sup>-century German intellectual Johann von Herder.

4. Jack Goody writes: "Actors generally define their culture in terms of the dominant political, linguistic, or religious units to which they owe affiliation, . . . presuming a bounded unity which is often problematic" ("Culture and Its Boundaries," in *Assessing Cultural Anthropology*, ed. Robert Borofsky, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 254).

5. For an argument for the compatibility of the judgment disapproving of this practice with fundamental beliefs in the Islamic tradition, see Abdullahi An-Na'im, *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

6. See, for instance, Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 15–23.

7. See Richard Brandt, "Ethical Relativism," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: MacMillan and Free Press, 1967) for a three-way distinction: descriptive, normative, and meta-ethical.

8. For a sympathetic view of descriptive cultural relativism, see An-Na'im, "Toward a Cross-Cultural Approach to Defining International Standards of Human Rights," in An-Na'im (*ibid.*).

9. A "cultural critique" of DCR would question its empirical foundation. Cultural anthropologists have yet to conduct any survey of all cultures in the world to warrant the claims that morality differs from culture to culture and that morality is relative to culture. See Michele Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

10. Bernard Williams, for instance, uses "culture" to refer to comprehensive "forms of life"; hence any two cultures are "incommensurable" in that they have different concepts, references, and notions of what counts as evidence and in that one could not "combine accepting" both or "work within both of them." He goes on to say that the incommensurability of cultures, however, should not leave room for cultural relativism. This is because when two incommensurable cultures exclude each other, those in one culture can still "reject" ideas in the other. Cf. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 157–158.

11. As Elvin Hatch points out, "[t]he fact of moral diversity no more compels our approval of other ways of life than the existence of cancer compels us to value ill-health" (Elvin Hatch, *Culture and Morality: The Relativity of Values in Anthropology* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 68).

12. For this refutation, see Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972) and (1985, ch. 9); and David Lyons, "Ethical Relativism and the Problem of Incoherence," *Ethics* 86 (1975–1976):107 and 109. Also, see Carlos Nino's critiques of moral relativism in Nino, *The Ethics of Human Rights* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).

13. For example, see Teson, F., "International Human Rights and Cultural Relativism," *Virginia Journal of International Law* 25(4) (1985): 869–898.

14. Daniel Shannon commented on this point, which helped me in presenting my thoughts more clearly.

15. Bernard Williams writes: "The fact that people can and must react when they are confronted with another culture, and do so by applying their existing notions—also by reflecting on them—seems to show that the ethical thought of a given culture can always stretch beyond its boundaries. . . . Each outlook may still be making claims it intends to apply to the whole world, not just to that part of it which is its 'own' world" (1985: 159). Also, as Marcus George Singer put it, "the generalization principle is involved in or presupposed by every genuine moral judgment, for it is an essential part of . . . [any] distinctively moral terms" (*Generalization in Ethics: An Essay in the Logic of Ethics* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 34).

16. Meanwhile, the validity of NCR does not depend on the (empirical) validity of DCR. Even if DCR is unconfirmed on empirical grounds, NCR can still be plausible. If gold mountains have not been confirmed to exist, one can still make normative propositions prescribing what one ought to do or not do with regard to gold mountains.

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