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Author(s): Sonia Sikka

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Moral Relativism and the Concept of Culture

Sonia Sikka

Abstract: This paper criticises the concept of culture as deployed within debates on moral relativism, arguing for a greater appreciation of the role of power in the production of a society's purportedly 'moral' norms. The argument is developed in three stages: (1) analysis of the relation between ideology and morality, noting that the concept of morality excludes self-serving moral claims and justifications; (2) analysis of the concept of culture, drawing attention to an ambiguity in its usage and to the hierarchical social structures within which the actual bodies of cultures are produced and reproduced; and (3) contention that (1) and (2) provide the basis for a radical and socially effective species of immanent critique: the exposure of existing norms and institutions purported to be morally justified as masks for the self-interest of elite groups.

Keywords: culture, ideology, moral relativism

Moral relativism of the cultural, as opposed to individual or personal, variety is commonly understood as the view that the truth or justification of moral claims and values can only be judged in relation to the moral code of the culture in which they occur. This is the most commonly debated version of moral relativism within both academic and popular discourse, to such an extent that the terms 'cultural relativism' and 'moral relativism' are often used synonymously. I argue in this paper, however, that before entering the debate couched in these terms we need to consider more carefully the role of power in constituting the purportedly 'moral' norms of a society, and in producing what we call its 'culture'. Doing so has significant consequences for the question of moral relativism as it intersects with the concept of culture. First, it highlights the importance of separating morality from ideology, where the latter constitutes a class of claims presented as justifiable in terms of reasons that all members of a society could accept, but actually serving only the limited interests of a dominant group. Whereas a significant portion of the so-called 'moral code' of a society can be plausibly interpreted as consisting of such claims, they actually do not fit cross-culturally accepted definitions of morality.

Second, inattention to the relation between power and culture in discourses about moral relativism generates confusions about the extension of the concept

of culture, and reinforces the supposition that the distribution of power within a society is exclusively the product of cultural norms rather than the other way around. Such moves are dangerous, as they can serve to legitimate the appropriation of the term 'culture' by elites seeking to further their own agendas. In light of this concern, while the idea of culture has been problematised within anti-essentialist critiques stressing that cultures are not unified, homogeneous and mutually exclusive wholes, the focus needs to shift from the content of culture to the means of producing and reproducing that content.

Third, due regard for these points helps to provide the basis for an important and socially effective species of immanent critique: the criticism of existing norms and institutions claimed to be morally justified through exposure of them as masks for self-interest and therefore as not properly moral at all. This form of critique is immanent because of the limitations on counter-arguments imposed by criteria for morality that the members of most (perhaps all) cultures are bound to accept and already do accept. It also helps to expose appeals to components of culture, such as religion and morality, as justifications for oppressive practices, without becoming entangled in the fraught history of cultural ranking and the defensive reactions that history provokes.

My objective in raising these issues is not to *resolve* the debate about cultural moral relativism, if that means deciding between the classical alternatives of accepting either that there are universal moral principles or that the truth of morality is relative to culture. It is, rather, to suggest that prior to framing the debate in these terms, whether generally or in relation to a particular practice, critical questions need to be posed about the status of what is all too quickly interpreted as the 'moral code of a culture'. This is especially important in light of the uses and abuses of the culture concept not only in theoretical discussions but in the speech of political and religious actors, social activists and the beneficiaries as well as the victims of entrenched practices involving subordination and inequality. Separating ideology and morality will not resolve all difference; deep inter- and intra-cultural disagreements about fundamental and genuinely moral principles remain, and my analysis is perfectly compatible with varieties of moral relativism maintaining there is no one best way to do things, given a plurality of respectable and potentially conflicting goods. But at the same time it challenges the assumptions behind any view that would position the dominant norms of a given society as the 'culture' to which its 'morality' is supposed to be relative, and offers resources to counter such views.

Ideology and Morality

One moral philosopher who has recently developed a highly sophisticated version of the position that there is no one best way of doing things is David Wong. Wong proposes a naturalistic account of morality according to which it serves certain functions, including beneficial social cooperation and the regu-

lation of an individual's internally competing desires. From this account, he arrives at a form of 'pluralistic relativism' maintaining that there is more than one true morality but also that there are some universal constraints on what can count as an adequate morality. Among the constraints Wong proposes is that 'justification for following the norms and reasons of an adequate morality cannot crucially depend on falsehoods', especially 'when moral norms and reasons call for the subordination of the interests of some to the interests of others' (Wong 2006: 59).

Elsewhere, in arguing that 'an adequate morality must provide a justification that is possible for the subordinated to accept', Wong notes that, historically, when the subordinated members of societies have accepted their position as morally justified, it has been because they were persuaded of their inferiority in some respect, or because they accepted a hierarchical social order as necessary and inevitable. Citing Walzer and Wartenberg, he calls attention to the Marxist insight that ruling classes, presenting their own interests as universal, are inclined to promote beliefs of this sort among subordinated groups. Furthermore, 'dominating agents need not consciously devise ideologies to conceal their domination ... rather, they can truly believe them, where belief formation is unconsciously aided by the fact that ideologies serve their interests' (Wong 1995: 385).

This concern is also raised by William Talbott in a discussion of the way self-interest can bias moral judgement. Talbott rejects the 'more radical claim that *all* moral beliefs are merely self-serving', including 'the Marxist view that morality is simply the ruling class's tool for legitimating its power' (Talbott 2005: 71). But he stresses the importance of paying attention to the role of both conscious and unconscious bias in the formation and communication of moral beliefs, noting that 'awareness of the power of interests and desires to bias moral observations and other moral judgments should alert us to strictly scrutinize the moral justifications of a practice offered by those who benefit substantially from it' (Talbott 2005: 72).

While these accounts still speak in terms of 'moral' beliefs, however, ideology and morality are actually mutually exclusive categories. We do not generally count as moral classes of judgement motivated entirely by self-interest, or norms and values that merely serve the self-interest of a particular individual or group within a society. This is true whether the norms and values in question are thought to be a reflection of class interest, as on a Marxist analysis, or whether they involve a variety of individual will to power, as a Nietzschean account might suggest. Such explanations are, after all, reductive and suspicious. They seek to show that something masquerading as morality is in truth something else. Whether or not we accept the explanation, of a given instance or of morality as a whole, we do accept that to expose a point of view as self-serving in some manner – a function of class interest, or individual egoism, or a desire for domination – is to expose it as not properly moral. We agree that whatever morality is, it is not *that*.

In other words, as several philosophers have pointed out, however much variation there may be between moral beliefs, and between the justifications given for them, there are also constraints on what can be identified as 'moral'. Our very concept of morality limits in principle the extent of difference that can be perceived between moral views because, in Tabensky's words (glossing Davidson), 'in order to have disagreements about moral issues there must first be a large degree of agreement that allows us to identify the subject matter of morality as just that' (Tabensky 2004: 191). Philippa Foot has made similar arguments, noting that there are some 'starting-points fixed by the concept of morality', that these provide 'definitional criteria' for moral evaluation (Foot 2002: 7), and that 'moral virtues must be connected with human good and harm' (Foot 1958a: 94). These observations about the very nature of moral concepts and judgements are intimately linked to conclusions about what can be recognised as a properly moral justification. If, for instance, a person were to justify an action exclusively by reference to what is good for himself, Foot suggests, we would not recognise this as a 'moral' justification (Foot 1958b: 511).

Consequently, efforts to determine the range of moral diversity across different societies first need to isolate what are judged to be the moral beliefs of the societies being examined, as opposed to beliefs of another kind. That can only be done on the basis of a concept of morality, which in turn is linked to a grammar of moral justification. This already imposes limitations on how the so-called 'moral codes' of different societies are conceived. It means that we can only recognise as moral social rules of a certain sort, ones whose logic entails that if the interests of some are excluded from the domain of moral concern, reasons need to be given for this exclusion, and these reasons cannot take the form, 'that works out better for me' (cf. Nagel 2001: 243). The question Foot poses here is: If we find in another society prescriptions and norms that are not of this sort, and want on that basis to conclude that there is here a radical difference or incommensurability between the moral codes of the societies we are examining, why should we describe these rules as 'moral' in the first place? Why should we not say instead that this is a difference not of moral outlook 'but rather ... between a moral and a non-moral point of view?' (Foot 1958b: 512).

These points are as relevant to *covertly* non-moral cultural beliefs and justifications as to ones that are overtly so. In identifying the 'moral code' of a society, one needs to be aware that, within that code, some of the norms for which a moral justification is claimed may actually be a function of the self-interests of a particular elite, in the sense both that they are motivated by such interests and that these interests constitute their only genuine justification. Although Wong speaks, in this context, of constraints on 'adequate' moralities, ideological claims and justifications are actually not moral at all, since they do not conform to the concept of morality we are using even to locate 'different' moralities. I deliberately use the locution 'we' in this context, to signal awareness that concepts of morality are not free-floating, and that there is a

‘we’ who makes this judgement that the grammar of morality excludes self-interest as a justification. But while there are some hard cases, prescriptive rules possessing this kind of grammar do exist in most cultures, and it is hard to see why we would identify as ‘moral’ ones that do not.

We should be wary, therefore, of casting debates about moral relativism in terms of differing moral codes. For a considerable portion of what is taken to be the ‘moral code’ of most societies may be more plausibly construed as ideology, on the grounds that its genuine motivations, which constitute its true rather than its pretended justifications, violate the concept of morality being used to identify the subject of disagreement. This is not to suggest that all moral disagreements can be resolved through a proper application of the concept of morality. Tabensky, cited above in support of the idea that identifying the subject matter of morality requires a large measure of agreement, adds: ‘But, for the most part, this applies at the general level only insofar as many of our most basic ethical concepts radically underdetermine their application thus allowing for the possibility of irresolvable differences’ (Tabensky 2004: 191). The claim that self-serving rules and reasons do not meet criteria for being moral operates at this general level, resting not on a definition of morality that would specify the precise content of moral assertions, but only on a measure of broad agreement about what morality *cannot* be said to be.

Still, the claim that certain kinds of statements and reasons should be excluded from the domain of morality by definition might seem to be adopting an *a priori* approach to morality and be vulnerable to objections against such approaches. Gowans, for instance, complains that ‘it seems odd to say some things are morally right and wrong by definition’ while ‘other things are right and wrong, but not by definition’. He therefore rejects the idea that ‘widespread and deep moral disagreements’ are impossible *a priori* (Gowans 2004: 148), and stresses the need for empirical knowledge regarding the moral beliefs and practices of diverse cultures to resolve debates about moral relativism and objectivity. Gowans is right about the importance of empirical inquiry in relation to these debates, but the modest claim that moral rules cannot be, by definition, exclusively self-serving would not allow one to resolve all cultural differences prior to examining them.¹ For instance, Gowans alludes to the approval of aggression as a result of valuing fierceness among the Yanomamö (Gowans 2004: 141), a much-discussed case in the literature on moral relativism. Without close empirical study, it is difficult to judge whether some of the violent practices of this South American indigenous people, including their harsh treatment of women, belong to the domain of morality or not. Is the devaluation and violent treatment of women a function of values that could be described as moral (although perhaps mistaken), or should it be described as simply furthering the interests of men at the expense of women, where this is a self-serving rather than moral viewpoint?²

Nazism constitutes another difficult case. The grotesque character of the Nazi regime doubtless accounts, in part, for the popularity of this example

within discussions of moral relativism, but only in conjunction with the premise that the perpetrators of atrocities under this regime acted according to a certain moral code. The atrocities committed by Leopold II of Belgium in the Congo, or by Vlad the Impaler ('Dracula') were also grotesque, but presumably the reason figures like this are not commonly included in discussions of moral relativism is that it is assumed they acted out of selfishness, greed and a drive for power, unhindered by any concern for those they harmed and accompanied by positive cruelty and sadism. We do not consider these to be moral motivations. Yet they are motivations one might attribute to those who formulated and carried out the murderous policies of the Nazi regime as well. Although references to Nazism in discussions of moral relativism typically do construe Nazi beliefs as constituting some kind of a moral code, it is actually not clear whether the goals, motivations and sentiments of the actors in this case qualify as moral. It is not clear, for instance, that these actors can legitimately be described as having done what they thought they 'ought' to do, given false empirical beliefs about race, since we often judge the holding of such beliefs to be motivated by self-serving desires that are patently non-moral in nature. Otherwise, we could not judge racists and sexists as morally blameworthy for holding their beliefs, as we frequently do. While judgement about the truth of beliefs is conceptually distinct from judgement about the reasons people have for holding them, those reasons do matter to our assessment of whether particular claims count as moral.³

Thus, in practice it is not always easy to distinguish ideology from morality, and sometimes only a plausible case can be made. In making such a case, an important question is that of *whose* assertions one is confronting. Yanomamö society is unambiguously patriarchal. Men and boys are judged to be more valuable than women and girls, and have much more say over their lives (Chagnon 2000: 91). It is not a coincidence that these judgements are largely produced by the sex that benefits from them. In the case of the Nazis, 'Aryans' were judged to be superior to 'non-Aryans', and the latter were not consulted about their views on the matter. This question about the subject who produces purportedly moral evaluations is central to exposing ideology, as is implicitly recognised within many feminist, anti-racist and other critical discourses. And yet it tends to be treated as a marginal aside, when it is recognised at all, in debates about moral relativism involving the idea of culture.

Power and the Production of Culture

To be sure, the concept of culture is often problematised within such debates, by anthropologists as well as philosophers. Indeed, Richard Feinberg suggests that 'the problem with cultural relativism may be less with relativism than with the culture concept as it has historically been articulated and utilized' (Feinberg 2007: 786), and he targets in particular 'the old assumption that cul-

ture is homogeneous and neatly bounded' (ibid.). This assumption has been widely challenged in recent years.⁴ Anti-essentialist critiques have underlined the extent to which cultures are dynamic as well as internally varied, including a multiplicity of sometimes conflicting voices, and are distinguished from one another only by highly porous borders. They have also drawn attention to the fact that individuals located on different rungs of the social ladder within a culture will naturally have different perspectives. Feinberg alludes to this issue in noting that 'men and women, young and old, commoners and chiefs, Brahmins and untouchables, capitalists and proletarians, have divergent vantage points and interests' (Feinberg 2007: 786).

In *Fieldwork in Familiar Places*, Moody-Adams also criticises essentialist notions of culture while challenging the validity of a thesis whose veracity, she contends, has been too hastily granted: namely, 'descriptive cultural relativism – which asserts that cultural differences in moral beliefs may generate "ultimate" moral disagreements' (Moody-Adams 1997: 8). A problem with this thesis, Moody-Adams writes, is that 'it is profoundly difficult to construct a reliable description of the moral practices of an entire *culture* – a description of the sort that could license judgments contrasting one culture's basic moral beliefs with those of other cultures' (ibid.: 41, emphasis in original). Neil Levy, however, counters this genre of argument by drawing an analogy between culture and language. Acknowledging that 'cultures are never fixed entities with stable boundaries', he points out that this is also true of languages, which nonetheless can be distinguished from one another, and do constitute separate codes with sets of rules determining what can and cannot be rightly said. Most fundamentally, his objection to analyses like that of Moody-Adams is that 'it is a mistake to think that because a concept has indistinct boundaries, it is not appropriate to use it' (Levy 2003: 170–1).

But adequately factoring power-relations into discussions of cultural relativism in light of the problem of ideology requires a shift in focus, as we need to take into account not only the fuzziness of cultural boundaries and existing internal divisions, and not only the fact that values are always a matter of ongoing contestation, but the role of unequal representation in the historical *production* of culture. Using appropriately fuzzy standards of definition, a given 'culture' (depending on what we mean by that term) may actually be quite univocal in its understanding of appropriate gender roles, for example, but the range of voices responsible for shaping the culture in question may not have included women, or not to any great extent. It is important that our terms of analysis capture rather than obscure this aspect of the situation, so that we are alert to the possible presence of ideology within what we might too quickly define as the 'moral' code of a culture. Thus, my point here is not merely that there are a variety of views and voices within cultures, that ethical traditions are frequently contested and revised, and that one ought not to work with overly monolithic and static conceptions of what a culture is. It is that in looking at dominant cultural norms, we need to ask not only whether most people

in a society in fact assent to them, but also how they were generated, under what social arrangements, with what aims, and by whom. In other words, when considering a practice asserted to be good or right in a given culture, we need to ask, how did it arise and whose interests does it serve?

Levy does address the issue of ideology, in addition to that of cultural essentialism, responding to arguments made by Moody-Adams and Midgley. Like the latter authors, though, he focuses exclusively on the issue of consent, on whether the 'members of a culture' generally accept what we take to be that culture's moral principles. Regarding the medieval Japanese practice of *tsujigiri*, where Samurai tested their swords on random passers-by, Midgley had noted that surely we should ask about the willingness of the passers-by (Midgley 1981: 164; cf. Moody-Adams 1997: 82). Levy retorts:

Whether the Japanese peasants actually regarded *tsujigiri* as permissible or not is an empirical question which can only be settled by way of detailed historical and anthropological investigation. We cannot show a priori that they could not have accepted it. Thus we cannot know before we investigate whether we are siding with the strong against the weak in saying that *tsujigiri* was permissible. (Levy 2003: 177)

Consent cannot, however, settle the question of whether or not a practice is a function of ideology or morality, since it can be produced through multiple stratagems of power, and resistance made virtually impossible or rendered invisible. We need, therefore, to consider the actual conditions of cultural production. It may not be possible definitively to know whether there was widespread consent to a social rule, or what were the real motivations behind its institution, since motivations are fundamentally private. But we can know objectively that particular groups are or have been excluded from the production and institutionalisation of values in a given society. Historical documents bear witness to their exclusion from the mechanisms of social and political power, and we can see clearly enough the absence of certain voices – women, labourers, servants – from literary and other expressive productions. When the justification given for a practice involving subordination does not seem plausible or is not verifiable, and when the practice appears to be harmful to the subordinated group and advantageous to the group doing the subordinating, that suffices to make a strong preliminary case not only for the falsity of this justification but for its status as ideology rather than morality. In such cases, it is often not possible to conduct the sort of 'detailed historical and anthropological investigation' Levy proposes, as the relevant data does not exist. Apart from the issue of whether consent is the right target for the investigation, there is the problem that the voices of those who have had no power to shape their 'culture' will not be represented in the body of that culture.⁵

While there are bound to be complications in judging particular cases, discussions of moral relativism involving the idea of culture at least need to take

seriously the role of power in the production of ‘moral codes’, and this is my central point. Doing so does not mean accepting psychological egoism, or adopting the cynical view that morality is always a mask for power.⁶ The answer to the question about the production of a social practice or rule may be that it arose through and reflects the common will, or that it was instituted by a select group out of genuine concern for the common good. Only, we cannot assume this is the answer, and discussions of ‘cultural relativism’ that implicitly do make this assumption are not only missing a component; they are positively distorting. Consider, for example, Maria Baghramian’s definition of relativism as ‘the view that cognitive, moral or aesthetic norms and values are dependent on the social or conceptual systems that underpin them’ (Baghramian 2004: 1), with moral relativism holding ‘that questions of right and wrong, good and bad, etc., are inexorably bound with specific societal or cultural conventions’ (Baghramian 2004: 272). These definitions reflect the conceptions of cultural relativism about morality that form the basis of most philosophical discussions of the subject.⁷ Their formulation neglects altogether the question of the conditions under which ‘social or conceptual systems’, ‘societal or cultural conventions’ are produced and evolve. In fact, the very idea of values or ethical propositions as being in some sense relative to a ‘culture’ obscures the truth that moral systems and conventions are almost always produced and reproduced by powerful groups within a society, who have their distinct perspectives and interests: men, clerics, landowners, aristocrats and so forth.

Baghramian does raise the issue of power inequalities, but like many others she presents it as part of a criticism of the idea that cultures form ‘integrated wholes, with self-contained sets of practices and beliefs’ (Baghramian 2004: 97). ‘It is ... unlikely that any society would operate as a fully integrated unit’, she writes, ‘for we can always find voices of dissent and opposition within any given social unit ... the accounts given by those marginalised from centres of power – for instance women, children, the infirm – would often be very different from the accounts of those who occupy positions of authority’ (Baghramian 2004: 97). It needs to be pointed out, though, that the perspectives of ‘those marginalised from centres of power’ have almost always been excluded, to one degree or another, from the social processes through which the dominant traditions of a society, including its moral conventions, have been articulated and instituted. This exclusion has implications for the concept of ‘culture’, as well as for the problem of separating morality from ideology. It means that, in some cases, what we think of as the ‘culture’ of a given society may be appropriately described as an ‘integrated whole’ even though it does not reflect the desires and perspectives of many, or even most, of that society’s members. But in that case, we can expect the ‘moral code’ of this ‘culture’ to be permeated by ideology.

A major source of confusion here is unclarity about the precise referent of the term ‘culture’. The word is sometimes used vaguely for the collective

views of all the individuals comprising a society. Most of the time, however, 'culture' does not carry this sense. It refers not to the private views and wishes of all members of a society, whether or not these are expressed and recognised in an objective form, but to the actual traditions, practices, norms, laws, institutions, language, literature and other aesthetic products of a society. Thus, when a privileged group or particular stratum of a society claims to be the primary representatives of that society's 'culture', it may well be right, but only because it has been the dominant producer of that culture. It is significant that Baghramian, in speaking of marginalised groups, uses a conditional phrasing, saying that the accounts given by such groups *would often be* different from those of the powerful. Although Baghramian does not thematise the point, this phrasing implicitly acknowledges that part of what it means to be a member of a 'marginalised' group is that you do not get to give an account of what the world is like for you, or what you think is right and wrong. The perspectives of marginalised groups are therefore not included in the expressions that form the body of a 'culture'.⁸

While this observation should be prominent in all discussions of cultural relativism, it is often completely absent, and especially in philosophical approaches to the subject revolving around issues of truth, objectivity, realism and rationality. For example, posing some critical questions to Hilary Putnam, Douglas Rasmussen writes:

Putnam regards metaphysical realism as unintelligible; thus, he cannot appeal to the nature of slavery and racism as they are apart from the conceptual scheme employed by a community of knowers. Yet, if there is no metaphysical difference between what these practices are and how a community of knowers conceptualizes them, then what these practices are (which includes how they are valued) will vary with different communities of knowers. What, then, can Putnam say to a community that does not employ the same conceptual scheme or share the same valuations as Putnam's? Are slavery and racism just plain wrong only *for us* in our community? (Rasmussen 2008: 93)

It is not that Rasmussen's formulation of the problem of cultural relativism is in principle wrong or irrelevant. A community might collectively suppose that slavery and racism are morally acceptable, and it might then be reasonable to raise questions about 'metaphysical realism'. We should notice, though, that in real cases where the 'conceptual scheme' of a 'community of knowers' includes or justifies the proposition that slavery and racism are right, the producers of the scheme tend to be those who stand to benefit from its institution, not those who lose out. In that case, why should we describe this scheme in terms of morality rather than ideology?⁹

To give another example, Nicholas Rescher argues that 'the key to moral objectivity' lies in recognising that morality has the aim of making people's lives better, that moral systems are instituted for this purpose, and that they can therefore be judged in light of their ultimate end (Rescher 2008: 395).

These normative claims are reasonable enough, as is Rescher's suggestion that 'moral realism' rests on the fact that there are objective answers to the question of whether a mode of behaviour will 'facilitate the realization of people's best interests' (ibid.). Notice, however, that Rescher's description of the nature of morality – namely, that it is a 'functional enterprise' which exists to 'make people's lives within their communities more beneficial and pleasant' (ibid.) – itself has a normative dimension. It assumes criteria for a practice or prescription being defined as moral that are not met in many cases, and are never perfectly met in any society, because a significant portion of what is presented as good and right in virtually any society is a function of the limited perspectives of powerful groups. At times, these groups may genuinely seek the good of all members of the society, but it is doubtful that they can be trusted to have either the will or the knowledge to implement measures that genuinely serve this purpose. And much of the time they are straightforwardly motivated by self-interest, so that, as Talbott notes, some stable, long-lasting social institutions and practices are supported by self-serving justifications (Talbott 2005: 92). Hence, elements of what is purported to be the moral code of a culture serve to preserve and promote the interests of the groups who, in virtue of their social position, are allowed to participate in producing that code, at the expense of those who are not.¹⁰

In effect, we do not know what the moral norms of a culture would be, what the *culture* itself would be, if all of the members of the society whose culture it is had been allowed to participate in shaping its values. Perhaps that hypothetical culture, the truly collective expression of an alien view of the good, would still look very unjust to us, and we would then need to ask whether there can be universal or objective standards for cross-cultural judgement. We should not, however, conduct the discussion now as if the situation were like this. A context where the purportedly moral code of a given culture reflects the perspectives of all or most of its members differs substantially from one in which that code is the product of dominant elites, and the question of relativism is not the same question in both of these cases. In the latter case, one first has to ask whether all of the elements being presented as the moral code of a society are rightly defined as such. Steven Lukes speaks of 'the general truth that the morality prevalent in a culture will normally implement the self-serving interests of the powerful (which their victims may appear, less or more completely to endorse' (Lukes 2008: 68). But this is not the right way to put it, because if the 'morality prevalent in a culture' implements 'the self-serving interests' of the powerful, it should not be called 'morality', given that we do not normally define self-serving justifications as moral.

Wong fails to engage with the issue of access to the means of cultural production and reproduction, although he does allude to the problem of ideology in developing his argument for pluralistic relativism.¹¹ Interestingly, Lukes presents the existence of ideology as an argument *against* relativism. In so doing, he supposes that cultural relativism about morality is necessarily com-

mitted to two claims: (1) that moral truth is entirely relative to cultural norms, and (2) that whatever the dominant narratives of a given culture identify as the moral norms of that culture are to be accepted as such. Wong describes relativism committed to (1) as ‘crude and uncritical conventionalism’ (Wong 2006: 73) and carefully distinguishes this position from his own, which prescribes significant constraints on what can be accepted as an adequate morality. But my analysis exposes and challenges (2), questioning the idea of ‘moral codes’ with which arguments for and against relativism tend to work. A further implication is that arguments for moral relativism that do accept (1) and (2) also have to accept a wholesale reductionism about morality. In other words, only if one accepts that morality is *always* exclusively a mask for self-interest can one coherently argue that moral truth is *entirely* relative to cultural convention, since many cultural conventions are ideological. If one accepts, however, that there is a proper domain of morality, with its own motivations and forms of reasoning, then one should be cautious about accepting that the alleged ‘moral code’ of a culture consists entirely of propositions that can be properly defined as moral.

A related problem, as I have pointed out, is that many accounts of cultural relativism presuppose a concept of ‘culture’ that hazily fuses together the objectively existing reflections of a society and the perspectives of all the members of that society. Michael Walzer, who also develops an argument for a form of relativism, recognises the difference between these when he qualifies his notion of the ‘shared meanings’ of a society with the clause that ‘the sharing cannot be the result of radical coercion’. This does not require anything as strong as ‘the Habermasian ideal speech situation’, Walzer adds, but it does require that, for instance, ‘the extorted agreement of slaves to their slavery ... should not count in establishing the common understandings of a society’ (Walzer 1994: 27). Often, however, the meanings that constitute a ‘culture’, as an objectively existing set of expressions, are assumed to be ‘shared meanings’ and are treated as such. At points, even Walzer’s phrasing illustrates the ambiguity to which I am alluding. He says, for example, that if conventions are imposed by force, so as to be ‘the mere ideology of the ruling class’, they do not count as ‘social meaning’ (Walzer 1994: 29). Thus, his constraint on ‘social meaning’ parallels Wong’s constraint on an adequate morality. Yet the phrase ‘social meaning’ does suggest objectively existing conventions within a society, in whatever way these are produced, as does the term ‘culture’.

What both Wong and Walzer obliquely recognise, but do not make explicit, is that arguments for moral relativism of the sort they are developing, which do not involve anti-realism or reductionism about morality, rest on an idealisation of concepts like ‘society’ and ‘culture’. Within these arguments, the body of statements to which moral truth is asserted to be relative is supposed to reflect the genuine agreement of the members of the society or culture to which these ‘shared meanings’ or ‘moral code’ are said to belong. Because the situation is not actually like that, however, formulations of moral relativism

which suppose that it is are misleading. Moreover, the recognition that much of what is identified as the moral code of a culture, and therefore taken to be 'traditional', is likely to be ideology lays the ground for an important species of immanent critique.

Immanent Critique as a Critique of Ideology

Both Walzer and Wong stress the possibility of internal criticisms of social practices and behaviours, meaning by this criticisms grounded in values already accepted by a society. Walzer speaks, in this respect, of 'the radical potential of an internal critique: the subversiveness of immanence' (Walzer 1994: 47). He gives, as an example, the possibility of criticising aristocrats for failing to live up to the ideals of aristocracy, suggesting that 'the revolutionary critique of aristocrats as parasites has its origin here: they have work to do but don't do it!' (Walzer 1994: 44). For his part, Wong presents the possibility of mounting an internal critique of the subordination of women in a society with no concept of equal individual rights, on the grounds that the 'subordination of women is in fact a detriment to the common moral ends of that society, that it unnecessarily restricts the ways in which women can make a contribution to those ends, and deprives women of the dignity that would come from making a contribution' (Wong 1995: 394). Wong refers to an instance of such a criticism: a short story called 'White Tigers' by Maxine Hong Kingston, which, he notes, 'may be read as an appeal to the core values in the Chinese tradition of community and filiality and the demand that women be given a full opportunity to realize those values' (Wong 1995: 394).

I would add that another kind of immanent critique is a permanent possibility in any culture where the concept of morality rules out self-serving justifications. This is the critique of ideology: the exposure of certain prescriptions, practices and values, with their attendant justifying narratives, as merely pretending to be for the common good but actually arising from self-serving motivations and functioning to promote the ignoble interests of a particular class or group of individuals. This kind of critique is immanent because it works with the logic of morality already accepted in a culture and with its own values. For the reasons already outlined, 'morality', as we commonly understand it, consists of claims whose justification cannot merely be, 'that is good for me', where 'good' refers to desires rather than virtues. Moral justification for the subordination of one group to another then cannot take the form: 'Because we can more easily fulfil our desires if those others serve us, or are kept at a distance from us, or have no power against us'. Such justifications do not constitute legitimate moves within moral reasoning.

Immanent critique of ideology is then possible because ideology is by its very nature obfuscating, operating within the logic of morality. One may indeed criticise aristocrats for failing to live up to what they themselves spec-

ify to be the virtues and social duties of aristocrats, as Walzer notes. But one might also assert, against their claims that the subordination of commoners, and especially labourers, is the natural order of things or required for society to function well, that actually they say so only because this enables them to live a life of ease and luxury while others do all the work. Feminists have made similar points against justifications for the subordination of women within patriarchal societies. Perhaps the grounds for arguments of this genre are more readily evident when dominant groups spectacularly fail to live up to the virtues they claim to embody – when aristocrats are cruelly exploitative and negligent towards workers, when men are brutal and unchivalrous towards women. However, critique of ideology involves more than the claim that a certain group falls short of the traditional social ideal for that group. It asserts, more radically, that the ideal itself is corrupt, because the subordination of others intrinsically connected with this ideal is motivated by base forms of self-interest, such as greed, laziness, cruelty or lust, which are accepted in common as vices rather than virtues. This is still an immanent critique because it works with a concept of morality, as well as a table of virtues, that belong within what Walzer calls the ‘shared meanings’ of a society.

I have already acknowledged that sometimes one cannot easily separate morality from ideology in a given instance. But this difficulty should also not be overestimated; as Talbott observes, ‘there is no simple test for determining when a particular moral judgment is biased, but it is possible to recognize particular cases’ (Talbott 2005: 69). The presence of such bias in justifications given for racial, caste, class and gender subordination across many societies is evident, especially when due attention is given to the asymmetrical relations of power within which the bodies of tradition that contain these judgements are produced and reproduced. Recognition of such bias can form the basis for a species of immanent critique that is capable of challenging social conventions in a radical manner. Relevant here is a distinction Dan Sabia draws between ‘immanent critique’ and ‘conventionalism’. ‘Immanent critique’, he writes, ‘is wary of conventional understandings of social practices and norms and of the arguments made to justify social practices in terms of social norms, and of either or both in terms of authoritative grounds’ (Sabia 2010: 691). Exposing purportedly moral judgements as in fact self-serving, in a context where it is agreed that morality is by definition *not* self-serving, can help to destabilise the status of conventional understandings, especially ones legitimising inequality and subordination, without appeal to external or universal moral principles.

This variety of immanent critique goes well beyond the kind of internal criticism to which Wong refers in the example of the story by Kingston, cited above. The latter kind of criticism, while valuable, is seriously limited as a response to sexual inequality. Women may complain, on the basis of Confucian values, that they are not allowed fully to contribute to society. What can they say, however, against norms that weigh their happiness less than that of

men, or that demand more sacrifice of them than is demanded of men? Confucian appeals to filiality and working for the social good will not, on their own, help to pick out what is genuinely wrong here or provide the resources for effective counter-arguments. But nor do counter-arguments require resort to modern Western norms balancing egoistic individual wants. It can also simply be pointed out that unequal demands made of women, involving an asymmetrical disregard for their well-being, serve the good not of 'society', but of men, and that it is no coincidence that men have been the ones to assert these demands (while often praising the self-sacrificing character of the feminine).¹² While arguments of this form have played a role in Western feminist discourses, there is nothing specifically Western about them. Immanent versions of such arguments can be developed in any society where to expose self-interest as motivating social norms is to expose those norms as non-moral. When they have been given out as moral by a particular elite, moreover, such exposure also involves an implicit accusation of *immorality*, pointing to hypocrisy and deception.

Such arguments can be, and have been, developed against many norms and practices involving social inequality: property relations in Europe,¹³ caste hierarchy in India,¹⁴ female genital mutilation,¹⁵ to give a few examples. Earlier, in relation to Levy's concern that one cannot know *a priori* that certain practices are ideological, I suggested that one can make a strong *prima facie* case that they are, given the exclusion of certain groups from social power in cases where a purportedly moral norm appears to harm these groups, while benefiting those who are in power. I would now add that, in a real instance of social critique, where the question concerns effective arguments that can be presented in public forums, conclusive evidence of ideological distortion does not need to be provided in advance. A strong preliminary case suffices to place the ball in the other party's court. If the justifications for subordination being challenged are claimed to be reasonable and genuinely moral after all, it is up to that other party to formulate convincing counter-arguments, which may not be easy. Pressing such confrontations is an effective strategy for undermining the moral authority of traditional justifications for subordination, and it has the advantage of resting on internal conceptions of morality and virtue rather than any appeal to 'foreign' values.

A serious hazard of the latter sort of appeal is that it is vulnerable to charges of betraying 'our' values or culture or tradition, raised by groups and individuals within a society and playing on deep insecurities rooted in historical and present geopolitical relations. Charges of this sort may be genuinely felt, or they may involve cynical manipulation on the part of powerful groups seeking to maintain their status.¹⁶ In either instance, objections to 'cultural relativism' in the name of allegedly universal values that are actually the product of a specific culture – and the very one that raises these insecurities in others – only serve to reinforce insecure and defensive reactions. Far better to draw attention to the issue of who has participated and who has been excluded from articu-

lating what counts as the common good of a society, while looking also at the motives of oppressive groups in hiding behind morality and religion. Raising these questions can also help to highlight parallel abuses of power across different societies, rather than positioning these abuses as flowing from the essence of some 'culture'. And attention to inequalities of power relations in the formation of dominant moral codes, combined with a suspicious eye for motive, aids in spotting the circular reasoning that runs: according to 'our' values, x is supposed to be subordinate to y – where that includes not being able, and never having been able, to participate in determining what 'our' values actually are.

Conclusion

My central argument in this paper has been that contemporary debates about cultural moral relativism are insufficiently attentive to the issue of power inequalities within societies, and specifically to the fact that the means of production and reproduction of what we call 'culture' have historically been owned by privileged social groups, and still are. Before entering into debates about moral relativism framed in such terms, we need to adopt a hermeneutics of suspicion in relation to the purportedly moral norms of other cultures as well as our own, asking whether some of these norms are not better interpreted as ideology, presenting as universal goods norms and practices that actually serve only the self-interested goals of privileged segments of society.

I would connect this critique with a general worry about current deployments of the term 'culture'. Too often, the morally objectionable practices of others (but not ourselves) are viewed through the lens of 'culture', when they would be better analyzed in terms of one dimension or another of power – as a product of patriarchy, for instance, or of class inequality. In approaching cross-cultural comparison, however, it is important to separate what can legitimately be regarded as cultural differences about moral values from situations that are more accurately interpreted as differences in distributions of power. For instance, one needs to be alert to the consequences of power when discussing the relative primacy of the individual and the community within the values of different societies. There are cultural differences on this issue, and likely no one single best arrangement but only a plurality of possibilities involving a different set of trade-offs, as Wong argues. But women in various societies might point out that they tend to be disadvantaged when there is a focus on the community, because whatever may be the ideals of mutual obligation in the society, in fact the burden of putting others before oneself falls far more heavily on them than on men, because the societies have been and continue to be patriarchal.

Rather than thinking of patriarchy as a function of the 'values' of these societies, and then asking whether or not we should be 'cultural relativists'

about this, we might stop and ask whether the values are instead a function of patriarchy, at best still shaped by the biased perspective of the group that produces them, and at worst simply serving that group's self-interest at the expense of another. In short, for reasons of descriptive accuracy as well as pragmatic efficacy, we should not entitle as morality what ought to be exposed as ideology, or talk naively about culture when we ought to be talking critically about power.

SONIA SIKKA is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Ottawa, Canada. Her primary research interests are European philosophy and philosophy of culture. She is the author of *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge University Press, 2011). In addition to other works on European philosophy, Dr Sikka has written a number of articles on identity, religion and culture, including: 'Untouchable Cultures: Memory, Power and the Construction of Dalit Selfhood' (*Identities*, 2012), 'The Perils of Indian Secularism' (*Constellations*, 2012) and 'Liberalism, Multiculturalism and the Case for Public Religion' (*Politics and Religion*, 2010).

Notes

1. This claim is much more modest than, for instance, the implications Moody-Adams draws from her own thesis about cross-cultural agreement (Moody-Adams 1997: 7). See Wong (2002), for a critique of some of Moody-Adams' arguments, including her rejection of the possibility of cross-cultural disagreement on 'fundamental' principles, as well of genuine novelty in basic moral concepts. My argument is committed to neither of these claims.
2. Elvin Hatch does observe, however, that 'the women do not look forward to the beatings they receive, otherwise they would not prefer to marry someone from their own village for the protection this gives, nor would they flee in terror when their husbands come at them with a machete' (Hatch 1983: 92). Cf. also Brandt, who points out that, in cases of alleged moral disagreement, we need to know more than that a given culture approves of x and condemns y ; we need also to know *why* they make these judgements, which requires knowledge of the beliefs and patterns of reasoning behind the judgements (Brandt 1959: 101–3).
3. See Moody-Adams (1997: 20). Also, Cook (1999: 113–14): 'anyone who is not yet a relativist will remain unpersuaded that someone like Idi Amin simply has a 'different morality' ... On the contrary, we will think of him as callously and ruthlessly pursuing his own selfish ends'.
4. Uma Narayan, for example, complains about versions of cultural relativism based on the view 'that there are neat packages called 'different cultures', each of which is internally consistent and monolithic, and which disagrees only with 'Other cultures' (Narayan 2000: 238). Seyla Benhabib's *The Claims of Culture* is centrally concerned with such conceptions of culture (Benhabib 2002).
5. This is especially a problem in the case of historical investigation, where fieldwork cannot be conducted. Sometimes, there are nonetheless some cultural byways to be explored, in

the form of oral traditions, or folk art. A study by Robert Deliege, for instance, seeks to discover whether castes historically designated as 'untouchable' in India have accepted their status, by examining their orally transmitted tales about their own origins (see Deliege 1993). It is not possible to determine how old the tales are, however, and since 'untouchable' castes were barred from literacy, we have no direct literary records of their views.

6. It could be that discussions of cultural relativism have tended to neglect the issue of ideology out of a concern to avoid reductive accounts of morality. This is true, I believe, of Alasdair MacIntyre's well-known 1985 essay, 'Relativism, Power and Philosophy', which, in spite of its title, strikingly fails to address crucial dimensions of the relation between culture and power. See Frazer and Lacey (1994) for a critique of MacIntyre on this point.

Compare Harman's formulation of the relativist position: 'There is no single true morality. There are many different moral frameworks, none of which is more correct than the others' (Harman and Thomson 1996: 5). Or Raz's definition of 'social relativism' as 'holding that the merit or demerit of actions and other objects of evaluation is relative to the society in which they take place or in which they are judged' (Raz 2003: 16). Or Bernard Williams' statement of one proposition that defines relativism, in its popular version: 'right means (can only be coherently understood as meaning) "right for a given society"' (Williams 1982: 171). Williams does, however, problematise the notion of 'society' when raising criticisms against purely functionalist analyses of social practices (ibid.: 172).

7. Another illustration of the confusion about the term 'culture' to which I am drawing attention is provided by Moody-Adams' claim that 'there will always be important moral questions on which the perspective of the person who is *not* average, or even the person who is in some way 'marginal', is equally important – if not more so – to a sufficiently informative account of the moral principles of a culture' (Moody-Adams 1997: 32). What we would normally identify as 'the moral principles of a culture', however, are the principles expressed in the *body* of the culture, that is its objectively existing practices, institutions and traditions. In that case, the voices of the marginalised do not provide *information* about an existing culture. Rather, they challenge and revise that culture, when given an opportunity to participate in shaping it.
8. One could also raise this consideration against Harman's supposition that hereditary slave-owning societies would involve 'agreement' (Harman 1975: 16–17), where such agreement is, on his relativist position, the basis of morality: 'morality arises when a group of people reach an implicit agreement or come to a tacit understanding about their relations with one another' (ibid.: 3). Harman raises no suspicious questions about the subjects of this 'implicit agreement' or 'tacit understanding', or about the production of what he describes as 'the basic moral understanding of the society' (ibid.: 17).

To Talbott's observation that self-serving justifications may be socially enforced (Talbott 2005: 94) it might be added that, even in the absence of coercion, consent to a practice by groups socialised into the acceptance of conventions they did not participate in shaping does not *per se* guarantee that these norms serve the interests of those groups. This point forms an objection to Hatch's analysis of polygyny (Hatch 1983: 97), as well as Blackburn's claim, in reference to 'the Taliban conception of what it is for a woman to flourish', that this is 'a conception ... that we can easily envisage being shared by their women, at least after a generation or two' (Blackburn 1999: 220) (though it is also debatable whether one can 'easily envisage' this).

9. See Gowans, reviewing Wong's *Natural Moralities*: 'This account will also need to say something about the conditions under which a group's values are established, promulgated and regulated. Surely moral truth cannot be said to emerge from just any conditions, for example when coercion or oppression are obviously involved. Wong shows awareness of these issues, but more needs to be said to address them' (Gowans 2007).
10. This point also helps to meet feminist concerns of the sort Susan Okin raises, about 'cultural excuses for women's oppression' (Okin 1998: 46).

11. My analysis is obviously indebted to the classical Marxist critique of ideology that focuses on property relations, but suggests that it is an instance of a broader genre of critique.
12. Heroes of the Dalit movement in India like Ambedkar, Phule and Periyar made extensive and highly effective use of such arguments in challenging untouchability, and the system of caste hierarchy in general.
13. Wong discusses the latter practice, using the more neutral term 'female genital cutting'. He raises objections to interpretations that position this practice as a purely patriarchal one, but the alternative justifications and meanings he lists still involve a distinct slant towards the self-interest of men (Wong 2006: 262–3).
14. Lukes observes, for instance, regarding the 'Asian values' debate, that 'at the level of official rhetoric, this has plainly been a self-serving justification for state authoritarianism and the suppression of rights in the name of stability and competitiveness' (Lukes 2008: 111).

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