EXPLAINING MORAL VARIETY*

By Chandran Kukathas

> What wide difference, therefore, in the sentiments of morals, must be found between civilized nations and Barbarians, or between nations whose characters have little in common? How shall we pretend to fix a standard for judgments of this nature?
>
> David Hume, "A Dialogue"[1]

Reflection on the variety of forms of social life has long been a source of moral skepticism. The thought that there are many radically different social systems, each of which colors the way its members think about moral and political questions, has been thought by many moral philosophers to undermine confidence in our belief that our way of looking at—or even posing—these questions is the correct one.[2] The fact of cultural variety is held to reduce, if not eliminate altogether, the possibility of moral criticism of the practices of other societies. This thought is not a recent one; it is implicit, for example, in an observation made in David Hume's "A Dialogue," when he writes:

> There are no manners so innocent or reasonable, but may be rendered odious or ridiculous, if measured by a standard, unknown to the persons; especially, if you employ a little art or eloquence, in aggravating some circumstances, and extenuating others, as best suits the purpose of your discourse.[3]

Moreover, he adds that "[a]ll these artifices may easily be retorted on you,"[4] suggesting that cross-cultural criticism is a risky enterprise.

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[1] David Hume, "A Dialogue," in Hume, *Enquiries concerning Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), p. 333.

[2] This thought is raised directly by the philosopher David McNaughton in his *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 147. The most influential philosophical treatment of this topic in recent years is probably John Mackie's *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978).

[3] Hume, "A Dialogue," p. 330.

[4] *Ibid.* Whether or not this reflects a thoroughgoing moral skepticism in Hume's thinking is, of course, another question. My own inclination is to accept David Norton's account

So even when not tempted down the path to moral skepticism, philosophers struck by the fact of cultural diversity have been induced to take great pains to stress the importance of toleration of cultural differences. Thus, Charles Taylor, for example, suggests that we accept a "presumption of equal worth" of cultures as an appropriate opening moral stance.[5] And many others have reflected on the difficulties that must be confronted when practicing cultural toleration means condoning intolerable practices.[6]

Cultural variety may be thought, then, to pose serious problems for moral theory, since it has thrown into question the possibility of moral criticism, and indeed the possibility of any sort of universal moral rationality. If moral systems are culturally shaped or determined, it may not even be possible to compare moral values. This thought appears to be implicit in the recent development of John Rawls's political philosophy insofar as he has abandoned his search for universal moral principles and recast his theory of justice as an attempt to articulate the principles of political justice appropriate only for modern democratic societies such as the United States.[7]

The purpose of this essay is to argue that cultural diversity is not the problem it is often taken to be.[8] It does not preclude the possibility of moral criticism or of developing universal moral standards. Nor does it make it impossible to compare moral values or to acquire moral knowledge. Central to this argument are an account of the meaning of culture and an account of the nature of moral variety. The case I wish to put is that once the nature of cultural diversity or pluralism is properly understood, it will not appear to be the problem for moral theory it is sometimes made out to be. This will become clearer if we can find an explanation for moral variety which shows why it arises and indicates why this need not issue in moral isolationism. I will suggest that such an account is available in Adam Smith's moral theory.

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of Hume as a common-sense moralist. See Norton, *David Hume: Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

[5] Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition,"* with commentary by Amy Gutmann, Steven C. Rockefeller, Michael Walzer, and Susan Wolf (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 72.

[6] One of the most important recent works addressing this problem is Will Kymlicka's *Liberalism, Community, and Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

[7] On the development of Rawls's thought and the move away from universalism, see Richard Arneson, "Introduction [to a Symposium on Rawlsian Theory of Justice: Recent Developments]," *Ethics*, vol. 99, no. 4 (July 1989), pp. 695–710.

[8] Some writers in the so-called "realist school" have also tried to defend this line over the last ten years or so. See, for example, David Wiggins, "Truth, Invention, and the Meaning of Life," in Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, ed., *Essays on Moral Realism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 127–65, where it is argued that the element of "invention" noncognitivists have identified in morality is something which can be accommodated by a realist moral theory.

The argument is offered here in three sections. In the first, I look at the question of the nature of culture as it bears on morality and suggest that there is not as much *cultural* conflict as might appear. Here I draw on the writings of T. S. Eliot on culture, and take issue with Alasdair MacIntyre's arguments concerning the incommensurability of rival cultural traditions. In the second, I turn to the problem of explaining moral variety and try to show what Smith has to offer. And in the final section, I attempt to explain why the nature of culture and the nature of moral variety should leave us optimistic about the possibility of cross-cultural moral criticism, and of developing some universal moral standards.

I. The Nature of Culture

> In how many circumstances would an Athenian and a French man of merit certainly resemble each other? Good sense, knowledge, wit, eloquence, humanity, fidelity, truth, justice, courage, temperance, constancy, dignity of mind: These you have all omitted; in order to insist only on the points, in which they may, by accident, differ.[9]

Much recent writing in moral and political philosophy has emphasized the significance of cultural diversity as a feature of the modern world. We might consider three examples. The first is a paper by the British political scientist Bhiku Parekh, reflecting upon the Rushdie affair. Soon after its publication in 1989, Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* was condemned as a work deeply offensive to Islam. The Ayatollah Khomeini issued a death sentence for Rushdie and, in Britain, a ban on the book was proposed by certain Muslim groups. Parekh reads the conflict, between the supporters of Rushdie and the Muslims who criticize and want to punish him, as representative of a wider conflict between different ways: "Rushdie thus stands at the centre of such large battles as those between Christianity and Islam, secularism and fundamentalism, Europe and its ex-colonies, the host society and its immigrants, the post and premodernists, art and religion, and between scepticism and faith."[10] The whole affair raises questions about "how to forge common values out of a welter of conflicting moral systems, how much diversity a society can accommodate without losing its cohesion," and so on.[11]

The second example comes from the work of the American philosopher Iris Marion Young in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Out of the Enlightenment, Young argues, came a revolutionary conception of

[9] Hume, "A Dialogue," pp. 333-34.

[10] Bhiku Parekh, "The Rushdie Affair: Research Agenda for Political Philosophy," *Political Studies*, vol. 38, no. 4 (December 1990), pp. 695-709, at p. 696.

[11] *Ibid.*, pp. 708-9.

humanity and society which regarded all people as equal. Its ideals of liberty and equality inspired movements against oppression and domination, and swept away norms defining rights and obligations on the basis of group membership (of different races, classes, religions, or sexes). Yet while this is all very well, the ideal of "liberation as the elimination of group difference" has become questionable: "The very success of political movements against differential privilege and political equality has generated movements of group specificity and cultural pride."[12] Young's book, indeed, offers a sustained critique of the moral ideal of justice, which she sees as resting on an ideal of assimilation.

The third example is the argument of Will Kymlicka that cultural communities, such as those of "indigenous peoples," ought to be accorded special protections by the law, so that their culture is not undermined. If a "cultural structure" is weakened by external influences, this may be severely damaging to the individuals who live within it, since their capacity to make meaningful choices may be diminished. The task for liberals, "in every country," is to find a way "to liberalize a cultural community without destroying it."[13]

These examples illustrate two kinds of concern about cultural diversity which are prevalent in contemporary discussions. The first is a concern about the existence of fundamental differences—and of moral conflicts—of a very deep kind in modern societies. The differences between Islam and Christianity provide a prime example of this conflict; the differences between the practices of the more remote and isolated or *traditional* Aboriginal societies in Australia and those of the European mainstream provide another. The second is a concern about the existence of conflicts between the values of different groups within society seeking to differentiate or distinguish themselves from the mainstream. Hispanics and ethnic immigrant minorities within the United States are examples of such groups, which share with the wider society a certain cultural inheritance but which nonetheless want to see themselves as culturally distinct.

It would be mistaken to think that there are not some real—and difficult—issues here. Where cultural differences prevail, moral conflicts, it seems, tend to arise. Yet it is worth asking at this point what it means to say that *cultural* differences exist, and how far differences do exist. We should begin by asking: What is (a) culture?[14]

Bernard Williams suggests that a culture is a "social world," and in recognizing that human beings cannot live without a culture, and that there

[12] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 157.

[13] Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, p. 170.

[14] There is, of course, a considerable sociological and anthropological literature on culture. Some of this is discussed in Michael Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures: Explaining Anthropology and Social Diversity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

are many cultures, we must see that there are many social worlds in which human beings must find their way around.[15] Kymlicka, however, offers a more substantial account, suggesting that culture should be defined "in terms of the existence of a viable community of individuals with a shared heritage (language, history, etc.)"[16] Yet we come closer still to understanding what a culture is if we recognize T. S. Eliot's contention that a culture is a "way of life."[17] Eliot's point is that culture is "not merely the sum of several activities."[18] To be sure, in every culture there are distinctive activities: all cultures produce art, display customs and habits, and practice some religion. But there is more to culture than that:

> [C]ulture is made visible in their [i.e., a people's] arts, in their social system, in their habits and customs, in their religion. But these things added together do not constitute the culture, though we often speak for convenience as if they did. These things are simply the parts into which a culture can be anatomised, as a human body can. But just as a man is something more than an assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs.[19]

Yet if it is true that the different parts of a culture cannot exist in isolation, it is no less true that the culture itself cannot do so. Indeed, while we may be able to distinguish different cultures in a general way, this does not mean that we can point to where one culture begins and another ends. We can, as Eliot suggests, speak, for example, of "European culture," but its boundaries cannot be fixed: "European culture has an area, but no definite frontiers: and you cannot build Chinese walls."[20] It would be a mistake to "consider the culture of Europe simply as the sum of a number of unrelated cultures in the same area"; it would be no less a mistake to "separate the world into quite unrelated cultural groups."[21] There is no absolute line that can be drawn between East and West, between Europe and Asia.

This is not to deny the existence of cultural variety, or indeed the depth of the differences between some ways of life. Muslim communities in urban Malaysia are very different from communities in rural Bowling Green, Ohio. But it would be a mistake to think they have nothing in common. This is not because they might share superficial things in com-

[15] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1985), p. 150.

[16] Kymlicka, *Liberalism, Community, and Culture*, p. 168.

[17] T. S. Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber, 1948), p. 41.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] *Ibid.*, p. 120.

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 62.

[21] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

mon (like access to U.S. television sitcoms). It is rather that, at a deeper level, they would share some common influences. For example, insofar as Christianity and Islam share a certain heritage, these two communities would have in common religious conceptions whose similarities neither may be aware of. This is not to suggest that the two cultures are closely related, though they have in common with each other more than either shares with, say, the culture of the aboriginal people of New Zealand, the Maori. The crucial point, however, is that they are not entirely unrelated. And, arguably, many cultures have come to have more in common as they have come into contact with one another. For example, Maori culture is held to be very strongly nonindividualist, with groups and their welfare regarded as the prime values and individuals finding their identity in the group whose ends they exist to serve. Yet the advent of European settlers, by making the option of leaving the group real, brought about a significant move away from the collective orientation of the Maori—even before the influences of European religion and custom were felt.[22]

A certain unity of culture is always to be found among people who live together and speak the same language, "because speaking the same language means thinking, and feeling, and having emotions rather differently from people who use a different language."[23] Yet, as Eliot suggests, "the cultures of different peoples do affect each other"; and "in the world of the future it looks as if every part of the world would affect every other part."[24] The fact that we can distinguish separate cultures does not mean that we can isolate them. The idea of an *uncontaminated* culture existing in a single village or a *self-contained* national culture is absurd insofar as it implies that a culture can exist other than in relation to others.[25]

Cultures must be seen, then, as distinguishable ways of life which are the product of the interaction of individuals within cultures and among cultures. Because they are the product of interaction, and are subject to numerous influences, cultures are also mutable. And changes over the years may be profound: the members of a cultural community may grow to have more in common with the culture of their neighbors than with that of distant ancestors. A "fully individuable culture," as Williams puts it, is at best a rare thing: "cultures, subcultures, fragments of cultures, constantly meet one another and exchange and modify practices and attitudes."[26]

[22] See Richard Mulgan, *Maori, Pakeha, and Democracy* (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 64.

[23] Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, pp. 120–21.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 121.

[25] For an anthropologist's view rejecting the possibility of cultural isolation, see Carrithers, *Why Humans Have Cultures*, esp. ch. 2 and pp. 24 and 118.

[26] Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, p. 158.

These points about the nature of culture are worth making because it has been argued that there are severe problems of communication across cultures. There are problems of translatability of concepts or notions, as well as problems of commensurability of standards or values. These problems, in turn, create serious obstacles to the development of any kind of universal rational moral discourse. This argument has been put most vigorously by Alasdair MacIntyre, and it is worth examining because it plays an important role in his critique of modernity and of modern moral theory.

The view MacIntyre wishes to reject, in the first instance, is the view most commonly associated with Donald Davidson, who asserts that there are no insuperable problems of interpretation and translation between languages or "conceptual schemes." Conceptual schemes cannot turn out to be wholly or radically incommensurable. Davidson's argument is an important one, not least because moral philosophers like David McNaughton have appealed to it to try to show that the commensurability of all conceptual schemes implies that different moral schemes cannot be incommensurable.[27] MacIntyre, however, is unimpressed by Davidson's argument, largely because it only denies the possibility of "radical" incommensurability. MacIntyre is quite prepared to concede this point on the grounds that anyone would accept that "there will always be something in common between any two languages or any two sets of thoughts."[28] But any stronger claim is less tenable.

For MacIntyre, the intimate connection between language and communal belief creates serious obstacles to translation. This is because cultures can be very different—so much so that they cannot be adequately characterized, let alone understood, without actually living in them for a length of time.[29] To understand their languages requires total immersion. But to go further, to translate a language's statements into another language, is to bring down further problems. Implicit in the terms of reference and classification of a linguistic community are substantive criteria of evaluation or standards of truth and rationality. To translate into the language of a very different tradition of beliefs poses enormous difficulties because the substantive import of a name or a term of classification may be lost in the move from one tradition-laden language to another. A different, but no less disturbing, difficulty emerges, MacIntyre argues, in attempts to translate from a "language-in-use" (or the language of a particular moral community) into one of the "international languages of modernity" (such as that of contemporary Western *intellectual* discourse).

[27] McNaughton, *Moral Vision*, pp. 152–54.

[28] Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), p. 371.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 374.

Because the languages of late-twentieth-century modernity make only "minimal presuppositions in respect of possibly rival belief systems," and truth is "assimilated, so far as possible, to warranted assertibility, and reasonableness, so far as possible, is relativized to social content," when texts are translated from traditions with substantive criteria of truth and rationality, they are presented in a way which neutralizes the conceptions of truth and rationality and the historical context.[30] Translation in this case would produce a text which would not be recognized by the audience for whom the original was intended.

This argument is the basis of MacIntyre's contention that rival traditions and cultures are much less accessible to our understanding than we think. The "belief in its ability to understand everything from human culture and history, no matter how alien," he argues, "is itself one of the defining beliefs of the culture of modernity."[31] But the translations generated by modern discourse have, in his view, generally presented misunderstandings of tradition. The fact modern discourse has not been able to grasp is that "there may be traditional modes of social, cultural and intellectual life which are as such inaccessible to it and to its translators."[32]

MacIntyre's argument is important because he uses his claims about the problems of understanding between rival traditions or cultures to support his contention that rival moral traditions are also essentially incomparable. It is simply not true, according to MacIntyre, that there are standards of rationality adequate for the evaluation of rival answers to moral questions:

> [W]hat those problems are, how they are to be formulated and addressed, and how, if at all, they may be resolved will vary not only with the historical, social, and cultural situation of the persons whose problems these are but also with the history of belief and attitude of each particular person up to the point at which he or she finds these problems inescapable.[33]

The answer will depend on who you are and how you understand yourself. But there are no "tradition-independent standards of argument" to which an appeal might be made.[34]

The basis of this contention may, however, turn out to be very weak if we examine MacIntyre's arguments about culture and comparability more closely, particularly in the light of Eliot's understanding of the na-

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 384.
[31] *Ibid.*, p. 385.
[32] *Ibid.*, p. 387.
[33] *Ibid.*, p. 393.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 403.

ture of culture. If we begin with the criticism of Davidson, we can see that MacIntyre has a point: the fact that "radical" incommensurability between cultures or conceptual schemes may be ruled out does not pose any serious problem to someone who concedes minimal or trivial comparability. The question MacIntyre has asked is, How comparable are rival cultural traditions?—and his answer is, Not very. Yet we can question whether or not he is right on this point, if we consider the extent to which cultures are interrelated. Many rival cultural traditions, while superficially different, share common ancestries or origins. If we look to the rival cultures of Europe, for example, the Christian heritage provides a considerable source of cultural unity. It is not merely a matter of shared religious faith; as Eliot put it, through Christianity

> we trace the evolution of our arts, through it we have our conception of Roman Law which has done so much to shape the Western World, through it we have our conceptions of private and public morality. And through it we have our common standards of literature, in the literatures of Greece and Rome. The Western world has its unity in this heritage, in Christianity and in the ancient civilisations of Greece, Rome and Israel, from which, owing to two thousand years of Christianity, we trace our descent.[35]

To the extent that Christianity has spread beyond Europe, we can say that this inheritance has been embraced by a diversity of peoples, from black South Africa to the Philippines, who now hold in common some very fundamental ideas and beliefs. A similar point could be made about the impact of Islam, which finds adherents in regions as diverse as Egypt, Bosnia, and Indonesia.

Even when cultural traditions have their roots in rival religious conceptions, the extent of incomparability of their different ideas is reduced by the extent to which there has been a history of interaction of religious traditions. Again, the cases of Islam and Christianity come to mind, since these rival traditions at once define themselves in opposition to one another and yet share a common philosophical inheritance. If one looks at the matter through the history of Islam, for example, it becomes clear that Muslim contact through conquest and expansion with diverse cultures resulted in Muslim appropriation and development of different intellectual heritages. The integration of the philosophical legacies of Greece, India, and Iran contributed to the cosmopolitan character of Islamic civilization. And, as Azim Nanji explains, Christian and Jewish scholars, familiar with these legacies, "played a crucial mediating role as 'translators', particularly since they were also aware that the moral disposition of Muslims, like theirs, was shaped by common monotheistic

[35] Eliot, *Notes towards the Definition of Culture*, pp. 122–23.

conceptions based on divine command and revelation."[36] Indeed, when comparing cultural traditions, one is struck as much by the similarities as by the differences.

Now MacIntyre might well agree with much of this, conceding that there are large areas of common ground between many rival cultures or traditions. Nonetheless, he could maintain, there does come a point when the different cultures become inaccessible to one another because the substantive criteria of rationality underpinning the different systems make translation impossible. Translating Horace's *Odes* from Latin into the Hebrew of the first-century B.C. Jewish community in Palestine poses insuperable problems because of differing conceptions of god and of idolatry.[37] Yet even if this is so, its significance is doubtful. The most it establishes is that in some instances there are insurmountable difficulties of translation or understanding across cultures. It does not show that there is a general problem of cross-cultural comparability. While Davidson may have established very little in showing that there is *no* "radical" incommensurability between conceptual schemes, MacIntyre has established equally little by showing that there is *some* incomparability.

Several other considerations suggest that the extent of incommensurability between cultural traditions is not as great as is sometimes suggested. Conflict between traditions or cultures may, for example, be reflective not of fundamental disagreement or differences of value but of inadequate understanding of the traditions by rivals, and by practitioners themselves. For example, Muslims may insist on the subordinate position of women as a fundamental tenet of Islamic practice. Yet the Quran's strictures on the family display a concern to ameliorate the status of women by abolishing pre-Islamic practices such as female infanticide, and according women rights of divorce, property ownership, and inheritance. Arguably, many practices which weakened women's status were the result of local customs which were often antithetical to the spirit of emancipation envisaged in the Quran.[38] Conflict between differing cultural standards on such issues might be best explained, then, not by appealing to incommensurability of values or fundamental cultural incomparabilities, but by pointing to the fact that not only outsiders but also insiders often misunderstand the traditions. Cultural traditions may also be weakened from within not only by the swamping of deeper religious and philosophical traditions by local customs, but also by the overcoming of

[36] Azim Nanji, "Islamic Ethics," in Peter Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 106–18, at p. 110.

[37] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 380.

[38] See Nanji, "Islamic Ethics," p. 109. See also, for example, the essays of the Muslim writer Chandra Muzaffar, "Female Attire: Morality and Reform," and "Women, Religion, and Humanity," in his *Challenges and Choices in Malaysian Politics and Society* (Penang: Aliran, 1989), pp. 392–412.

traditional commitments by powerful interests—which may have the power to distort moral discourse. These factors may lead different cultural communities down separate paths, despite their shared cultural inheritance.

What this suggests is that there may be many cultures which exhibit superficial differences even though they share more fundamental commitments. This may be true of many of the groups Iris Young has in mind—groups which wish to differentiate themselves from one another and to celebrate their differences. To some extent, it may even be true of the communities Bhiku Parekh depicts as representative of wider conflicts between different ways. Yet, while it is conflict between them that tends to bring our minds into focus, it is of their shared presuppositions, which make coexistence generally possible, that we need to be reminded.

There is certainly plenty of cultural variety in the world; but, on an adequate understanding of the nature of culture, there is not as much *deep* variety—or difference—as is often asserted. And this suggests that the prospect of establishing cross-cultural moral standards may not be as remote as many suppose.

There is, however, an objection that needs to be considered.[39] Even if there is a deep level at which different cultural understandings converge—since different cultures have more in common than is often supposed—divergent substantive moral beliefs may still be defended or justified by appeal to divergent cultural understandings which are less fundamental. Even if a Muslim and a Christian come to see that they share the same cultural base on some deep level (e.g., a commitment to monotheism), they may retain their cultural disagreements that lie one level up (e.g., regarding the place of women in society). Those (less fundamental) cultural differences can thus serve as a justification for divergent substantive positions still one more level up (e.g., on whether women have certain rights). Deep convergence, it might therefore be argued, does not help us to understand substantive disagreements, since the divergence at the intermediate level has not been shown to be affected (much less dissolved) by the recognition of convergence at the deepest level.

This objection is well-taken insofar as it observes, correctly in my view, that moral conflict often takes place not at the level of deepest philosophical assumptions but rather at the intermediate level. However, there is no suggestion here that shared deep beliefs in themselves will ensure agreement on intermediate moral principles or on moral practice. The argument being advanced here is that the existence of shared fundamental ideas enhances the possibility of reaching moral agreement and establishing moral standards. In part, at least, this is because the existence of

[39] This was put to me by John Tomasi.

some shared premises makes moral dialogue possible. And this, I wish to suggest, will improve—though not guarantee—the prospects of establishing cross-cultural moral standards.

II. Moral Variety and Moral Theory

Yet the question will be asked: How, then, are we to account for the considerable moral diversity and moral conflict we observe? If cultural differences are not always as deep as is commonly supposed, why is there so much moral variety? After all, it cannot be denied that there are many competing and conflicting moral systems in operation, and that no universal moral standards have been settled upon. The most obvious explanation for moral variety seems to be that morality is a cultural product and cultural variety produces moral variety.

To show, then, that there is some prospect of discovering cross-cultural moral standards, it is not enough to argue that cultural differences are not always as deep as suggested. The existence of moral variety simply poses a challenge to that argument. What is needed is an account of morality which offers a plausible explanation of moral diversity as well as an explanation of how universal standards may be attainable. Such an account is, I think, available in the moral theory developed by Adam Smith in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*. What follows in this section is an account of Smith's theory, and an explanation of its importance.

It was not Smith's intention to produce an explanation of moral variety; his concern rather was to produce a more general account of the nature of morality as something which arose out of the nature of human beings. Yet the account which emerges is capable not only of accounting for moral variety but also of suggesting what are the prospects of more general moral principles gaining currency.

Smith's explanation of the emergence of morality begins with an account of the capacity for sympathy with their fellows as the most important characteristic of human beings. We have a natural tendency to place ourselves in the situations of others, to take an interest in their interests, to desire that they take an interest in ours. When the mob gaze at the dancer on the slack rope, they "naturally writhe and twist and balance their own bodies as they see him do";[40] we cannot help but react to the sorrow of others; we sympathize even with the dead.[41] Yet there is an even stronger inclination in our nature: the desire to be in accord with our fellows.

> The great pleasure of conversation and society . . . arises from a certain correspondence of sentiments and opinions, from a certain har-

[40] Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1976), p. 48.
[41] *Ibid.*, p. 52.

> mony of minds, which, like so many musical instruments, coincide and keep time with one another. But this most delightful harmony cannot be obtained unless there is a free communication of sentiments and opinions. We all desire, upon this account, to feel how each other is affected, to penetrate into each other's bosoms, and to observe the sentiments and affections which really subsist there.[42]

On the one hand, the "desire of being believed, the desire of persuading, of leading, and directing other people" Smith sees as "one of the strongest of all our natural desires" (and perhaps the one upon which is founded the characteristic human faculty of speech).[43] On the other hand, there is an equally strong desire not to be out of step, which inclines men to be led by others. For Smith, as Knud Haakonssen suggests, "it is basically this continuous exchange that underlies all human culture."[44]

The capacity for sympathy is the basis of all expressions of approval and disapproval, which, in Smith's account, is where moral judgment begins. Like Hume before him, Smith sees approval and disapproval as essentially emotions or passions. Our natural inclination is to express approval or disapproval as sympathy dictates; and of course, to seek approval. The important point here, however, is that the mutuality of human sympathy does not only lead men to observe others and to express approval or disapproval; it also leads them to an awareness that they too are being observed and judged. This in turn inclines each individual to try to see himself as others would see him by taking up the position of an imaginary spectator. In this process he further distances himself from his own original motives and sentiments in an effort to see and judge them from the standpoint of this spectator, who looks impartially at his behavior and that of others and expresses approval or disapproval accordingly. In such a process we come to judge our own behavior by the standards with which we judge that of others.

Others, then, are crucial for the development of standards of moral self-evaluation. But more than this, it is the process of self-evaluation by reflecting on the likely judgments of others that leads to the development of common moral standards. Once again, mutual sympathy and the desire to be in harmony with the sensibilities of others are crucially important. The individual agent longs for "the entire concord of the affections of the spectators with his own" feelings. But to achieve this he must also consider what would be felt reasonable by those others, and adjust his emotions accordingly, "lowering his passion to that pitch in which the spectators are capable of going along with him," and flattening "the

[42] *Ibid.*, p. 531.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 530.

[44] Knud Haakonssen, *The Science of a Legislator: The Natural Jurisprudence of David Hume and Adam Smith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 49.

sharpness of its natural tone, in order to reduce it to harmony and concord with the emotions of those who are about him."[45]

What Smith offers here is an account of how common social standards can emerge without anyone's intending it. But it is not only social standards but also independent moral standards which come out of this process. Men in society learn to judge themselves by the same standard by which they judge others: a standard of propriety. Yet having asked whether others would regard their behavior as proper, they are led to wonder whether their behavior is *in fact* proper. They begin to ask not simply how their conduct would be regarded by other spectators but how it would be regarded by a third person: an impartial spectator. In the end, individuals want not merely the approval of others; they want to be worthy of approval. Nature has endowed them "not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what ought to be approved of; of being what [they approve] of in other men."[46]

The striking thing about Smith's account of the emergence of moral standards in this way is that it relies solely on individual sympathy and capacity for expressing approval and disapproval. Utility and interest do not come into it. It is the search for approval coupled with a desire to be worthy of approval that creates intersubjective standards which exercise an independent hold on society's members. As Haakonssen puts it, the "general rules of morality are thus the unintended outcome of a multitude of individual instances of natural moral evaluation, but once they are in existence they are quite capable of directing our moral evaluations."[47]

Yet this account also suggests why we might find such moral variety as we do across different societies. Moral standards, like social standards generally, arise out of the interaction of individuals in particular circumstances or contexts. But as circumstances differ, so will the objects of approval and disapproval; thus, the standards of propriety which emerge in various contexts will differ. More importantly, they will differ because it is the sense of propriety rather than anything else (such as perceptions of utility) which inclines individuals to feel approval or disapproval. And the sense of propriety is, to some extent, highly subjective, since it is likely to be affected by perceptions of the beauty or deformity of an act or a character. (There is a tendency to find beauty in things which are useful and not hurtful, but Smith takes the view that in making assessments of propriety, usefulness tends to be an afterthought: it is the beauty or deformity of a form of behavior which first animates us.)[48] So the standards of propriety which emerge in various societies might vary

[45] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 67.
[46] *Ibid.*, p. 212.
[47] Haakonssen, *Science of a Legislator*, p. 61.
[48] Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 310.

considerably, since they have their origins in the mutual sympathy of particular groups of people, with their own subjective perceptions of beauty and deformity. Since social standards are an unintended outcome of numerous individual acts of evaluation, it is not surprising that small differences in individual judgment can lead to significant differences between contrasting social systems. It must be remembered, however, that although Smith gives great weight to the subjectivity of evaluation at the initial stage, he is no simple emotivist. Moral standards emerge out of the process of interaction and mutual adjustment among individuals who have a strong capacity for sympathy with the joys and sorrows of others, but have an equally strong desire that those judged be genuinely worthy of approval or disapproval. Morality may have its origins in emotion; but it quickly acquires an independent standing which exercises a strong hold on individuals.

This last point is important because it indicates that, in Smith's theory, moral standards emerge which are more than mere reflections of popular opinion. Once standards are apparent, individuals do not merely accept them as givens, but rather embrace the idea of moral conduct, and become ready to criticize extant standards on the basis of their own interpretations of what morality demands. At the same time, however, this tendency is tempered by the desire not to be out of step with the community. In this process, in which individuals lead and look to be led, more refined standards of moral conduct are developed.

Different social standards will develop insofar as different judgments of propriety will be made in different contexts. But the moral standards that emerge will be more than mere conventions, insofar as the desire to be moral rather than merely conformist will subject social standards to disinterested evaluation and criticism. This is why Smith suggests that, although custom will always have a strong influence on a society's moral sentiments, it will not be wholly responsible for its moral development. While men are swayed by fashion and ideas about what is socially customary, this does not distract them entirely from the general search for "the natural propriety of action."[49]

What Smith offers, in one sense, is a descriptive science of morals, which explains the relation between human behavior and social (and moral) rules. Certain behaviors are repeatedly selected through sympathy as proper, others as improper. "By and by this recurrent pattern will stand out clearly and men . . . [will] read it off as rules or guidelines for their behaviour."[50] Yet at the same time, while he is offering an account of morality as something which is developed in social contexts, there is no suggestion in Smith that morality is *merely* a form of human behavior

[49] Haakonssen, *Science of a Legislator*, p. 60.
[50] *Ibid.*, p. 61.

"invented" by human beings. On the contrary, it is in their nature to seek to *be* moral; and it is within their capacity, aided by reflective interaction with others, to *become* moral.[51]

The importance of Smith's moral theory for our concerns is that it offers an explanation of moral variety without denying the possibility of there being universal moral standards. The crucial dimension of his theory in this respect is the suggestion that morality is *discovered* in a process of *convergence* upon moral standards. Within a particular social context, patterns of behavior are settled upon, but one of the motivating forces in operation is the *search* for standards of propriety. In this process modes of conduct may be settled upon as morally acceptable in that context; at the same time, whether or not they are morally worthy is kept open, since further reflection and criticism may in fact lead us to different conclusions. What is also kept open is the source of further reflective insight and criticism: it need not come from within the same society or cultural tradition.

Smith's account of morality as something which is discovered in a process of convergence in the course of the interaction of moral evaluations suggests, in fact, that further moral development might be possible through the greater interaction of moral agents from different moral systems. Morality, in Smith's theory, is not simply a cultural product; morality emerges in societies, and moral standards are to some extent shaped by cultural norms. But morality *develops*, as we reflect upon the moral standards which have come to be expected and criticize them; as we reflect upon our criticisms and ask whether they demand too much of our fellows; and as we listen and react to the criticisms of others. And the fact that it develops in this way suggests that it can change when the moral ideas of different cultures come into contact. Typically, cultural differences are seen as the source of moral conflict; on Smith's theory, the interaction of different cultures might turn out to be a source of moral insight.

This, however, raises the question of *how* cultural interaction might produce moral development, particularly since there may be cause for skepticism about the claim that cross-cultural moral disagreement can prove beneficial. One important objection runs as follows. Smith's argu-

[51] It is tempting to suggest that Smith might be categorized as a moral realist. My only reservation about doing so is the controversy which surrounds the term, but I am inclined to go along with Thomas Nagel, who writes:

> Normative realism is the view that propositions about what gives us reasons for action can be true or false independently of how things appear to us, and that we can hope to discover the truth by transcending the appearances and subjecting them to critical assessment. What we aim to discover by this method is not a new aspect of the external world, called value, but rather just the truth about what we and others should do and want.

See Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 139.

ment suggests that we care about how others judge us and that this guides our moral reflection through the impartial spectator; and this is fine insofar as it tells us that the moral standards we establish reflect (indirectly) the judgments of our peers. But why think that the judgments of outsiders would have the same effect, or contribute to our moral reflection? Perhaps the mechanism in question only works locally.[52] This objection might be extended further: it seems clear that the shape and direction of sympathy in individuals is determined by their family, group, class, church, sect, and so on. Indeed, as Smith himself recognized, social pluralism necessarily entails a certain amount of competition and antagonism. To the extent that this is true, it would follow that the sympathies engendered within an individual toward certain of his fellows would entail antipathies or aversions toward certain others. My case seems to assume that pluralism entails merely moral differences when, in fact, pluralism also entails competition and antagonism.[53]

To some extent the objections are well-founded: there has been—and will continue to be—a certain tendency for people to reject the judgments of outsiders as irrelevant to moral discussion. On the other hand, this should not be exaggerated. For one thing, it is clear that, despite our tendency to favor those who are closer to us—members of our own family, or church, or local community—we have, nonetheless, acquired moral sentiments and developed moral standards which range more widely. We have developed the capacity to recognize injustice even when it is perpetrated by "one of our own" to the disadvantage of "strangers" from other families, or towns, or states, or sects. And while there is a tendency to dismiss outside moral traditions, there is also sometimes a tendency to romanticize them.[54]

There is, however, a more important argument to be made for thinking that Smith's mechanism is not one which works only locally. The crucial point here is Smith's observation that people are not entirely distracted by fashion and custom from the general search for "the natural propriety of action." This is because, in the course of moral development, they embrace not merely particular moral standards but, more importantly, the idea of moral conduct. People become, to at least some degree, interested not only in whether conduct conforms to existing moral standards but also in whether those standards meet the demands of morality. Morality comes to have a life of its own. But this enhances the

[52] This objection was put to me by John Tomasi.

[53] This objection was put to me by Brian Beddie.

[54] See, for example, the television series *Millenium*, hosted and narrated by Harvard anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis, which contrasts tribal societies—with their harmonious relations and profound wisdom about people and their place in the world—with modern societies, which are characterized by loneliness, greed, and environmental pillage. Less savory aspects of tribal societies are ignored; on this point, see Ron Brunton, "Millenium: Getting Tribal Rites Wrong," *IPA Review*, vol. 45, no. 4 (1992), pp. 51-52.

possibility of moral interaction and moral criticism. Once morality is less—or no longer—tied to custom, it is open to others, including outsiders, to appeal to it. For example, many Muslims in England who called for Salmon Rushdie's book to be banned appealed not to Islamic strictures but to the English blasphemy laws which favored Christian sensibilities. Muslims argued that consistency required the extension of the laws to other religions as well. This raised the possibility of moral standards being revised in either of two ways: first, by extension of the blasphemy laws, or, second, by their abandonment.

The point here is not to argue that moral standards are always revised peacefully and rationally, or that partiality and conflict have disappeared. It is simply to suggest that even when there is antagonism and competition, moral criticism and moral development are possible.

III. Cultural Pluralism and Moral Knowledge

Cultural pluralism is often taken to preclude the possibility of establishing cross-cultural or universal moral standards, or indeed of acquiring moral knowledge. In looking to reject this claim, I have tried, first, to show why cultural differences do not pose a problem: the reason is that there is already a good deal of convergence among cultural traditions. Although there are many differences of custom and moral practice, there is also a good deal that is shared which makes for the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue. Secondly, I have tried to show that there is a moral theory which can account for the existence of moral variety, and also to show how moral convergence might be possible. This is the moral theory developed by Adam Smith. My concern now is to try to draw out the conclusions of the essay, and to offer some final observations about the obstacles to, as well as the possibility of, moral knowledge.

The development of universal moral standards is not improbable, because convergence upon such standards can be regarded as a serious possibility. Cultural pluralism can be regarded as an obstacle to such a development only if there is no possibility of communicating across cultures and there exist no mechanisms through which moral differences might be mediated. But it is not true that communication is impossible; and differences are mediated—through dialogue, through informal associations, and sometimes through courts of law. So if there are any serious obstacles to the establishment of universal standards, cultural pluralism is not among them. The fact that cultural traditions in fact have much in common supports this contention.

There is an objection which can be raised at this point, however, which needs to be considered. It comes from MacIntyre, who denies the significance of the fact that competing traditions share much in common:

> It is not then that competing traditions do not share some standards. All the traditions with which we have been concerned agree in

> according a certain authority to logic both in their theory and in their practice. Were it not so, their adherents would be unable to disagree in the way in which they do. But that upon which they agree is insufficient to resolve those disagreements. It may therefore seem to be the case that we are confronted with the rival and competing claims of a number of traditions to our allegiance in respect of our understanding of practical rationality and justice, among which we can have no good reason to decide in favor of any one rather than of the others.[55]

Here a couple of points need to be made. First, it may in fact be impossible to resolve disagreements between competing traditions by putting them up against one another. But if so, it may be because to approach matters in this way is simply asking too much. It is much more likely that disagreements will be resolved by traditions becoming modified in the course of communication between them. This seems much more like the way in which moral disputes generally are resolved; very seldom does one party accept the other's alleged "knock-down" argument: but on occasion moral debate sees one party reassessing his beliefs over time to accommodate, and perhaps concede to, moral criticism.

The second point is that MacIntyre may be adopting the assumption that the resolution of moral disagreements has to take place at the level of philosophical discourse. Yet once again this seems to be asking too much. For example, he writes:

> Consider what is involved in the attempt to evaluate rival claims about practical reasoning by comparing each with what are taken to be the basic facts about practical reasoning. Hume, for example, claims that reason can be nothing but the servant of the passions. Aristotle and Aquinas claim that reason can direct the passions. Should we then proceed by considering as wide a range as we can of examples of human action, in which both reasoning and passion are present and play some part in generating action, and in the light of those examples decide between the two rival claims? The problem is: how to describe the relevant examples.[56]

But while there may be such difficulties if abstract assumptions confront each other, it is not clear that two individuals from different traditions attempting to resolve a moral disagreement must turn away because they have different basic beliefs. History is full of examples of different ways of life coexisting; and many traditions, such as the Islamic, have developed conventions for the fair treatment of "nonbelievers." The fact of successful interaction between different traditions, and the fact that traditions

[55] MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, p. 351.
[56] *Ibid.*, p. 332.

have been modified by others, suggests that conflicts of basic assumptions identified by philosophers should not be seen as insurmountable obstacles to communication between cultures. It may well be that, in this matter, theory lags behind practice. This point is well made in a slightly different context by Michael Smith in confronting arguments about moral relativism. It is often argued, he notes, that if there is a fundamental relativity in our reasons then it follows that any convergence we find in our moral beliefs must be entirely contingent. Yet why not look at it the other way around? "Why not think, instead, that if such a convergence emerged in moral practice then that would itself suggest that these particular moral beliefs, and the corresponding desires, *do* enjoy a privileged rational status?"[57]

To the extent that theory *is* capable of describing how conflicts between traditions can be resolved in practice, I suggest that Adam Smith's theory provides us with the appropriate model. If Smith's account is right, then it is possible that universal moral norms can emerge out of the sympathetic interaction of moral agents, who act guided by a mixture of concern to be in accord with their fellows and desire to be moral and to be morally worthy. To the extent that this is the way in which morality develops, there is reason to think that there is also a possibility of moral convergence as different cultural traditions interact.

If one were to take the most optimistic view possible, one might even consider whether cultural pluralism, far from being an obstacle to the achievement of moral knowledge, might not turn out to enhance its prospects. If moral knowledge is acquired in a process of testing our moral evaluations in practice, and eliminating practices and standards as our sense of propriety is refined through moral criticism, then interaction among a large number of cultural traditions opens up the possibility of examining and comparing a wider range of moral hypotheses. If there is to be a convergence upon universal moral standards, the prospect of our finding such standards may be enhanced by a greater range of traditions to consider and to draw upon for moral insight.

Yet it may not do to be too optimistic. A number of difficulties stand in the way of our converging upon common moral standards. The first is that it may turn out that there is only a limited area over which universal standards can legitimately range. It may be that large areas of moral knowledge will remain local or contextual knowledge of practices which are appropriate only to particular forms of human interaction. Adam Smith thought this, and suggested that, in the end, it was only that part of morality which dealt with the rules of justice that was capable of universal application.

A second obstacle to the development of universal moral standards is that argument and persuasion are not the only forces operating in human

[57] Michael Smith, "Realism," in Singer, ed., *A Companion to Ethics*, pp. 399–410, at p. 408.

society. Interest is in many ways a more powerful force for social change, and it may be that interest will dominate over ideas in many circumstances, hampering moral development.

Thirdly, moral development or convergence may be held back by failures of moral insight. We may simply make mistakes in our reasoning when subjecting moral ideas to criticism.

Fourthly, moral development may be hindered by moral intransigence. People may refuse to consider alternative constructions and to subject their thinking to moral criticism. At worst, this may be exemplified in moral fanaticism, which would make moral interaction and moral development more difficult. This point is well worth pondering at a time when the demise of European Communism has led many prematurely to predict the triumphant march forward of the ideals of democracy and individual rights. On the one hand, there is no shortage of evidence that these ideals are held in high regard as the rulers and intelligentsia of the former Communist states appeal to human rights, freedom of religion, thought, and the press, and democracy in their daily debates and pronouncements. Yet on the other hand, we see in the same regions, from Georgia to Bosnia, ethnic animosity and moral atrocities which have their roots in conflicts based on religious antagonisms and reciprocal atrocities committed over centuries.

Generally, there may be enormous difficulties standing in the way of moral convergence and the acquisition of moral knowledge stemming simply from weaknesses in human character. These are more serious obstacles to moral progress and the development of universal standards than mere cultural variety.

> The fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our cultures,
> But in ourselves, that we are underlings.

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