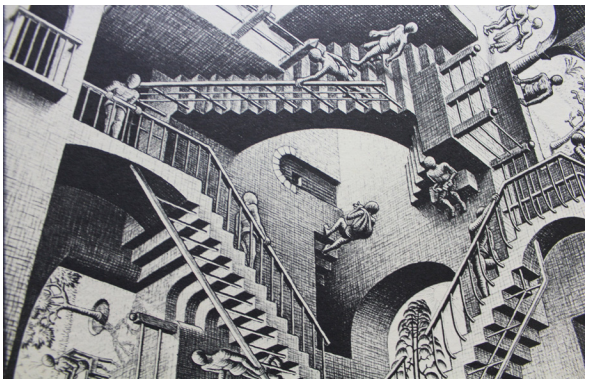
APPENDIX B: MORAL RELATIVISM



The professor stands behind a podium and poses a question, "Who here thinks that it would be wrong to steal expired food to feed your starving dog?" A mixed response in the class prompts the professor to make the statement, "What you see here is proof-positive that what is right and wrong is not set in stone. It depends on your personal values and the culture in which you were brought up." Such sentiments are espoused not only behind the podiums of university campuses but also on the local streets and on the media. Right and wrong are seen today as mere conventions or preferences that are either determined by the individual or prescribed by the surrounding culture, which ebbs and flows with the times; hence the mantra, *morality is relative*.

> *Everyone has the right to determine their own moral laws to live by.*
>
> *Who are you to say that someone else is wrong?*
>
> *Right and wrong are determined by society.*
>
> *You shouldn't impose your moral values onto others.*

Living in our postmodern culture, such statements as the ones above are espoused so commonly that we can't escape them. However, before echoing such 20-second sound bites from television shows, we must carefully examine their underlying principles. In this appendix, we will consider the major forms of relativism (subjectivism & conventionalism) and examine some of their fundamental problems as ethical systems, as well as explore moral objectivism as a viable alternative.

REASONING FROM DIVERSITY

Going back to the professor's reasoning, he argued that since there is no consensus about what is right or wrong, morality must be relative.

> **The lack of consensus does not lead to the conclusion that there is no objective morality.**

Indeed, reasoning from diversity may be the most widely used and accepted logic behind moral relativism.

However, upon some examination, one can see that the line of reasoning is illogical, for lack of consensus does not lead to the conclusion that there is no objective morality. If I were to stand before a randomly chosen group of people and ask the question, "What is the derivative of hyperbolic sine?" I am sure to get a variety of answers (probably more wrong than right). However, this diversity does not mean that the true answer lies therefore in the eye of the beholder. If this question were on a test, a student who got the answer wrong would find it difficult to convince his math instructor that the answer must be relative since there are so many different answers. Obviously, the lack of consensus in the class does not lead to the conclusion that mathematical truths are relative. Likewise, the fact that different people have thought differently about ethical issues is just an observation about a lack of consensus or perhaps poor ethical reasoning. It does not logically follow that morality is relative.

SUBJECTIVISM

One of the most commonly held forms of moral relativism is the belief that morality is determined by the individual (called individual relativism or subjectivism). Subjectivism holds that every person has the right to define for himself what is right and what is wrong – thus the expression, "What is good for you might not be good for me," or the famous, "Who are you to say what is right?"

However, one serious problem with subjectivism is that it undercuts the very concept of morality, destroying its function as an ethical system. As Pojman states, "There seems to be a contradiction between subjectivism and the very concept of morality that it is supposed to characterize, for morality has to do with *proper* resolution of interpersonal conflict and the amelioration of the human predicament."[1] In other words, by making morality an entirely individual matter, subjectivism denies morality its power in a social context; it denies the concept of the "should" *despite* the desires of the individual to the contrary.

For example, according to subjectivism, statements such as "You should not discriminate against handicapped people" become meaningless because morality is up to the individual, so no one can say that another person *should* or *should not* do anything. But if that's the case, in what sense are we still talking about morality? Consequently, in the cases of a conflict of beliefs (e.g., the beliefs of a racist versus the beliefs of an egalitarian), subjectivism actually eliminates any possibility for resolution by its assertion that each individual has the right to determine what is good or evil. As a result, any disagreement about right and wrong would be relegated to a shouting match – the winner being whoever can shout "Who are you to say?" the loudest. When one understands the ramifications of subjectivism, it becomes apparent that it is a nonsensical moral system, for it destroys the very concept of "should," making it possible for individuals to justify every action by saying that "that's good for me."

One common argument raised by moral relativists at this point is that relativists are in fact moral people. But this argument is really missing the point; the point is not about whether relativists themselves are moral or immoral, but rather, the issue is that moral relativism *as a worldview* lies on faulty grounds and therefore ought to be rejected. Further, we should note the irony underlying such an objection on the part of relativists. They defend themselves by saying that they live "morally upright and good lives." This assumes, naturally, that I am able to recognize the picture of a morally good life. However, under relativistic systems like subjectivism, terms like "morally upright" and "good" are defined by the individual and therefore lose their meaning in the argument.

CONVENTIONALISM

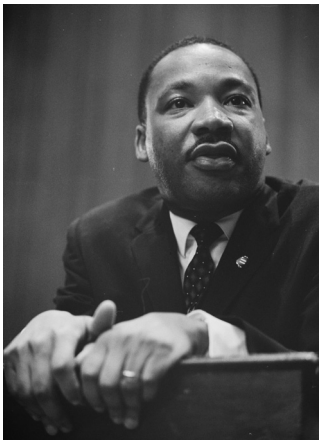
Another form of moral relativism is conventionalism, which is the belief that morality is determined by the society of which an individual is a part.

Good and evil are nothing more than sets of behaviors accepted or rejected by the local society.

According to conventionalism, "good" is the set of behaviors that has gained cultural acceptance in a particular society, and conversely, "evil" is the set of behaviors "of a kind disliked by the herd,"[2] as atheist Bertrand Russell put it. By recognizing the "should" of morality in the social context, conventionalism seems to escape the pitfalls of subjectivism. However, further examination reveals that conventionalism results in absurd logical ramifications and faces similar problems as subjectivism.

According to conventionalism, good and evil are nothing more than sets of behaviors accepted or rejected by the local society. It follows then that a particular society cannot possibly condemn another society for immorality, for it would be bigoted to do so. One disturbing ramification of this doctrine is that absolutely no moral judgment can be made regarding heinous acts committed by other cultures, such as the genocide committed by the Nazis. If conventionalism is correct, and "good" is defined as such by virtue of acceptance in a particular society, then it follows that what the Nazis did, according to the conventionalist definition, was actually a morally good thing. Indeed, at the Nuremberg trials, the Nazis defended themselves by stating that they were operating according to the laws of their own land. To that defense, a counter-question was raised, and it remains to this day a question that needs to be answered: "But is there not a law above our laws?"[3]

Furthermore, conventionalism is a view that makes all talk of moral progress ultimately meaningless. A conventionalist cannot agree that the abolition of slavery, for instance, represents moral "progress," for any idea of progress must assume that there exists some objective standard of morality independent of societal consensus that we are moving toward or moving away from. If conventionalism is correct, all that one can say about moral progress (like the abolition of slavery and the civil rights movement) is that morality is now "different" – along the same lines as saying that my car used to be blue, but now it is beige. Moreover, by its own definitions of good and evil, conventionalism would have to denounce moral reformers, such as Martin Luther King Jr., because they often went against the social policies accepted by the majority in their society. Such an understanding of morality not only leads to ridiculous assessments but also forces us to *condemn* any current moral causes that one might be involved in (such as women's rights, human rights or child labor law reform) where one is trying to change the current policy held by the majority in a particular culture or society.



Another major problem with conventionalism is that it conveniently

refuses to define which society one belongs to, especially in light of the fact that an individual often belongs to a multiplicity of societies. Pojman gives a realistic illustration of a student who is a member of a racist fraternity in an egalitarian university located in a racist community that is a part of an egalitarian nation, which is within a racist world at large. Which is the society that he belongs to? In such a situation where he could choose any society that fits his fancy, a moral question no longer makes sense, for "morality has lost its action-guiding function."[4] Like subjectivism, it turns out that conventionalism also strips morality of its action-guiding power.

The imperative, "You should not impose your own moral views onto others," is itself a moral imperative that gets imposed onto others.

Perhaps the most vexing problem of moral relativism is the self-refuting nature of the imperative, "You should not impose your own moral views onto others." This statement is the motivating force driving moral relativism. Yet this imperative itself is a moral imperative (note the word "*should*"), which seeks to impose itself onto others as the "morally right" way to treat others; therefore, it is self-refuting. The only way a moral relativist could justify the imperative is by saying that this imperative is the only exception – the only universal moral absolute that we must all abide by. But such an exception to the rule is completely arbitrary without *some* kind of higher authority, and moral relativism, having destroyed the obligation of morality and declaring itself triumphant, finds that it has cut the limb that it is sitting on.

MORAL OBJECTIVISM

The rejection of moral relativism necessarily means that one adopt some form of moral objectivism as the only viable alternative. When saying that something is objective, it means that it is "true irrespective of the beliefs of individuals or cultures."[5] The statement, "The earth is round," for example, would be an objective truth claim – it is either true or false – and its truth does not depend on the beliefs of people. The earth was round even when no one on earth thought it so. If a particular society still believed that the earth is flat, those people would be wrong. The statement, "Torturing babies for fun is wrong," is, according to moral objectivism, another objective truth claim which does not depend on the beliefs of people. If a particular group of people or a society thought that it was morally fine for someone to torture babies for fun, the moral objectivist would say that those people are wrong. Such is the basic tenet of moral objectivism.

UNIVERSAL MORAL PRINCIPLES

One endorsement for moral objectivism arises from a response to the relativistic argument. We have already seen that a diversity of moral viewpoints does not mean that morality is relative. However, upon further examination, it turns out that even the very claim that there is such a wide diversity of morality is highly questionable. C.S. Lewis observes that while the *application* of moral principles might be different, the core moral principles remain surprisingly consistent across cultures.[6] Anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn agrees, listing regulations regarding murder, sexual behavior, lying, restitution, reciprocity and responsibilities in familial relationship as a few of the moral concepts that are "altogether universal."[7] In other words,

people by and large find these moral principles to be intuitive; the differences lie in the application of those principles and which principle takes precedence in cases of moral conflict.

For example, let's take the contemporary moral controversy over capital punishment. It would seem on the surface that there is a fundamental moral difference between the parties on opposing sides of the issue. However, what are the moral principles that are involved here? They are justice, compassion and the value of human life. The interesting fact is that both camps uphold all these moral principles. Where then is the difference? It lies in the application of those principles, i.e., in the decision regarding *which moral principle takes precedence* in this particular situation (justice overriding compassion; value of human life overriding justice, etc.). They are not in disagreement about those basic moral principles as such. Likewise, when one examines issues like cannibalism, killing of the elderly and other typical examples put forth by relativists as irreconcilable diversity of morality, one finds that there are universal moral principles (such as protection of the tribe, civic duty to preserve tribal resources, etc.) that undergird those practices. Therefore the moral relativist's argument from diversity of morality is not only illogical, it is also a faulty observation arising from a superficial examination of cultural practices.

A COMMON MISCONCEPTION

At this point, one quick point of clarification may be needed to correct a common misconception about moral objectivism. Although the moral objectivist believes in objective moral truths that do not depend on the beliefs of people, the moral objectivist does not see all moral issues as black-and-white (i.e., he/she does not deny the existence of "gray areas"). Moral objectivism acknowledges that 1) there are situations where one moral principle comes into conflict with another, and 2) in those situations, one must evaluate the applicability of the principles and obey the higher principle. For example, the principle of saving a life should take priority over the principle to tell the truth. As such, moral objectivism recognizes that there is such a thing as moral ambiguity[a], but in those cases, moral objectivists believe that there is an objectively higher moral principle (e.g., given a crisis situation, the principle of saving human lives objectively takes priority over the principle of saving animal lives). Moral relativists, on the other hand, deny any kind of moral objectivity or priority, leaving the choice up to the person (e.g., Person-A can save human lives, Person-B can prioritize saving animal lives, and both would be morally justified, as long as they were "true to themselves").

INTUITION

Perhaps the strongest evidence for objective moral principles is our own intuition and everyday experience. Everyone has observed or engaged in quarreling – between children as well as adults. C.S. Lewis looks at these kinds of statements that are used in quarreling such as "That's my seat, I was there first" and "Why should you shove in first?" and makes the observation that "he is appealing to some kind of standard of behavior which he expects the other man to know about. And the other man seldom replies: 'To hell with your standard.' Nearly always he tries to make out that what he has been doing does not really go against the standard, or that if it does there is some special excuse. It seems as if both parties had in mind some kind of Law or Rule of fair play or decent behavior about which they really agreed. And they have. If they had not, they might fight like animals, but they could not *quarrel* in the human sense of the word. Quarreling means trying to show that the other person is in the wrong. And there would be no sense in trying to do that unless you and he

a. By "ambiguity" I do not mean that they are unknowable ontologically, but that they are not immediately knowable.

had some sort of agreement as to what Right and Wrong are." It has been argued that this cognition of what is right and wrong is so deeply ingrained in our moral psyche that it is in fact impossible to live out the contrary.

C.S. Lewis again states in an illustration that although one may meet an individual who mentally rejects objective morality, as soon as that person is wronged in some way, he will reflexively appeal to moral principles as an objective reality and either demand restitution or an apology. Although he may give lip service to moral relativism, it seems that he cannot escape his own intuitive grasp of objective morality. In the end, perhaps the strongest evidence for objective morality is the traces of the universal law we find embedded in our own intuitions and hearts.

BURDEN OF PROOF

Although some evidence has been laid out, this appendix has not provided an airtight proof against moral relativism or an airtight proof for moral objectivism. However, one more thing can be said: There are certain intuitive statements that are reasonable to believe without further proof. For example, the statement, "*Other people exist*," cannot be proven (since we could possibly be dreaming or in a computer simulation like the Matrix), yet we assume that other people do exist because it simply strikes us as being true. It is possible that we could be wrong about that since we can't prove it. However, the fact that we can't prove it shouldn't trouble us, because when dealing with such seemingly intuitive (also known as axiomatic) knowledge, the burden of proof really lies with the party that is denying that knowledge. So if someone were trying to convince you that other people don't actually exist because you are living in a computer simulation, the burden of proof lies with that person to provide some astonishing evidence.

Now, according to moral objectivists, a statement such as "*It is good to be kind*" is a self-evident statement that does not require further proof. It simply hits us as true. Even moral relativists trying to deny the truthfulness of that statement readily admit that such a statement hits them as being true. But if that is the case, the burden of proof is not on the moral objectivists to prove that statement; rather, the burden is on the moral relativists to provide some astonishing evidence to prove that our intuition is completely wrong. Therefore, it is more reasonable for a person to assume that moral objectivity is true until enough evidence has been given to tip the scale. Proponents of moral relativism must do far more than simply trot out anecdotal examples of people who might have thought differently.

SO WHAT?

So what if morality is objective? Let's briefly consider its implications. As we observe ourselves from the inside, we find a strange urge or command trying to get us to behave in a certain way; we find that we are under some kind of "law." But unlike physical laws, these laws are more like moral exhortations, which we often don't obey. The question is: What is the source of this moral law, which urges me to do right and makes me feel uncomfortable when I do wrong? We can make some educated guesses about the nature of this law: we know, for example, that inanimate objects do not issue moral exhortations. It seems that moral exhortations and instructions come solely from other beings that have minds and wills. We could reasonably conclude, then, that whatever moral impulse we possess has to come from a being that has something like a mind and a will. Moreover, this mind-like being must be authoritative enough to issue an objective moral law and is apparently intensely interested in right conduct – fair play, unselfishness, courage, honesty and truthfulness. Yet human beings often choose not to obey these laws, all the while feeling uneasy, because we know that we should.

Although it's not sufficient proof for Christianity, it's notable to recognize that the God of the Bible matches this description. The Bible claims that God is that Being from whom these laws came, and it describes our predicament as being in rebellion against his rightful authority. Although we live in a culture that considers it fashionable to espouse moral relativism, our own moral intuitions and conscience point us to the reality of the Moral Law, which in turn points us to the Lawgiver.

ENDNOTES

1 Louis P. Pojman, "Ethical Relativism: Who's to Judge What's Right or Wrong?" Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), 23.

2 Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1957), 43.

3 Ibid.

4 Pojman, 26.

5 J.P. Moreland and Norman Geisler, *The Life and Death Debate: Moral Issues of Our Time* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990), 6

6 The case for consistency in moral principles across cultures is made in C.S.Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1960), 24-26

7 Clyde Kluckhorn, "Ethical Relativity: Sic et Non," Journal of Philosophy (1955): LII, quoted in Louis P. Pojman, "Ethical Relativism: Who's to Judge What's Right or Wrong?" Ethics: Discovering Right and Wrong, 2d ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing, 1990), 28.