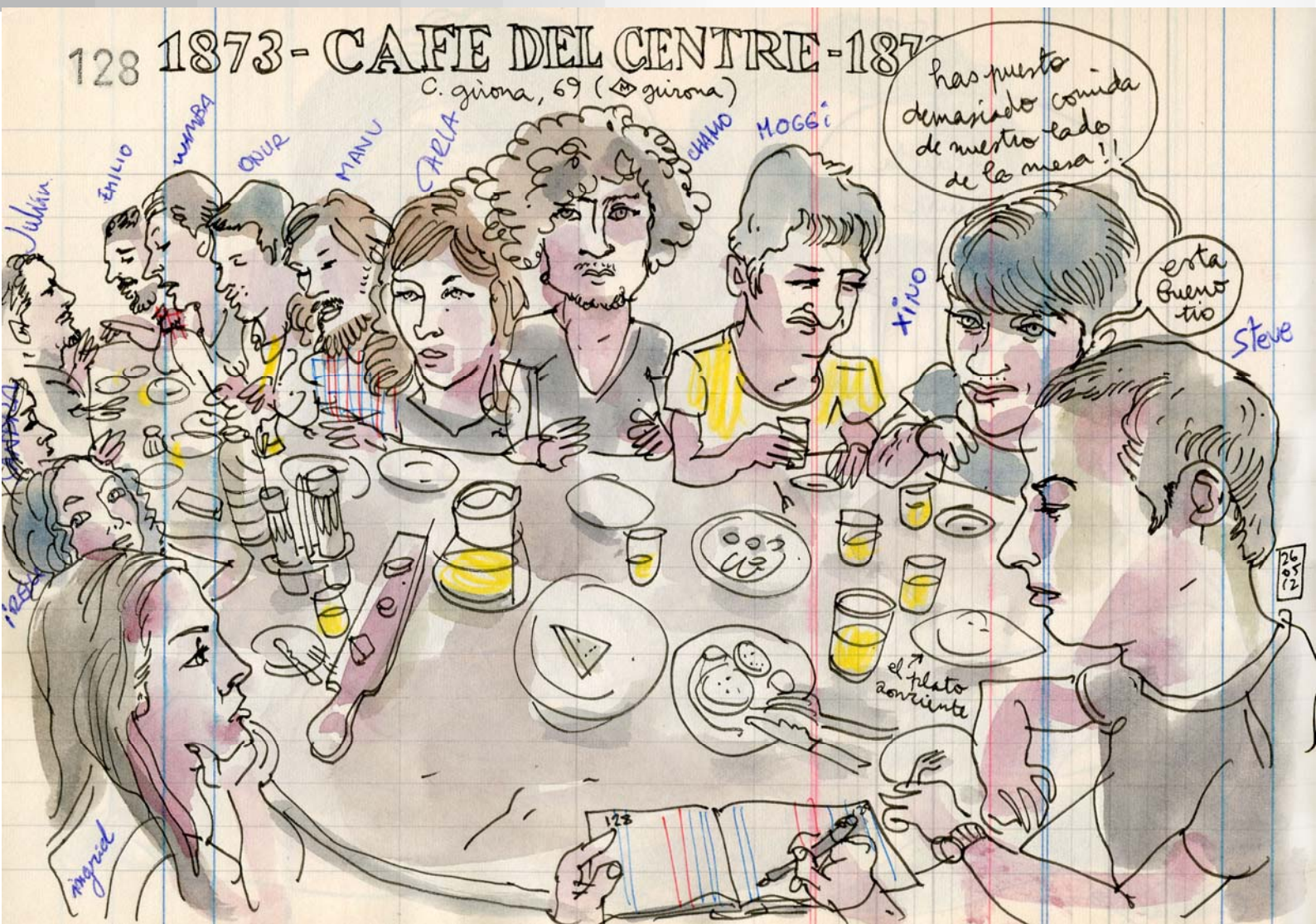


# Café Philosophy



## Relativism

**IS AN ATTEMPT TO MAKE SENSE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

### FEATURED ARTICLES:

- \* "Moral Relativism & Cultural Chauvinism" by Gerald.R.Lang, (U.K)
- \* "Don't Blame the Postmodernists" by Stuart Sim, (U.K)
- \* "Morality is a Culturally Conditioned Response" by Jesse Prinz, (U.S.A)
- \* "Meditations and Discourse on the Pursuit of Philosophical Studies" Part 1 and 2, by Catherine Cunningham (Cork, Ireland)
- \* "Aesthetic Relativism" by William Tam (Hong Kong)
- \* Front Cover Artwork and page 15 sketch by *Lapin* (Barcelona, Spain)
- \* 'What is this thing called Philosophy' by Bob Fitter (U.K)

Tom  
McGuire

July 2012

Editorial



## IT'S ALL RELATIVE, DUDE

Many philosophical problems are destined to remain the province of unread journals, dusty manuscripts and specialist-level seminars. Their debates are conducted in, what to most people is, a foreign language, saddled with complex and obtuse points that could only occur to those who ponder the topic at every waking hour.

Not so with the question of morality. Everybody who can think has a view on it. This is because we are forced to make moral decisions every day. Whether to help a blind man cross the street, or to steal that cupcake you are sure nobody will miss.

From the five year old who screams "it's not fair!" to the sophisticated criminal who claims that they are the victim, we all readily make appeals to morality. A child is aware of personal likes and dislikes, but pretty soon grasps (perhaps subconsciously at first) that there is something called 'fairness' to which his parents ought to pay homage. As we develop, we usually try to make sure that our behaviour conforms to morality, which we may see embodied in social conventions. Other times, a strongly held moral conviction motivates a defiance of such conventions.

It is natural to have feelings such as disgust or gratification as a reaction to certain things. Consider the act of putting a baby in a blender. I am guessing you feel that such an act of infanticide is abhorrent. But do you think this feeling is simply personal to you, or does it reflect a universal standard, one which is applicable to everyone whether they like it or not?

You might think that regardless of whether the baby-killer shares your values, they are morally obliged to respect a child's life. Or perhaps because they have a different set of values according to which they are doing a good thing (after all, the baby could grow up to be a terrorist), we cannot truthfully hold that what they are doing is absolutely evil. The latter view is an example of moral relativism.

The Pope believes that moral relativism is "the central problem of the 21st century". He is not the only representative of the opposite view, and there are many possible justifications (not only religious ones) for belief in objective morality. The Pope argues (p.3) that there is a natural law of moral right and wrong. Our conscience can tell us when we are obeying or breaking it. The denial of this law leads to its habitual violation, and thus a world in which evil prevails. This argument has wide support, especially from religious people. It is the notion that we each have a 'moral compass', though some people may choose to ignore it or even have one that is faulty.

However, moral relativists tend to disagree that the denial of objective morality must lead to social chaos. Stable societies in which people get along make us happier and increase our chance of survival. No moral law required. According to Gerald Lang (p.4), moral views have continually changed and shifted over time. But if there is something objective about moral values, then every society should have roughly the same ones. Lang thinks cultures (both past and present) are just too different for that to be feasible.

As Jesse Prinz (p.10) puts it, relativists "believe that conflicting moral beliefs can both be true". My values are true for me, and

your values are true for you. And because both are 'true' in this sense, neither is triumphant over the other. In the absence of some objective standard applicable to everybody which governs all values, there is no basis on which the truth of mine outweighs yours.

Prinz believes there are three forms such a standard could take. It could be divine, arising from the commands of an entirely good Supreme Being. Alternatively, perhaps humans have evolved a genetic predisposition to certain moral values. Or maybe there is some rational principle not subject to human opinion (such as the laws of mathematics) to determine what is right and wrong. Prinz rejects all three possibilities in favour of moral relativism. Ask yourself whether he is right.

From the belief that moral values are subjective, it is only a small step to the related idea that all values are. Take beauty, for example. Aesthetic relativism would say that from a neutral standpoint, a heap of soil is just as beautiful (or ugly) as the Taj Mahal. William Tam asks: 'Is Beauty Subjective?' (p.16) and answers with a resounding 'no.'

Also in this issue, some pieces on the nature of philosophy itself. Catherine Cunningham (p.14) muses on the opulent lifestyle awaiting the philosophy graduate (note: tongue-in-cheek alert), and Bob Fitter (p.18) tries to find out what it is, if anything, that philosophers actually do.

Whether you like to use Café Philosophy for discussion fodder or as free wallpaper for your inner city apartment, we sincerely hope you make the most of this edition.

Thanks so much for reading!

TOM MCGUIRE

## THE POPE LAUNCHED A RENEWED ATTACK ON THE "MORAL RELATIVISM" THAT HE HAS BLAMED FOR BRITAIN'S SUMMER RIOTS

(By SIMON CALDWELL—THE TELEGRAPH, LONDON, 30 DEC 2011)

In a message for the 2012 World Peace Day of January 1, Pope Benedict said that neither peace nor justice was obtainable if the objective norms of morality expressed in the Ten Commandments continue to be rejected.

His words represent another severe criticism of moral relativism, the humanistic creed that holds there can be no objective standard on which to base morality.

They come just months after the Pope told Nigel Baker, Britain's Ambassador to the Holy See, that the spread of the ideology was to blame for the riots that convulsed British cities over four days in August, saying it produced "frustration, despair, selfishness and a disregard for the life and liberty of others".

In his New Year's Day message, the Pontiff warned all societies that justice and peace will remain "words without content" unless they are informed instead by the natural moral law, the key precepts of which are expressed in the Ten Commandments.

He said that every person 'must move beyond the relativistic horizon and come to know the truth about himself and the truth about good and evil'.

"Deep within his conscience, man discovers a law that he did not lay upon himself, but which he must obey," he said in his message, *Educating Young People in Justice and Peace*.

"Its voice calls him to love and to do what is good, to avoid evil and to take responsibility for the good he does and the evil he commits," he said.

"Thus, the exercise of freedom is intimately linked to the natural moral law, which is universal in character, expresses the dignity of every person and forms the basis of fundamental human rights and duties - consequently, in the final analysis, it forms the basis for just and peaceful coexistence."

The Pope said: 'The right use of freedom, then, is central to the promotion of justice and peace, which require respect for oneself and others, including those whose way of being and living differs greatly from one's own.'

"This attitude engenders the elements without which peace and justice remain merely words without content: mutual trust, the capacity to hold constructive dialogue, the possibility of forgiveness, which one constantly wishes to receive but finds hard to bestow, mutual charity, compassion towards the weakest, as well as readiness to make sacrifices."

The Pope said that it was the task of education to form people in authentic freedom because when absolute individualism was promoted in its place a person 'ends up contradicting the truth of his own being and forfeiting his freedom'.

"On the contrary, man is a relational being, who lives in relationship with others and

especially with God," he said. "Authentic freedom can never be attained independently of God."

Pope Benedict has taught the significance of the natural moral law throughout his seven-year pontificate.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, this law is considered natural because it is part of the nature of a person, inscribed on every human heart enabling people to discern by reason good and evil, and truth from falsehood.

Pope Benedict ended his message by addressing young people directly. 'You are a precious gift for society,' he said.

"Do not yield to discouragement in the face of difficulties and do not abandon yourselves to false solutions which often seem the easiest way to overcome problems.

"Do not be afraid to make a commitment, to face hard work and sacrifice, to choose the paths that demand fidelity and constancy, humility and dedication. Be confident in your youth and its profound desires for happiness, truth, beauty and genuine love."

Pope Benedict XVI is theologically conservative and his teaching and prolific writings defend traditional Catholic doctrine and values. During his papacy, Benedict XVI has advocated a return to fundamental Christian values to counter the increased secularisation of many developed countries. He views relativism's denial of objective truth, and the denial of moral truths in particular, as the central problem of the 21st century.

Simon Caldwell—London



## MORAL RELATIVISM & CULTURAL CHAUVINISM

MEMBERS OF DIFFERENT CULTURES WITH DIFFERENT VALUES AND BELIEFS COME INTO FREQUENT CONFLICT, SOMETIMES VIOLENT. GERALD LANG ASKS IF WE CAN STILL PASS JUDGMENT.

### “When in Rome do as the Romans do”—Cultural Relativists Agree

Depending on whom you ask, moral relativism is either an overdue and salutary antidote to imperialism and cultural arrogance, or else it represents a self-defeating, wishy-washy gesture in the direction of cultural even handedness. The often excitable and high-voltage nature of popular debates about these issues suggests that many of us feel unsettled about them. We may feel torn between the two camps: while we deplore imperialism and cultural chauvinism, we are also likely to have weighty moral commitments that we take to have application beyond our immediate cultural or political borders. What seems undeniable is that all the mudslinging and raised hackles stand in the way of precise and careful thinking. Relativism’s prospects deserve to be debated in a more sober spirit.

This article is intended to make a small contribution to that large task. My aim here is to clarify what moral relativism actually is, and to critically examine some of its alleged virtues, including, in particular, the suggestion that relativism has the merit of avoiding cultural chauvinism.

### Defining Moral Relativism

According to moral relativism, moral judgments are ‘of their time and place’. It is the view that the applicability of moral claims is relative to, or indexed to, societies, cultures or ways of life.

A number of comments on this definition are in order. First, what is meant by ‘applicability’? The relativist provides a two-part answer. First, and un-controversially, there are boundary conditions on the making of moral judgments – there are conditions or circumstances under which moral judgments do not make sense, or are misplaced, or fail to hit

their target. Second, the boundary conditions for the making of moral judgments are cultural in character.

Relativism doesn’t deny the obvious fact that cross-cultural moral judgments are advanced. It does not deny that the practices of another culture may look like perfectly good candidates for moral assessment. But it denies that any judgments we make about other cultures carry their usual force. Relativism says that each culture is answerable only to its own standards, so that an outsider’s judgment about an alien culture has stepped outside the boundaries under which moral judgments carry force. Relativism, then, goes beyond the idea that moral judgments, like certain wines, do not travel well – it makes the exportation of moral judgments straightforwardly impermissible.

The second comment on my definition of relativism concerns the societies, cultures and ways of life to which relativism says moral judgments apply. If relativism is to have any substance or critical bite, it must be in a position to demarcate the cultures to which moral claims are to be relativised. We need to know where one culture ends and another begins if we are to be able to tell whether the claims or judgments in question are truly applicable. This requirement, in turn, leads to notoriously difficult questions about how to individuate the relevant ways of life or cultures. We are forced to address questions of the form: Who are ‘we’? Who are ‘they’? These questions seem particularly taxing when considered from the philosopher’s armchair.

There will, of course, be some criteria for demarcating between cultures, which the philosopher can borrow from the historian or the anthropologist. These will include geographical boundaries, political history, a common language and a shared religion. Moreover, these criteria will often, and non-accidentally, dovetail with each other. For the purposes of argument, let’s assume that the relativist can cobble

together rough-and-ready criteria of cultural demarcation. There may still be grey areas or leaky cultural boundaries to contend with, but relativists will protest that their project is not, by and large, hopelessly indeterminate. Relativists may or may not be right to be so optimistic, but there are other philosophical issues afoot. It is these issues I wish to explore.

### Relativism and Moral Diversity

What does relativism have going for it? What makes it appear an attractive doctrine? One advantage of relativism that may come immediately to mind is that it explains the formation of human moral codes better than non-relativist theories. In particular, relativism seems able to account for the radical moral diversity that holds between societies and cultures.

There is undoubtedly a great deal of variation in moral codes, and it is undoubtedly true that this diversity varies along with broader cultural differences. The typical product of an upper-middle class upbringing in Victorian Britain would have emerged with startlingly different ethical commitments from the typical products of upbringings in the samurai culture of medieval Japan, or in ancient Rome, or in a Californian 1960s hippie sect. Relativists can then say that the best explanation of this moral diversity is the ultimately cultural or societal source of moral conviction. As J.L. Mackie put it: “The actual variations in ... moral codes are more readily explained by the hypothesis that they reflect ways of life than by the hypothesis that they express

perceptions, most of them seriously inadequate and badly distorted, of objective values.” (Mackie, p.37).

## Finding Room for Normativity

Even if there is not too much wrong with the explanatory picture sketched above, this defence of relativism is incomplete, for nothing has been said so far about moral justification. If it were true that our moral beliefs are just a function of the accidents or peculiarities of our upbringings, or the peculiarities of the culture we were brought up in, it would not follow that our beliefs were morally acceptable. It would not show them to be justified. Like other philosophical theories about morality, relativism is concerned with what people ought to think, and with how people ought to behave. This need to do justice to the moral ‘ought’ is what makes relativism a normative theory.

The normative nature of relativism is revealed if I am rash enough to advance a judgment condemning the practices of another culture. Relativism will correct me. Relativists will tell me that I ought not to think that members of other cultures are morally answerable to me.

The fact that relativism has to be regarded as a normative theory, however, has to be squared with what many people would see to be its utter permissiveness: this lies in relativism’s acceptance of any moral code, just as long as that code can be related back to a culture that sustains it. I’ll say more about that issue now.

## “That’s just what we do around here”

Imagine that two people, John and Mary, are having a moral discussion about female circumcision. John is a relativist who wishes to defend the practice of female circumcision in cultures where that practice is prevalent. Mary, who is a non-relativist, states the usual objections to female circumcision, namely, that it carries risks of severe physical harm, denies women the possibility of experiencing sexual pleasure, and by doing so denigrates

female sexuality, and so on. Mary says, in addition, that these objections to female circumcision don’t stop having moral force simply because it is being practised in another culture. For Mary, that is neither here nor there.

Now what could John say in response? Initially, he might volunteer the following response: well, that is what they strongly believe. At this juncture, Mary would surely press the charge that the subject of debate was what these people ought to believe. As a sophisticated relativist, John will have to accommodate this point, on pain of failing to register the essentially normative nature of moral philosophy.

Could John do this? Yes. He could argue that moral justifications have to come to an end somewhere. He might point out that it is unhelpful for Mary to make a brute appeal to the distinction between what people do and what they ought to do. At some point, what they do and what they ought to do have to be brought back into contact. A plausible and quite general feature of moral justification, according to John, is that the appropriate terminus for moral justification is captured in the phrase “That’s just what we do around here”.

## Relativism: Some Virtues

Once relativism is equipped with this type of moral justification, it re-emerges with a number of attractive features.

First, as we said above, if there is gap between what we do and what we ought to do, the gap has to be closed in some way. The chain of justifications for our moral beliefs has to come to an end sooner or later. And relativism’s chosen terminus for moral justification is consistent with deep facts about the diversity of human moral experience. This seems to count in favour of it.

Second, relativism has the merit of showing that the majority of conscientious, reasonably scrupulous moral agents over time and across cultures have not been hopelessly mistaken about their moral beliefs. Relativism offers us a way of with-

holding blame from inhabitants of cultures and societies very different from our own. Do we really wish to blame medieval Japanese samurai for being committed to values and practices very different from our own? Isn’t it chauvinistic of us to think we know better than they did? Aren’t we illicitly making the prior and objectionable assumption that our culture is superior to, or more enlightened than, theirs? And isn’t the lucky fact that we’re living and they’re dead the only reason, in assessing past societies and cultures, that we are allowed to get away with this chauvinism?

Third, the terminus of justification specified by the relativist – “That’s just what we do around here” – captures the idea that we can only act and deliberate from here, constituted as we are. To express the point in Hilary Putnam’s words, we can only go “by our own lights” (Putnam, p.161). We can’t step outside ourselves to assess whether we are going on in the right way. If that is so, relativism deserves to be regarded as a sensible and humane doctrine, not the spineless and indiscriminating view that some strands of popular thought would have us believe.

## Moral Chauvinism and Moral Complacency

Let’s take a closer look at the second and third of these apparent virtues. These are, first, the claim that relativism avoids cultural chauvinism, and second, the claim that relativistic justification reflects the fact that we can only go by our own lights. I shall examine these in turn.

First, the chauvinism charge. Non-relativists might offer a two-part response to it. First, moral judgments, when sincerely

uttered, aim to be true. That is a familiar and completely general aspect of our moral experience. Even our struggles over issues that are morally very complex, or contentious – abortion, social justice, genetic engineering, animal rights – are struggles over arriving at the correct view of these issues.

In other words, our moral judgments express beliefs, not attitudes or desires. When I say that female circumcision is wrong, I am not simply expressing a 'negative attitude' towards it. I am expressing the belief that female circumcision is wrong. Similarly, when I say that the Earth is round, I am not expressing a 'positive attitude' towards the proposition that the Earth is round. I am expressing the belief that the Earth is round. If the Earth is, in fact, flat, or if female circumcision is, in fact, morally permissible, then my judgments are incorrect, and I am bound to revoke them if the facts are explained to me.

When we make moral judgments, we take ourselves to be aiming at truth, but that should not lead us to be intolerant, inflexible, smug or complacent. Since there is always the possibility of a gap between what we take to be right and wrong answers to moral questions, and what is in fact right and wrong, the upshot of our commitment to finding moral truth should be modesty or cautiousness, rather than intolerance, arrogance, or bullheadedness. When the comment "I hear you have strong political views" was put to the historian A.J.P. Taylor, he replied "No. Extreme opinions, weakly held." There is nothing necessarily paradoxical about this combination of conviction and circumspection.

Now for the second part of the reply. In aiming at truth in my

moral judgments, I'm not claiming, as part of an argument for the truth of those judgments, that I'm superior to you, or that I belong to a culture that is superior to yours. I am saying: these practices are wrong, and these are my reasons for believing they're wrong. If these practices were, in fact, revealed to be taking place in my own culture, my verdict on them would be equally harsh. (If not, I would be rightly open to accusations of inconsistency, or dishonesty.)

It is often the case, no doubt, that chauvinistic thoughts do explain, or at least accompany, exercises in cross-cultural moral denunciation. That does not show that chauvinism is necessarily an aspect of cross-cultural moral denunciation. We ought to be vigilant of such condescension, and to denounce it whenever it occurs. But in insisting on a comprehensive ban on cross-cultural moral traffic, relativism reveals itself to be too doctrinaire. It makes morally heavy weather of the possibility of chauvinism by putting cross-cultural moral judgments beyond the pale altogether. Instead of embracing relativism, we should instead be prepared to look, on a case by-case basis, for signs of chauvinism and condescension.

That should be enough to defuse the point about cultural chauvinism. Now for the claim that we can only go by our own lights. This claim can actually be taken in one of two ways. One way is made plain by Putnam's follow-up questions: Whose lights are we supposed to go by? Someone else's? The thought here is this. If we take ourselves to be in the business of making judgments at all, then we must take responsibility for those judgments – these matters cannot be delegated to others.

The relativist claim goes beyond this idea. Relativism tells us that the reason we should be content to go by our own lights is that they are our own lights. But isn't it relativism that is now beginning to look chauvinistic, or complacent?

If we reject relativism, there is still the problem of finding a resting-place for the moral 'ought'. But this problem cannot be solved in any old way. If there are demonstrable shortcomings to relativism, or confusions embedded within it, so much the worse for it. We should go back to the drawing board and tackle the problem in a different way.

## Historical and Moral Parochialism

A lingering suspicion that relativism enables one to avoid historically naïve or simplistic moral judgments may explain one's attachment to it. Consider the following argument:

- (1) Equal opportunity legislation ought to be implemented.
- (2) The force of a moral judgment is not intrinsically dependent on 'a time and place'.
- (3) Therefore, Emperor Nero ought to have introduced equal opportunity legislation.

For the sake of argument, let us imagine that we concur with (1). (If you don't agree, think of another example.) The non-relativist is not supposed to quarrel with (2), either (though, as we shall see, there is a sense in which he can). Is the non-relativist, then, committed to (3)? It sounds odd, even rather simple-minded, to suggest that Nero ought to have instituted such policies. This may raise questions, once again, about (2). Perhaps equal opportunity legislation is 'of its time and place'.

But the non-relativist can reject (3), by rejecting the relativists' interpretation of (2). It is obvious that equal opportunity legislation only makes sense against a moral background that is broadly liberal. To put it another way, a commitment to equal opportunity legislation is downstream of many more fundamental moral commitments which would have had to be already in place for the introduction of these measures to have had an intelligible point. That does not make it true that the moral force of equal opportunity legislation is 'of its time and place'. It means there was a huge amount of moral

work to do before equal opportunity legislation seemed like an intelligible and workable idea.

To put the point another way, there is a sense in which equal opportunity legislation is of its time and place, but this is not a sense that can support relativism. It is simply a point about moral priorities. You can't run before you can walk.

## Moral Truth and Blame

My final point concerns the question of blame. It might seem mistaken to blame those of other cultures who had beliefs and engaged in practices which, by our lights, seem objectionable or even abhorrent. This is for the reason that these individuals may not have had the opportunities to reflect on their beliefs and practices in a way which might have steered them in the direction of the truth. It's easy enough, after all, for any of us these days to denounce child labour, slavery, human sacrifice and non-universal suffrage. Who is going to challenge us? For earlier thinkers, though, the effort and sacrifice required to confront unpleasant realities and the entrenched interests which thrived on those realities, might have been truly herculean. As a further possibility, the cultural and psychological makeup of these people might have been such that certain options were simply unthinkable for them. A non-relativist can, and should, accept these points. They can be accommodated in a way that doesn't steer us back in the direction of relativism by simply pressing hard on the distinction between the rightness or wrongness of a belief or practice, and the question of whether it is appropriate to accord blame to the people holding those beliefs or engaging in those practices.

The practice of heaping praise or blame on the inhabitants of other eras needs to be sensitive to the opportunities for moral discovery and practice that they enjoyed at the time. It may have been very costly, or even practically impossible, for people living in societies very different from our own to arrive at the truth. It would be odd, then, to blame them, or still less to look back and mock them. Within the cultural parameters available to them, certain

slave traders, Aztec priests or feudal barons may have been, in their own limited way, morally admirable, as well, of course, as being admirable in all sorts of non-moral ways. No doubt we hope that future generations will show us the same courtesy. For we, too, will most likely fail to arrive at the truth in any comprehensive sense. (We can only go by our own lights, remember?)

None of this shows that there is no such thing as moral truth; and it does nothing to unsettle the claim that the inhabitants of such cultures failed to arrive at the truth.

In short, the impermissibility of a moral act or practice is only one of the factors that we should take into account when we consider the appropriateness of extending blame to members of other cultures. The costs of, and opportunities for, moral reflection and action are just as important.

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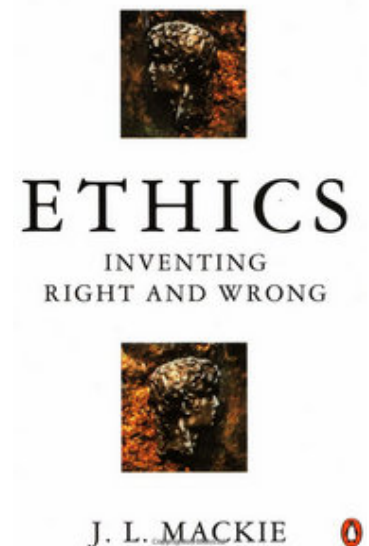
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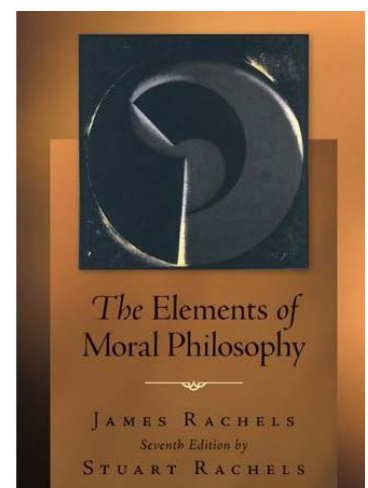
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### Quotation:

"Insularity is the foundation of ethnocentrism and intolerance; when you only know of those like yourself, it is easy to imagine that you are alone in the world or alone in being good and right in the world. Exposure to diversity, on the contrary, is the basis for relativism and tolerance; when you are forced to face and accept the Other as real, unavoidable, and ultimately valuable, you cannot help but see yourself and your 'truths' in a new way."

— David Eller



# Don't blame the postmodernists

STUART SIM

## Religion and Politics

Multiculturalism has its drawbacks and paradoxes, but it is still worth defending if the alternative is enforced cultural homogeneity. It depends how the concept is interpreted. At the moment it is increasingly an argument for cultural separatism, whereas it ought to mean peaceful coexistence and the mutually-beneficial sharing and disseminating of ideas. Perhaps that would be better termed poly-culturalism? Crucially, however, I do not see how such a system can work without a context of secularism. Personally, I'd like to see religion wither away as a force in human affairs, but I'm well aware that is a utopian dream. Yet that need not prevent us from striving to realise one of the key objectives of Enlightenment thought: the removal of organised religion from politics. When religions enter politics, they have a depressing habit of gravitating towards theocracy. And I'm not just speaking of Islam. Christian fundamentalists in America and Jewish fundamentalists in Israel are driven by the same ideals, even if they are currently less successful in achieving their desires than their Islamic counterparts are.

## SCEPTICISM

I'd like to make the case for a role for scepticism within the debate on multiculturalism, and also to defend the reputation of postmodern thought after what I consider to be unfair treatment at the hands of Paul Cliteur. If multiculturalism can be persuaded to take scepticism on board, and to acknowledge that all religions and belief systems have a history of scepticism that can be activated against their tendency towards dogmatism, then it can still contribute to constructing "a new European story." The problem isn't Islam, or Enlightenment, or multiculturalism, or

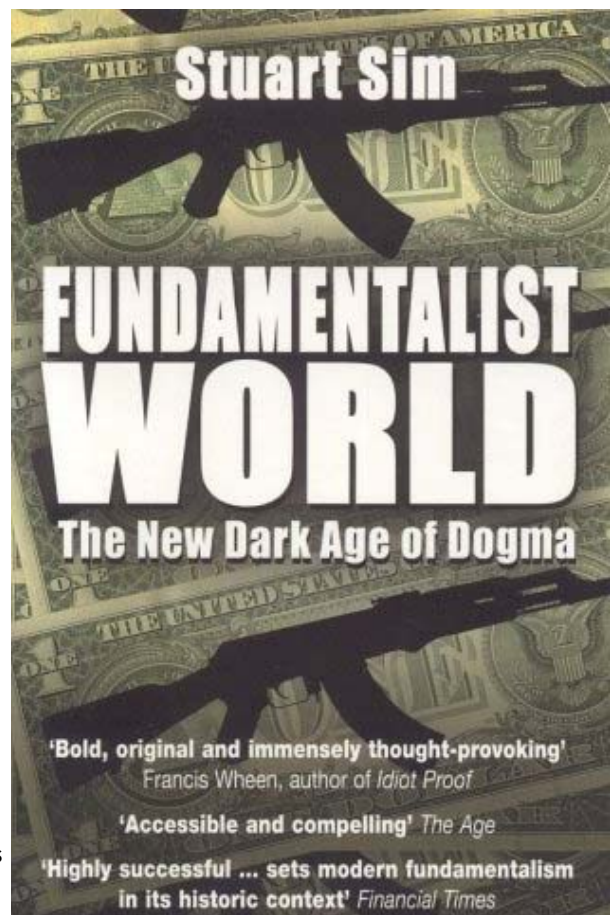
postmodernism, or relativism: it's dogmatism, and unless that is addressed we're treating symptoms not causes.

Like Ian Buruma, I feel myself to be the subject of a misreading by Cliteur, and I agree with Buruma's complaint that there has been a great deal of misrepresentation, of both views and concepts, over the course of this debate. It is my intention here to try and clear up some of these misrepresentations in the hope that this pushes the debate further forward. Polemic is one thing, but distortion of opposing viewpoints is something else again. It's time to revisit some of the key terms we are all using.

I am taken to task by Cliteur for being a "postmodern nihilist" in my book "Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma," which I find very odd, as I am careful to point out that my intent is to graft the best aspects of postmodern thought onto the best aspects of Enlightenment thought – "Enlightenment Plus," as I call it – in order to confront dogmatism. I continue that theme in a subsequent book, "Empires of Belief: Why We Need More Scepticism and Doubt in the Twenty-First Century," and I will return to the arguments of that later. I agree with Buruma also that one of the Enlightenment's "greatest achievements is the rejection of dogmatism," and with Pascal Bruckner's observation that the Enlightenment has "showed itself capable of reviewing its mistakes."

Modernity may have many sins that can be charged against it, but modernity and the Enlightenment, although they overlap, should not be conflated. How my own rejection of dogmatism turns me into a nihilist I am at a loss to understand.

What is most questionable about Cliteur's piece is that it consistently conflates concepts in order to dismiss the views of opponents. From his perspective, scepticism equates to relativism, and relativism to nihilism. This is a travesty of what scepticism and relativism actually involve. Scepticism has a long and distinguished history in Western philosophy (and as I note in "Empires of Belief," features in non-Western philosophical traditions, such as Islam, too), and its role as



an internal critique of the discipline's wilder speculations should be valued rather than mocked. Its main enemy has always been dogmatism, and it asks us to reconsider all those assumptions claimed to be beyond all possible doubt: that God exists; that our God is the only true one; that the Bible - or any other holy book, for that matter - is a literal transcription of God's will; that the free market is the only acceptable way to run a national economy, etc. These are treated as articles of faith by believers, whose refusal to countenance an alternative viewpoint is the source of a great many of the world's current socio-political problems. Scepticism argues that we should suspend judgements where we lack proof of their truth: I cannot see what is wrong with that, it strikes me as an entirely healthy attitude to adopt. Unquestioning belief is rife amongst us, and it always leads to trouble. Surely it's a worthwhile project to subject that tendency to close scrutiny?

Neither is it nihilistic to concede that various interpretations of the world are possible. Again, it is dogmatism that is being confronted. At base, relativism is calling into question the notion of there being an absolute truth - precisely what all those of a fundamentalist disposition claim there is (their version, naturally). Even worse, fundamentalists refuse to acknowledge that other views have any validity at all. You can't debate with them - about multiculturalism or anything else.

As for postmodernism, I just do not recognise Cliteur's interpretation of this. Postmodernism challenges authority in its many guises, and questions the assumptions that underpin our value system. It is a tactical exercise designed to make us rethink the ideals behind modernity, many of which have proved over time to have an

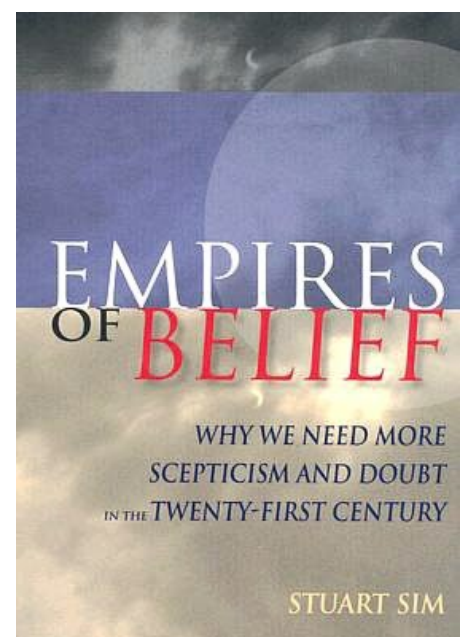
adverse effect on our world. But I'd regard that as in the best spirit of the Enlightenment: refusing to take things on trust just because they have the weight of traditional authority behind them. And if Cliteur thinks that postmodernists "refrain from criticism" in the political domain, then he is failing to take account of the work of Jean-Francois Lyotard, particularly his impassioned critique of fascism in Heidegger and "the Jews." Much of Lyotard's philosophical career was spent in searching for ways of being politically active, in a leftish sense, while steering clear of the unexamined assumptions by which ideologies justify themselves.

I'd also contest Cliteur's claim that for me, "every single set of ideas that is not completely relativistic is fundamentalist." First of all, I don't know what it would mean to be "completely relativistic"; secondly, I explicitly commit myself in "Fundamentalist World" to what I admit could be called "universal values": "equality of opportunity, an end to cultural oppression and the tyranny of tradition (religiously inspired or otherwise), and the eradication of discrimination on the grounds of gender, ethnic group, social position, or sexual preference." This hardly sounds like nihilism to me, and I make these commitments precisely because the various fundamentalisms I discuss are denying their validity. If it's a universal value to be against discrimination then I'm more than happy to subscribe to it. My argument in "Empires of Belief" is that we need to encourage scepticism and doubt as a method of countering the spread of dogmatism and unquestioning belief. There is almost always more reason to doubt your beliefs than to feel they are beyond dispute. The natural impulse of empires of belief is to stifle dissent, and that is all too common an occurrence at present. If multiculturalism is to mean anything then it has to include the possibility, even desirability, of dissent within any system of belief. Islam is not going to

go away, but non-believers should be doing what they can to stimulate debate within it, as well as make information widely available about the traditions of dissent, and, yes, outright scepticism, that exist within Islam as a system of thought. Islam will have to change from within, but that does not mean it should not also be challenged vigorously by ideas from the outside. I very much endorse Bruckner's plea that we should extend all the support we can to oppositional voices within the Islamic world - creative artists, for example, who have a proven ability to have an effect on public consciousness.

So it's not postmodernism that we have to worry about if we're trying to put together "a new European story," it's dogmatism. Timothy Garton Ash argues for "less Bruckner, more Pascal," but I'd put it very differently: what is wanted is less belief, more scepticism and doubt.

Stuart Sim is Professor of Critical Theory at the University of Sunderland. His most recent book is "Empires of Belief: Why We Need More Scepticism and Doubt in the Twenty-First Century" (Edinburgh University Press, 2006).



# MORALITY IS A CULTURALLY CONDITIONED RESPONSE

Jesse Prinz argues that the source of our moral inclinations is merely cultural



Suppose you have a moral disagreement with someone, for example, a disagreement about whether it is okay to live in a society where the amount of money you are born with is the primary determinant of how wealthy you will end up. In pursuing this debate, you assume that you are correct about the issue and that your conversation partner is mistaken. Your conversation partner assumes that you are making the blunder. In other words, you both assume that only one of you can be correct. Relativists reject this assumption. They believe that conflicting moral beliefs can both be true. The staunch socialist and righteous royalist are equally right; they just occupy different moral worldviews.

Relativism has been widely criticized. It is attacked as being sophomoric, pernicious, and even incoherent. Moral philosophers, theologians, and social scientists try to identify objective values so as to forestall the relativist menace. I think these efforts have failed. Moral relativism is a plausible doctrine, and it has important implications for how we conduct our lives, organize our societies, and deal with others.

## CANNIBALS AND CHILD BRIDES

Morals vary dramatically across time and place. One group's good can be another group's evil. Consider cannibalism, which has been practiced by groups in every part of the world. Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday found evidence for cannibalism in

34% of cultures in one cross-historical sample. Or consider blood sports, such as those practiced in Roman amphitheatres, in which thousands of excited fans watched as human beings engaged in mortal combat. Killing for pleasure has also been documented among headhunting cultures, in which decapitation was sometimes pursued as a recreational activity. Many societies have also practiced extreme forms of public torture and execution, as was the case in Europe before the 18th century. And there are cultures that engage in painful forms of body modification, such as scarification, genital infibulation, or footbinding – a practice that lasted in China for 1,000 years and involved the deliberate and excruciating crippling of young girls. Variation in attitudes towards violence is paralleled by variation in attitudes towards sex and marriage. When studying culturally independent societies, anthropologists have found that over 80% permit polygamy. Arranged marriage is also common, and some cultures marry off girls while they are still pubescent or even younger. In parts of Ethiopia, half the girls are married before their 15th birthday.

Of course, there are also cross-cultural similarities in morals. No group would last very long if it promoted gratuitous attacks on neighbors or discouraged childrearing. But within these broad constraints, almost anything is possible. Some groups prohibit attacks on the hut next door, but encourage attacks on the village next door. Some groups encourage parents to commit selective infanticide, to use corporal punishment on children, or force them into physical labor or sexual slavery. Such variation cries out for explanation. If morality were

objective, shouldn't we see greater consensus? Objectivists reply in two different ways:

Deny variation. Some objectivists say moral variation is greatly exaggerated – people really agree about values but have different factual beliefs or life circumstances that lead them to behave differently. For example, slave owners may have believed that their slaves were intellectually inferior, and Inuits who practiced infanticide may have been forced to do so because of resource scarcity in the tundra. But it is spectacularly implausible that all moral differences can be explained this way. For one thing, the alleged differences in factual beliefs and life circumstances rarely justify the behaviors in question. Would the inferiority of one group really justify enslaving them? If so, why don't we think it's acceptable to enslave people with low IQs? Would life in the tundra justify infanticide? If so, why don't we just kill off destitute children around the globe instead of giving donations to Oxfam? Differences in circumstances do not show that people share values; rather they help to explain why values end up being so different.

Deny that variation matters. Objectivists who concede that moral variation exists argue that variation does not entail relativism; after all, scientific theories differ too, and we don't assume that every theory is true. This analogy fails. Scientific theory variation can be explained by inadequate observations or poor instruments; improvements in each lead towards convergence. When scientific errors are identified, corrections are made. By contrast, morals do not track differences in observation, and there also is no evidence for rational convergence as a result of moral conflicts.

Western slavery didn't end because of new scientific observations; rather it ended with the industrial revolution, which ushered in a wage-based economy. Indeed, slavery became more prevalent after the Enlightenment, when science improved. Even with our modern understanding of racial equality, Benjamin Skinner has shown that there are more people living in de facto slavery worldwide today than during the height of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. When societies converge morally, it's usually because one has dominated the other (as with the missionary campaigns to end cannibalism). With morals, unlike science, there is no well-recognized standard that can be used to test, confirm, or correct when disagreements arise.

Objectivists might reply that progress has clearly been made. Aren't our values better than those of the 'primitive' societies that practice slavery, cannibalism, and polygamy? Here we are in danger of smugly supposing superiority. Each culture assumes it is in possession of the moral truth. From an outside perspective, our progress might be seen as a regress. Consider factory farming, environmental devastation, weapons of mass destruction, capitalistic exploitation, coercive globalization, urban ghettoization, and the practice of sending elderly relatives to nursing homes. Our way of life might look grotesque to many who have come before and many who will come after.

## EMOTIONS AND INCULCATION

Moral variation is best explained by assuming that morality, unlike science, is not based on reason or observation. What, then, is morality based on? To answer this, we need to consider how morals are learned.

Children begin to learn values when they are very young, before they can reason effectively. Young children behave in ways that we would never accept in adults: they

scream, throw food, take off their clothes in public, hit, scratch, bite, and generally make a ruckus. Moral education begins from the start, as parents correct these antisocial behaviors, and they usually do so by conditioning children's emotions. Parents threaten physical punishment ("Do you want a spanking?"), they withdraw love ("I'm not going to play with you any more!"), ostracize ("Go to your room!"), deprive ("No dessert for you!"), and induce vicarious distress ("Look at the pain you've caused!"). Each of these methods causes the misbehaved child to experience a negative emotion and associate it with the punished behavior. Children also learn by emotional osmosis. They see their parents' reactions to news broadcasts and storybooks. They hear hours of judgmental gossip about inconsiderate neighbours, friends, and the black sheep in the family. Consummate imitators, children internalize the feelings expressed by their parents, and, when they are a bit older, their peers.

Emotional conditioning and osmosis are not merely convenient tools for acquiring values: they are essential. Parents sometimes try to reason with their children, but moral reasoning only works by drawing attention to values that the child has already internalized through emotional conditioning. No amount of reasoning can engender a moral value, because all values are, at bottom, emotional attitudes.

Recent research in psychology supports this conjecture. It seems that we decide whether something is wrong by introspecting our feelings: if an action makes us feel bad, we conclude that it is wrong. Consistent with this, people's moral judgments can be shifted by simply altering their emotional states. For example, psychologist Simone Schnall and her colleagues found that exposure to fart spray, filth, and disgusting movies can cause people to make more severe moral judgments about unrelated phenomena.

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and colleagues have shown that people make moral judgments even when they cannot provide any justification for them. For example, 80% of the American college students in Haidt's study said it's wrong for two adult siblings to have consensual sex with each other even if they use contraception and no one is harmed. And, in a study I ran, 100% of people agreed it would be wrong to sexually fondle an infant even if the infant was not physically harmed or traumatized. Our emotions confirm that such acts are wrong even if our usual justification for that conclusion (harm to the victim) is inapplicable.

If morals are emotionally based, then people who lack strong emotions should be blind to the moral domain. This prediction is borne out by psychopaths, who, it turns out, suffer from profound emotional deficits. Psychologist James Blair has shown that psychopaths treat moral rules as mere conventions. This suggests that emotions are necessary for making moral judgments. The judgment that something is morally wrong is an emotional response.

It doesn't follow that every emotional response is a moral judgment. Morality involves specific emotions. Research suggests that the main moral emotions are anger and disgust when an action is performed by another person, and guilt and shame when an action is performed by one's self. Arguably, one doesn't harbor a moral attitude towards something unless one is disposed to have both these self- and other-directed emotions. You may be disgusted by eating cow tongue, but unless you are a moral vegetarian, you wouldn't be ashamed of eating it.

In some cases, the moral emotions that get conditioned in childhood can be re-conditioned later in life. Someone who feels ashamed of a homosexual desire may subsequently feel ashamed about feeling ashamed. This person can be said to have an inculcated tendency to view

homosexuality as immoral, but also a conviction that homosexuality is permissible, and the latter serves to curb the former over time.

This is not to say that reasoning is irrelevant to morality. One can convince a person that homophobia is wrong by using the light of reason to draw analogies with other forms of discrimination, but this strategy can only work if the person has a negative sentiment towards bigotry. Likewise, through extensive reasoning, one might persuade someone that eating meat is wrong; but the only arguments that will work are ones that appeal to prior sentiments. It would be hopeless to argue vegetarianism with someone who does not shudder at the thought of killing an innocent, sentient being. As David Hume said, reason is always slave to the passions.

If this picture is right, we have a set of emotionally conditioned basic values, and a capacity for reasoning, which allows us to extend these values to new cases. There are two important implications. One is that some moral debates have no resolution because the two sides have different basic values. This is often the case with liberals and conservatives. Research suggests that conservatives value some things that are less important to liberals, including hierarchical authority structures, self-reliance, in-group solidarity, and sexual purity. Debates about welfare, foreign policy, and sexual values get stymied because of these fundamental differences.

The second implication is that we cannot change basic values by reason alone. Various events in adulthood might be capable of reshaping our inculcated sentiments, including trauma, brainwashing, and immersion in a new community (we have an unconscious tendency towards social conformity). Reason can however be used to convince people that their basic values are in need of revision, because reason can reveal when values are inconsistent and self-destructive. An essay on moral relativism might even convince someone to give up some basic values, on the ground that they are socially

inculcated. But reason alone cannot instill new values or settle which values we should have. Reason tells us what is the case, not what ought to be.

In summary, moral judgments are based on emotions, and reasoning normally contributes only by helping us extrapolate from our basic values to novel cases. Reasoning can also lead us to discover that our basic values are culturally inculcated, and that might impel us to search for alternative values, but reason alone cannot tell us which values to adopt, nor can it instill new values.

### God, Evolution, and Reason: Is There an Objective Moral Code?

The hypothesis that moral judgments are emotionally based can explain why they vary across cultures and resist transformation through reasoning, but this is not enough to prove that moral relativism is true. An argument for relativism must also show that there is no basis for morality beyond the emotions with which we have been conditioned. The relativists must provide reasons for thinking objectivist theories of morality fail.

Objectivism holds that there is one true morality binding upon all of us. To defend such a view, the objectivist must offer a theory of where morality comes from, such that it can be universal in this way. There are three main options: Morality could come from a benevolent god; it could come from human nature (for example, we could have evolved an innate set of moral values); or it could come from rational principles that all rational people must recognize, like the rules of logic and arithmetic. Much ink has been spilled defending each of these possibilities, and it would be impossible here to offer a critical review of all ethical theories. Instead, let's consider some simple

reasons for pessimism.

The problem with divine commands as a cure for relativism is that there is no consensus among believers about what God or the gods want us to do. Even when there are holy scriptures containing lists of divine commands, there are disagreements about interpretation: Does "Thou shalt not kill?" cover enemies? Does it cover animals? Does it make one culpable for manslaughter and self-defense? Does it prohibit suicide? The philosophical challenge of proving that a god exists is already hard; figuring out who that god is and what values are divinely sanctioned is vastly harder.

The problem with human nature as a basis for universal morality is that it lacks normative import, that is, this doesn't itself provide us with any definitive view of good and bad. Suppose we have some innate moral values. Why should we abide by them? Non-human primates often kill, steal, and rape without getting punished by members of their troops. Perhaps our innate values promote those kinds of behaviors as well. Does it follow that we shouldn't punish them? Certainly not. If we have innate values – which is open to debate – they evolved to help us cope with life as hunter-gatherers in small competitive bands. To live in large stable societies, we are better off following the 'civilized' values we've invented.

Finally, the problem with reason, as we have seen, is that it never adds up to value. If I tell you that a wine has a balance between tannin and acid, it doesn't follow that you will find it delicious. Likewise, reason cannot tell us which facts are morally good. Reason is evaluatively neutral. At best, reason can tell us which of our values are inconsistent, and which actions will lead to fulfillment of our goals. But, given an inconsistency, reason cannot tell us which of our conflicting values to drop, and reason cannot tell us which goals to follow. If my goals come into conflict with your goals, reason tells me that I must either

thwart your goals, or give up caring about mine; but reason cannot tell me to favour one choice over the other.

Many attempts have been made to rebut such concerns, but each attempt has just fueled more debate. At this stage, no defense of objectivism has swayed doubters, and given the fundamental limits mentioned here (the inscrutability of divine commands, the normative emptiness of evolution, and the moral neutrality of reason), objectivism looks unlikely.

### Living With Moral Relativism

People often resist relativism because they think it has unacceptable implications. Let's conclude by considering some allegations and responses.

**Allegation:** Relativism entails that anything goes.

**Response:** Relativists concede that if you were to inculcate any given set of values, those values would be true for those who possessed them. But we have little incentive to inculcate values arbitrarily. If we trained our children to be ruthless killers, they might kill us or get killed. Values that are completely self-destructive can't last.

**Allegation:** Relativism entails that we have no way to criticize Hitler.

**Response:** First of all, Hitler's actions were partially based on false beliefs, rather than values ('scientific' racism, moral absolutism, the likelihood of world domination). Second, the problem with Hitler was not that his values were false, but that they were pernicious. Relativism does not entail that we should tolerate murderous tyranny. When someone threatens us or our way of life, we are strongly motivated to protect ourselves.

**Allegation:** Relativism entails that moral debates are senseless, since everyone is right.

**Response:** This is a major misconception. Many people have overlapping moral values, and one can settle debates by appeal to moral common ground. We can also have substantive debates about how to apply and extend our basic values. Some debates are senseless, however. Committed liberals and conservatives rarely persuade each other, but public debates over policy can rally the base and sway the undecided.

**Allegation:** Relativism doesn't allow moral progress.

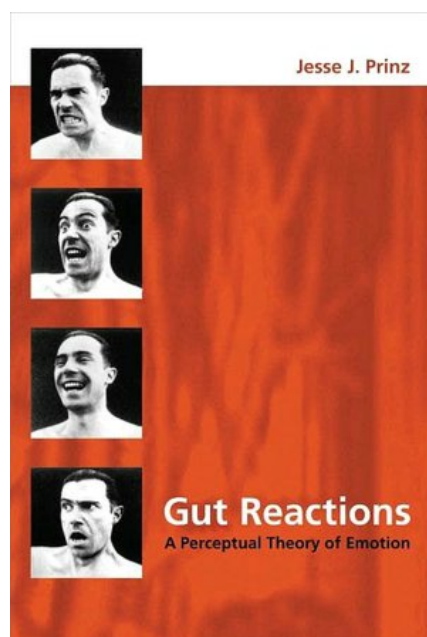
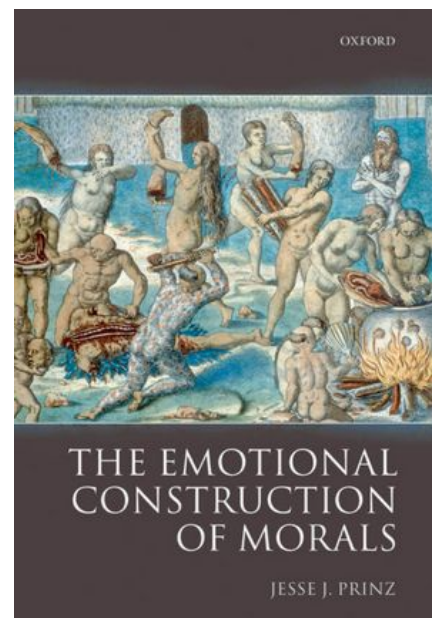
**Response:** In one sense this is correct; moral values do not become more true. But they can become better by other criteria. For example, some sets of values are more consistent and more conducive to social stability. If moral relativism is true, morality can be regarded as a tool, and we can think about what we'd like that tool to do for us and revise morality accordingly.

One might summarize these points by saying that relativism does not undermine the capacity to criticize others or to improve one's own values. Relativism does tell us, however, that we are mistaken when we think we are in possession of the one true morality. We can try to pursue moral values that lead to more fulfilling lives, but we must bear in mind that fulfillment is itself relative, so no single set of values can be designated universally fulfilling. The discovery that relativism is true can help each of us individually by revealing that our values are mutable and parochial. We should not assume that others share our views, and we should recognize that our views would differ had we lived in different circumstances. These discoveries may make us more tolerant and more flexible. Relativism does not entail tolerance or any other moral value, but, once we see that there is no single true morality, we lose one incentive for trying to impose our values on others.

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Jesse Prinz is a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York. His books include *Gut Reactions*, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*, and *Beyond Human Nature*.

## Jesse Prinz BEYOND HUMAN NATURE



# Meditations and Discourse on the Pursuit of Philosophical Studies—Part 1

by Catherine Cunningham—*Philosopher*



As a learned student of Philosophy, I have struggled with and explored many of the most perplexing questions of this era. Questions such as “Is there a God” “Is one’s mind synonymous with one’s body”, “Are we determined beings” etc.

At the risk of sounding immodest, I think I have managed to grasp and pontificate admirably on these problems and perhaps have even helped future generations in their quest for truth.

I am forced to admit though, that Philosophy still poses one problem which I am at a loss to answer. It is a question with which I am constantly confronted by my father. My father, incidentally, is not a philosopher, has no interest in philosophy and wonders if it was really he who conceived a daughter who studies philosophy. In short, my father thinks philosophy is a load of crap.

Still, I think there is hope of interesting him in the subject. He is obviously obsessed with this particular philosophical problem and insists on our discussing it at every possible opportunity.

Certain professors in our renowned philosophy department are of the opinion that subjects such as God, the Mind, Morality etc. are of the most consequence to the average citizen. I feel compelled to argue (as is the duty of the philosopher). It has been my experience that when I have revealed the nature of my “studies” to my fellow man I am not asked about Socrates, Aristotle, Plato, Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Kant etc (all with whom I am of course familiar). No, I am asked the most difficult question of all. The question with which philosophers have unsuccessfully struggled since Socrates discovered the science.

What everybody, especially my beloved and demented father wants

to know is “What kind of a job will you get out of this?”

In this moment of altruism, I am prepared to reveal to my fellow student some of the defences of philosophical studies which I have postulated.

A certain philosophy lecturer once, in an effort to tackle this question told us about a former philosophy student who is now in corporate management. He said that the skills acquired in philosophy would be immensely valuable in any profession. so, as soon as the lecture finished, I dashed out, phoned my father and told him the story. For some reason he didn’t seem in the least impressed.

So what, he persists, can you do with a philosophy degree? Well, there are an infinite number of possibilities.

One could come back and do a post-grad in philosophy, an option, which I might add, is not available to non-philosophy graduates!

One can also come back and study for another degree, such a Banking and Finance, Human Nutrition, Social Administration etc. Naturally, the skills acquired in pursuing a degree in philosophy will be of tremendous benefit to the student.

Another alternative is to apply to the local factory for a job on the assembly line. Tasks which do not occupy the mind are best for people of a philosophical nature as they allow the freedom the speculate and explore while working. It is significant to note that a large proportion of philosophy graduates have “chosen” this type of work.

One could always go around the world with a philosophy degree. I’m told by a reliable authority that it

doesn’t carry much weight!

Another popular source of employment for many philosophy graduates is the ministry – so if all else fails ..... (of course, it would be useful if one could manage to preserve one’s faith during one’s studies).

If one were really desperate, one could become a philosophy lecturer.

One could write a book on one’s philosophical speculations and discoveries. It should have a circulation of around ten, depending on the size of one’s immediate family.

Of course the number of books sold is irrelevant to the true Philosopher, who by nature is not interested in trivial things such as money, clothes, food, survival etc.

No, such are not the inclinations of the Philosopher. All he asks for in life are his books and a bottle of vodka, the latter for inspirational purposes of course.

I am sure that by this stage the reader, whether a student of philosophy or not, realises the superior nature of the Philosopher, and the subsequent moral responsibility to support and revere the Philosopher.

To conclude, I must state that it is an insult to the status of the philosophy student to be queried about job prospects. It is immoral and extremely dangerous to distract his mind from higher things. It is obvious therefore, that the responsibility lies with the government to reward him for his genius, integrity and indispensable contribution to society.

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Catherine Cunningham was a student at the University of Ulster, NORTHERN IRELAND



## PART 2 CATHERINE CUNNINGHAM— SONG WRITER/SINGER

"Socrates" "Aristotle", "Pythagoras", "Philosophers" - words I remember jotting into my history notebook in secondary school. Somehow, without having ever really thought about it, I had assumed they had all died uneventfully in Ancient Greece. So two days into college, I was delighted to discover that they were alive and well - sort of. I was particularly delighted because I was simultaneously discovering that I had no interest whatsoever in the "Business Studies" course on which I was enrolled.

One easy downgrade later (yes, that was how it was perceived!), and there I was grappling with metaphysical questions I had never known existed. I was an excellent student! Within a few months, I had renounced a lifetime of catholicism, embraced a fundamentalist, materialist doctrine and identified as a "compassionate atheist". "Compassionate" because I couldn't expect those who hadn't had the benefit

of philosophy 101, 102, and 103 to understand the logical implications of living in a deterministic universe whose component parts behaved like and in accordance with the same laws as billiard balls.

Somewhere towards the end of my second year, a friend gave me a copy of "the Dancing Wu Li Masters", a "popular science" book on quantum physics. I was completely drawn into a version of reality utterly different from the one my science teachers (and my philosophy lecturers) had shared with me. What is disturbing in retrospect is that not only was the chemistry I had learned inadequate, but I had never really considered that what I was studying was relevant to my world! It was as dead to me as the ancient philosophers.

It's probably a good thing I wasn't "taught" about quantum physics (or evolution) at school. If I had learned about the subatomic world like I learned chemistry and ancient Greece,

i.e., without the context, the drama, the personalities, the bafflement and the excitement, it would most likely have been lost to me.

By the time I got my degree, I had come full circle and then some. I had grappled with questions I hadn't known existed, taken positions on them, and then discovered that the basis for these positions was faulty. I had lost my faith in language, in logic and in the reasoning process as ways of knowing the world. I wasn't even sure I knew what that meant or if it was possible - and I was in good company. Einstein likened the scientific endeavour to a man trying to understand the mechanism of a closed watch. "He may form a picture of the mechanism which is responsible but he can never know if his picture is the true explanation. He can never compare his picture with the real mechanism and he cannot even imagine the possibility

of the meaning of such a comparison.”

As I argued in my “Meditations . . .”, you can go anywhere with a philosophy degree, and because it doesn’t train you for anything in particular, well you don’t feel particularly inclined to do anything in particular!

I went to America and worked at various jobs - none of which required a philosophy degree. I travelled around for a couple of years, supporting myself through fruit picking, work exchanges and busking. I had been writing songs since college, but gradually during this period, I came to recognize that song-writing and performing were what I wanted to do, career-wise, with my life. It turns out, being a songwriter is rather like being a philosopher in that you rarely make much money but you always feel like you’re working on the most important thing in the world! .

I imagine there are lots of unpaid scientists, mathematicians, philosophers, etc. as well as artists of all types all working away obsessively at their “art”. Some make breakthroughs, get recognition and carve out a career for themselves, while the vast majority of us do it simply because that is what we are drawn to and what we feel we must do. .

I returned to Ireland in 2000, did an MA in Community Music, and worked in that area for a couple of years. I also got very interested in ecology and may even have been a pagan for a while! Around 2004, I developed a “chronic-fatigue” type condition, from which I’ve been slowly recovering. I now live in the countryside and grow much of my own food, most of which is eaten by caterpillars and slugs. I teach guitar and play the occasional gig, and I live a country which has been destroyed by bankers and developers - and people with “Business Studies” degrees!

My philosophizing days are pretty much ancient history, though latterly

that part of my mind and some philosophical type issues are finding expression in my songs. I don’t really believe in beliefs, belief systems or dogma, but if you have a tendency to preach, then songs are great Trojan horses for telling people what they might not otherwise want to hear. It’s particularly gratifying when you have a captive audience and control of the microphone!

I’ve uploaded a song onto “Soundcloud.com” that might be of interest to some of you.

It’s called “the Square Root of Two” and the story behind the title is that Pythagoras (remember Pythagoras?) ran a school of mathematics in Ancient Greece. Only the brightest students could attend as he was intent on divining the nature of the world/ the mind of God using mathematics (the language of God) and its tools, reason and logic. Hippasus, a young student working on the newly emerging concept of “square roots” suggested that  $\sqrt{2}$  was “irrational”. For his troubles, Pythagoras had him drowned in a nearby river. Why? Why did Hippasus’ suggestion so threaten Pythagoras, and why did Pythagoras, the champion of reason and logic, resort to violence and not a mathematical proof to argue his conviction? And why were we told none of this in school? And how does the fear of punishment for uncovering unpalatable truths impact on our ability to see them? For an exploration of these questions and for an introduction to my “special theory of nudity”, check out the song on sound cloud. You can hear more of my songs at:

[www.catherinecunninghammusic.com](http://www.catherinecunninghammusic.com)

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## Is Beauty Subjective?

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” the saying goes. We are now living in a world where we can no longer assess whose taste is better or worse, for the subject of beauty lies in the realm of pure subjectivity, which one can proudly proclaim he is the greatest living aesthetes, or perhaps even artist, of his own time. A subject which once belonged to a professional minority is now only considered a confused private imperative.

But it wasn’t always like this. In what sense is something beautiful? How can one firmly criticise that one’s taste is better or worse than the other? How can one defend a particular style in the face of many other contradictory opponents? These were the questions that were widely and professionally discussed and were the central task for architects, painters, and sculptors in the past. For the most part in the history of aesthetics, at least in the West dated far back to Plato, who might be the first one who wrote meticulously on the subject, what is beautiful was largely defined by a few individuals who were thought to actually have taste, who thought that only a classical building could represent beauty. They suggested that there was an objective criterion in measuring beauty instead of one that was subject to our moods, emotions, and personality.

For many years, Classical beauty was born, dead, and revived. It was once thought to be the supreme aesthetic guide of the European aristocrats.

And those who repelled such style were despised. Now remnants of Classical beauty, which have been carefully preserved and rebuilt, are still scattered across Europe and remain part of the western heritage that is highly praised by the educated class. But where did the objective standard of beauty go wrong? Why would anyone rival against the absolute formulas to constructing a window and a door and relating rooms to hallways that had been left unchallenged for hundreds of years?

One of the biggest rivals of objective beauty is perhaps what might be called postmodernism. It suggests that beauty, unlike science, can hardly subscribe to the rigours of rational examination and is critically dependent on what holds up our moods, hence lacking an objective assessment of what is beautiful. If we are to truly appreciate beauty, according to postmodernists, we need to cast aside the assumed certainty in science and favour a trust in the fact that something is not necessarily beautiful in all races and cultures. They contend that the imposed objective standard of beauty is a violation of human nature, denying us the liberty to freely express what we value. Thus we should exercise our right as individuals rather than submitting ourselves to the so-called "professionals".

Encouraged by a democratic vision of being aesthetes, all art critics are therefore rendered useless, for, according to this aesthetic relativism, no one is in the power to judge someone's

taste based on how he decorates his home or what he wears, because "beauty is in the eye of the beholder". Everything can be beautiful when you think it is beautiful.

Yet if the concept of objective beauty offends our human nature as the postmodernists suggest, we may be tempted to look back to the western history where cities struggled to enforce city planning to do away ugly houses and tedious buildings. The Great Fire of London in 1666 that swept through the central parts of London is a sobering reminder of how the masses are not in the position to judge what is beautiful. With many parts being reduced dust and ashes after the Great Fire, Christopher Wren was the architect for the redesigning and rebuilding of 51 churches in London and most notably, the St. Paul's Cathedral. The reason why Christopher Wren, instead of the masses, was summoned was obvious, because the masses were most unlikely to be as aesthetically sensible as Wren. He was an architect, a man who was able to look at things with an aesthetic eye and knew the essential ingredients to making a city beautiful. Many great religions have also constructed temples and churches in the same manner. Though many biblical stories and wisdoms may lay at heart the force of gathering the faithful, we also find it hard to deny that a series of stained glass windows that depict the story of the Christ, high ceilings with centre-pointed windows, and castellated roofs with pinnacles are the crucial factor for summoning thousands of followers. In the face of financial necessity, political disgrace, and romantic pessimism,

the heaviness concentrated upon our mortal souls is perhaps too great to be fortified within our material casings. Hence we are tempted to inscribe certain values on works of architecture to act as sobering reminders of what we hold dear to. These architectures at once harbours within us a feeling of solemn awe and force us to contemplate ideas that might have been inconceivable in the commercial world. Surrounded by the Gothic grandeur, ideas that might seem laughable in the secular world would begin to make sense and assume an air of sanity, for works of architecture administer the correct dosage of our missing virtues we wish to savour in our hearts. Behind these churches and temples lie the implicit attempt to support a way of life that appeals to the religious, the kind of beauty that provokes them. If the architects of these structures have been successful in seducing millions of followers in the world, does this not say something about our idea of what is beautiful? Is it not beauty more objective rather than subjective?

Hence the idea of city planning is founded on the assumption that beauty is objective. Without this assumption set forth in the first place, most cities cannot be built with such coherent beauty. Likewise, if we have no common ground on what is beautiful, how can we explain thousands of architectures that seduce and move us to tears? After all, we are all clung to the same aesthetic language because there are some of the things in the world the whole of mankind feels the need to value.

Yet the issue of aesthetic relativism does not easily settle here. On the face of it, it might seem liberal. But on closer examination, it

reveals a risk that we might be in danger of resorting to. Instead of appreciating beauty through a conscious effort of seeing and noticing the minutest details of the object of beauty, aesthetic relativism offers us an outlet to be lazy, for everything is beautiful if we think it is beautiful. Hence we are likely to overestimate our aesthetic sensibility and assume that our uneducated eyes can assure us automatic possession of beauty without even a second of contemplation. After all, only when evaluation of beauty is confined within a few remarkable individuals, our idea of what is beautiful will start to bear fruit, for the masters will have sensitised us, exposing us to the details we may have previously neglected and allowing us to take on a new perspective when we confront the same object again.

We all long for beauty. But all too often we are too inclined to think that we are the masters of our own senses which require no training whatsoever. We should not be afraid to accept the fact that some may see, hear, and write better than us. Admit that their awareness of colours, rhythms, and usage of words are far better than ours. They are able to guide our mind to pick up certain signals that initially bypasses our consciousness, and from that, cultivating our aesthetic sensibility, solidify and amplify it, and thereby grant us access to certain aesthetic textures we may have never experienced before. The postmodernists are right in asserting our right to express what we fancy. But the evaluation of beauty is not as individualistic as it seems. Let's not forget to learn from the masters so as to prevent ourselves from destroying what is truly beautiful.

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## What is this thing called Philosophy?

BOB FITTER ASKS WHAT ARE WE ALL DOING, EXACTLY?

Students of philosophy tend not to be as compliant as those unfortunate citizens of Athens who happened upon Socrates in one of his troublesome moods. (Yes Socrates, No Socrates, You're right there Socrates). They not only ask questions like "What is philosophy?", they expect an answer. Philosophers are expected to tackle a simple question from simple folk and provide a simple answer. Admittedly the question, the folk and the answer turn out to be not that simple, but philosophers will go to almost any lengths to avoid answering this particular question. They not only make no apology for this, they seem to regard this reticence as some sort of virtue. Imagine allowing the garage mechanic advancing upon that new hatchback with a spanner, or the dentist edging towards that leaking lower-right molar with the drill, to get away with saying that they really found it quite difficult to say exactly what it was they were about to do: and making a virtue out of the fact. The point is not that we would avoid that garage or that dentist, but that in any other sphere of life we would not normally take the inability to say what it was someone did as profound evidence that they knew what they were doing. Traditional responses include replies such as: "Philosophy is an activity" and "The best way of learning it is to do it". Though true, these replies give the impression of playing for time. Although trivial simplification should of course be avoided, it is surely important to ensure that introductions to the subject are no more obscure than they need be. I would like to suggest a starting point for an answer to the "What is philosophy?" question.

Quite frequently accounts begin with a distinction drawn between two uses of the word 'philosophy'. 'Philosophy' the academic discipline

is contrasted with 'philosophy' the outlook on life. The outlook that allows one to accept the sudden failure of the deep-freeze, the collapse of the car's suspension and the discovery of subsidence in the foundations all in the same afternoon; with equanimity. Clearly university degrees, evening courses and introductory magazines in a subject as old and as honoured as philosophy need to cover something more substantial than the ability to smile through clenched teeth. Nevertheless, it is important to look for ways of relating the more academic exercises to ordinary life if philosophy is to be more widely and readily understood. Certainly there is a difference between the two uses of 'philosophy', but perhaps this is more a matter of degree than is normally thought.

An early problem, and arguably the most difficult, for those starting out in philosophy is the grasping of what it is that is distinctive about the subject. Philosophy is often defended (mistakenly in my view) on the grounds that it is really just very theoretical study of another sort, usually science. This leads to the view that it should tackle rather abstract hypotheses of a physical kind such as the nature of time and space, or whether the brain is a computer. Or else it should tackle important controversial issues of a social kind such as abortion and genetic engineering. This view may be reinforced by the recognition that traditional philosophical problems include questions such as 'What is there?' and 'How should we live?'. The result of these apparent confirmations of preliminary impressions can compound a misleading picture of what is taking place, and lead to a polarising of views. The philosophy of logical argument and scientific inquiry is accused of an ivory-tower detachment. A concern with the philosophy of every-day practical issues of an important social kind invites the accusation that it lacks the full academic rigour of a sharp analysis. In much the same way that 'academic philosophy' has been contrasted with 'outlook on life philosophy' I consider this distinction

between scientific and social philosophy to be at worst false and at best misleading. It may lead one to suppose that philosophers are divided by their subject matter; whereas I suggest that they are united by the nature of their activity. Hence the need to at least try and indicate what this activity is.

I suggest that it is a mistake to suppose that philosophy is an inquiry of a physical or socially scientific (or mathematical) kind, taken to extremes. It is, for example, an acceptable manoeuvre in philosophy to suppose virtually anything one likes.

In the recent past, and even in the present in some places, the idea of 'other worlds' has been wielded; not as a conclusion, but as a premise. Not as a destination, but as a point of departure. A scientific inquiry involves taking known facts and projecting from them further 'possible facts'. Philosophers contemplating other worlds, however, do not take established information concerning molecular structure and project the existence of a possible substance that looks and behaves like, for example, water; but is in fact some other substance. They begin by supposing such a substance and take it from there. This is not a factual inquiry; some other activity is taking place. This other activity is going to be at least a very good indication as to the nature of philosophy. It may not be quite as straight-forward as the notion of interpretation, but I believe it is closely related.

If one views a particular aspect of the world, then one does so from a vantage-point. In order to then view the vantage-point itself one needs to move to a fresh vantage-point. This now becomes the new point-of-view, the view being the old vantage-point. Clearly (or perhaps not so clearly) one's current point-of-view is never open to scrutiny in quite the same way as one's view is. To view facts from a cultural, sociological or scientific point of view rules out the possibility of including the system of interpretation amongst the facts one interprets. Cross-checking one's explanatory model is not a factual exercise; at least not in the sense that examining the objects of the explanation may be factual.

It is probably good crime-preventative practice to photograph valuables in order to provide a record in case of theft. Naturally the one thing that proves rather more difficult to photograph is the camera. (One could, of course, borrow a friend's camera, but then this is only an analogy.) A more ingenious solution would be to use a mirror to obtain an image of the camera. This solution is quite literally reflective. In a similar sort of way when out on a map-reading exercise and lost, or suspected of being so, one's actual position (one's point of view) can be ascertained by the use of 'reflective bearings' taken upon distant objects of known location. My suggestion in more abstract terms is that the examination of philosophical examples is similarly reflective. The contemplation of a hypothetical state of affairs in philosophical circumstances is not aimed at discovering the probability, or otherwise, of the existence of that particular state of affairs, any more than lost map-readers taking reflective bearings are taking an interest in distant objects. Or, if it comes to that, than those engaged in crime prevention are interested in taking a photograph of the mirror. Whatever philosophers appear to be examining (or even take themselves to be examining) the actual object of their study is themselves, or more correctly their 'point of view'. This consists of the basic concepts, notions, assumptions and presumptions, from which they view the world around them. The nature of the inquiry is constant across whatever subject area is being studied. The view, but not the nature of the viewing, changes.

The philosopher Gilbert Ryle once used, as an example of a particular kind of error, the case of a visitor to a university who, having been shown all the various buildings, goes on to ask to be shown the university, as if the university itself were a further building in addition to those already seen. The danger Ryle warns us against is that having come to see the university, and having seen the buildings, and having employed the same observational techniques and failed to find the 'university'; the visitor might go on to suppose that the university must exist in some other world above or beyond this

one. A world responsible for this one perhaps, but which is not to be contacted in the same way as this one.

Ryle seems to be saying, the only facts available to us are those discoverable in the normal everyday way. If our inquiry takes us beyond the plain facts we should not be on the look-out for extra or mystical facts, but begin an examination of the interpretations we put upon those facts we already have. Philosophy is a different kind of examination carried out with facts we already have, not the same old factual inquiry carried out upon hypothetical or mystical facts we have yet to lay our hands on.

In Ryle's example the question cannot be about universities since it is only by already knowing the nature of a university that one gets the point of the example. The point is about how we account for collective or abstract nouns, and to show us that it is a mistake to suppose that universities, football teams and choirs exist either in the same sense that their members do, or in a similar though 'other worldly' sense just beyond our reach.

If science (physical or social) is an examination of facts, and the 'outlook on life philosophy' is a way we have of relating to these facts, my suggestion is that 'academic philosophy' is an examination of our attitudes towards facts, rather than an examination of facts.

In map-reading terms the view we get depends as much upon our point of view, as upon the objects in our view. Discovering how the land lies depends as much upon examining our point of view (knowing where we are) as upon the view we view. Philosophy is not done by looking harder at the view, or by looking at the view through metaphysical binoculars. It involves the reflective exercise of cross-checking one's position. Learning to think in this way, in a more disciplined reflective way, can be quite a difficult exercise for newcomers; especially so when even well-seasoned practitioners appear unable to say what it involves.

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1991

Bob was once a devoted student of Philosophy at the University of Hull.



## THE CAFÉ SOLSTICE—A POPULAR STUDENT CAFE AS SKETCHED BY; **GAIL WONG**

The Cafe Solstice is located at the heart of the University of Washington and has a very vibrant student population. Although it's always crowded, you still can find some room—perhaps even find a seat somewhere.

Some of the tables are long and give plenty of space for a MacBook Pro, and your elbows. Although the quality of the internet is a bit wonky, due to high demand I suspect, Solstice is just a really fun place to be at. If you are the type of person who needs noise to work, this is perfect!

Coffee drinkers know that Solstice makes a mean espresso. I get mochas pretty much anywhere I go and they have one of the best in the area and tasty cookies and pastries as well. They also make sandwiches (rather than buy them pre-made) which is nice if you're in the mood for lunch and not just a pastry.

For some reason their baristas are not friendly at all and their service is pretty mediocre - nothing too rude or grumpy but nothing really friendly or welcoming either... but to me whether or not the barista smiles at me is a lot less important in a coffee shop than the cut of coffee and the atmosphere, hands down this is my favourite cafe anywhere in the U-district

It's about as laidback and cool as you can get, with the mismatched chairs and tables to the artwork from local artists on the walls to the amazing locally roasted coffee.

**Café Solstice** 4116 University Way NE  
(between 41st St & 42nd St)  
Seattle, WA 98105  
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