FOLLOWING similar shifts in the philosophy and history of science—as witness the controversies surrounding the work of Kuhn, Feyerabend, Hesse, and Bernstein—relativism has in the past few decades received increasing attention in both anthropology and philosophy, particularly in the analytical study of ethics. Instead of summary dismissal based on allegations of logical inconsistency, extended serious discussion has been taking place among philosophers, and some anthropologists are actively questioning assumptions previously taken for granted. There has been a growing momentum since Philippa Foot noticed the increased interest in her “Moral Relativism” essay a decade ago (Foot, 1982, pp. 152-166). Only a few years ago Clifford Geertz addressed the American Anthropological Association in some consternation in defense of a broadly relativist position.1

Enough has been learned to sustain the claim that ethical relativism is in some of its forms neither incoherent nor implausible. Nor is it just the obvious construction of a deconstructed, post-modern world, or just another diffuse “point of view.” Rather, it is the label of a diversifying body of thought full of possibilities worthy of exploration. Our critical discussion of ethical relativism will focus on what we believe to be the central issues as they arise in the best current proposals. Our survey will enable us to develop criteria of adequacy for relativist theories in the hope that these will prove useful in assessing the directions future theories might take.

Another important recent development in ethical theory is the debate over moral realism, following the trend toward realism in the philosophy of science (see Boyd 1988 and citations there to earlier work). Geoffrey Sayre-McCord defines moral realism in such a way that it “is not solely the prerogative of objectivists” (1988, p. 16); what he calls “intersubjectivism”—roughly equivalent to ethical relativism, particularly of the conventionalist type—is a species of realism as he conceives of it, though others would disagree (cf. Sturgeon, Platts and especially Boyd in the same volume). It is not clear to us that realists are committed to a disavowal of moral relativism in all of its forms, as some think. Nor, for that matter, is it clear just how relevant the realist demarcations are to addressing issues of relativism. The criticisms by some realists of relativism may nevertheless provide stimulus for reflection (see, for example, Lear 1988).

Some attention to the impulses behind relativism needs to be given. Gilbert Harman finds it hard to believe that everyone shares basic moral values, while Bernard Williams refers to a need to confront the surprise at encountering seeming moral disagreements. Max Hocutt suggests, as have many anthropologists, that “The proof of [relativism], if the relativist is right, is to be found in the plain facts: Different societies have different moralities and laws, and there exists no morality or law that is demonstrably binding on all societies alike.”2

In some domains of inquiry the impulses behind relativism have been particularly acute. These include the study of peoples which in our society are taken commonly to be radically different Others—the “primitive” societies of anthropology; they also include some historians’ concerns with the Past, some feminist concerns with the two genders, and inquiries into the disputations that go on in political life. In some of these cases, there is more pressing need either to resolve or show unresolvable certain apparent disputes that involve ethical norms: sexism, fights over the role of government, conflicts between parents and children over right conduct,
and the like. The ethnographic case, however, seems different from the others, enough so to warrant brief special attention. The Others of anthropology are peoples we tend to suppose to be strongly different from Us. Unlike the other gender, they are less apt to be taken to be complementary parts of a whole, and unlike partners to political fights, even whether they have anything to do with Us is debatable. The historian’s Past Other may be distant enough to seem like the anthropologist’s prototypical Other, the Native. But the Past Other may, and in prototypical cases, often does have some connection with the historian’s present. So, it is in the ethnographic case that the most unambiguous Other is found, if only in the imagination. Their ethics is imaginatively held to confront the anthropologist, or his or her readers (especially if they are philosophers), as strange and bizarre, though some of the anthropologist’s home culture may come to be similarly perceived, in the fully joined experiences of many ethnographers. Then translation problems and questions about what counts as difference emerge, and cultural and ethical relativism often become the response.

I. Ethics in Anthropology and Moral Philosophy: Preliminary

The response is sometimes principally an aversion to ethnocentrism and intolerance, to not wanting to have understandings or practices developed in one society imposed upon another. Alison Renteln (1988, pp. 56-72) proposes a form of moral relativism that brings together a negative metaethical thesis with a positive claim about the origin of values. She attempts to give grounds for thinking that cultural relativism is consistent with moral non-neutrality and with the existence of cross-cultural universals in moral reasoning. Her arguments are thus interesting for the effort to have and eat simultaneously the relativist and universalist cakes. She follows the inclination, commonly associated with relativists, of rejecting the idea that morality has objective, supra-cultural rational grounding. But she contests the common relativist insistence that tolerance is an adequate general basis for metaethical relativism. She argues, as do many relativists, that ethnocentrism is universally induced by enculturation of belief and perception; this recognition is what makes cultural relativism necessary. But she challenges those relativists who maintain the adequacy of the cultural grounding of moral positions. Her position will appeal to those who (1) share the idea of an envelopment of morality in culture and (2) accept the idea that this cultural envelopment is essentially arbitrary but (3) find themselves compelled to take moral positions nevertheless, including the one that disavows universal tolerance because of its ethnocentric source or because of its counsel of the toleration of the intolerant.3

Renteln distinguishes moral universals from absolutes.4 The former are the values or ideals underlying moral codes, either general moral categories or specific moral principles. She is not so clear what she means by “moral absolutes.” She does not seem to have in mind the sense of “exceptionless principles” as the meaning of absolutes; it is unclear whether her universals would have absolute status in that sense. On another interpretation of the meaning of absolutes, they would be the actual rules found in the same invariant form cross-culturally and historically. She argues that there may, but need not, be cross-cultural universals in morality; however, the search for cross-cultural absolutes is fruitless.

Nicholas Rescher proposes as moral absolutes such principles as taking “due care for the best interest of others” (1989, p. 50). The generically abstract formulation of this and similar principles gives Rescher a basis for claiming that they meet one definition of a universal (as opposed to an absolute): that they might be quite variably implemented, subject to a hierarchy of levels, each progressively more concrete. This would seem to allow for the undeniable variation among cultures. But Rescher’s conception of an absolute involves grounding in absolute rationality (a rationality common to all humans as such), a grounding that Renteln has rejected. The appeal of universals for Renteln appears to be precisely that they allow for the possibility of reaching moral consensus without rational grounding, incoherence, or authoritarianism even though enculturation universally leads to ethnocentrism.

Facts and Values

Moral relativism characteristically involves claims about the relations between facts and
values and the significance of enculturation. We believe that lack of clarity and undue brevity in Renteln’s remarks on these matters cover several serious difficulties in her program, including possible inconsistency.

Early in her article Renteln asserts the position that the evaluative and factual sides of moral beliefs are indistinguishable. Her argument appears to be that moral values are fact-contaminated at the same time as some facts are value-determined. Her assertions bring to mind John Searle’s example of promising and Philippa Foot’s example of rudeness (see John R. Searle, (1969); Philippa Foot, (1978b)). Yet elsewhere she invokes a distinction between prescribing and describing and expresses a determination to avoid “the naturalistic fallacy.” Renteln’s position on the fact/value relation is thus unclear.

Our view is that there is not so much a fact/value gap as a fact/value overlap such that some, but not all, values are a species of facts. Seeing the matter in terms of Bernard Williams’s distinction between what we will call thick and thin moral concepts may best illustrate our position (see, e.g., Bernard Williams, (1985, pp. 128-130, and pp. 140-145)). Thick moral concepts, such as rude, courageous, lazy, have a fairly precise descriptive content and well-defined truth conditions; thin moral concepts, for example, justice, morally right, morally obligatory, lack much descriptive content and truth conditions.

Applying Williams’s distinction, and retaining the spirit of Renteln’s cultural relativism, we can imagine a community, perhaps one to which Sapir’s appellation “genuine” would apply, with nothing but thick concepts. In this society, one’s duties and the nature of the good would all be clear. We would find it hard to separate out the factual from the evaluative side of the morality, whether according to a local or a broadened conception of what counts as a fact. Any plausibility the thought experiment would have would thus appear to support Renteln’s views, in that the difficulty in the separation of the factual side from the evaluative side of morality would be given a (preliminary) descriptive basis. However, we believe that reflection on this “hypertraditional” community suggests a strong objection to Renteln’s apparent belief in a fact/moral value non-distinction, one which has negative implications for her overall project.

Two points need to be made. The first is that thin more than thick moral concepts allow for fundamental critiques of accepted moral norms—the recognition of which is decidedly desirable. Their substantial independence from descriptive criteria of application permits moral reformers or dissenters to use existing moral concepts in arguing for departures from prevailing norms and values. This seems to be an impossibility in the hypertraditional society we have imagined. Moral progress (or change) seems to involve shifts in perspective: people acquire new inclinations as a result of seeing new similarities or differences among persons, practices, and institutions, or attaching new importance to old distinctions. Argumentative use of language is often crucial to this process.

The second point is that the cultural genesis of norms, as we understand it, implies neither (a) that one’s moral judgments cannot apply to persons and institutions outside one’s own society, nor (b) that their justifiability is entirely a function of their coherence with the prevailing social morality of one’s own group. We will attend further to (a) below. The weaknesses of the version of relativism expressed in (b), commonly called conventionalism, are well-known: by making accepted standards the final court of ethical appeal, such relativism renders the phenomena of radical moral criticism and reform more or less unintelligible. The same is true of our beliefs about moral constraints in a “state of nature” (including relations between societies) and our convictions that at least some moral strictures apply to people in societies with fundamentally different traditions and basic values. Renteln explicitly disavows this type of relativism (Renteln, p. 62).

**Enculturation and Universals**

Renteln has further difficulties with the fact/value dichotomy. Recall that while she argues that even though it is only enculturation (or else what appears to be arbitrary cultural change subject to enculturation’s limits) that determines values, she also claims that anthropologists will be able to isolate and describe values in such a way as to discern genuine universals. The question is whether these two ideas, taken together with her earlier claim in response to Brandt re-
garding the inseparability of moral values and facts, can constitute an intelligible program.

Renteln might argue that she has avoided incoherence by reference to two considerations. First, she follows the practice, conventional at least since Weber, of separating a theory about morality from a moral theory. Renteln evidently supposes that whereas morality and moral theories are purely cultural, a theory about morality can be supra-cultural. The latter theory would be either not normative or based on values that are not relative (see Renteln, p. 59). But is it plausible to claim that moral evaluations are relative to their cultural context whereas the values involved in the endeavors of modern Western social scientists are not? Renteln cannot avoid taking a position on broader questions of cultural relativism if she is to explain how a full understanding of universals can be constructed given that enculturation engenders a strong form of ethnocentrism. How could this ethnocentrism be restricted to moral norms rather than applying just as much to understandings of them? In the event that the problem for norms is also a problem for understandings of them, Renteln has a specific consistency problem. In the event that the separation between them is strong, the general coherency of her project is threatened, for then she would have to account for a fact/value gap she has been at pains to annul, at least in moral contexts (and why only those)? To avoid these two problems in the obvious way by weakening the enculturation thesis would seem to defeat the whole import of Renteln’s resolution of the universalist/relativist dilemma.

The second consideration is that Renteln has diminished the terms of objectivity claims by backing away from “absolutes” in favor of “universals.” By allowing universals, however, she has made her position difficult to sustain, in the following way. By making the analysis of “common denominators” the central issue, she puts a heavy burden on someone being able to abstract them from cultural, and other, detail. It is a matter of dispute whether we can specify the moral beliefs of radically different societies. Pessimistically one might suppose that if discerning universals were readily feasible, progress would already have been made—evidently it has not, by Renteln’s lights—and that the strong ethnocentrism would preclude it in any case. More optimistically, Renteln hopes her re-

construction of what the problem is primarily about would put us in a better position to do something along the lines she suggests. She would then presumably have to depend on ethnocentrism being overcome, so far as discerning norms is concerned. A weakening of the enculturation thesis would therefore seem warranted.

**Diversity in Enculturation and Ethnocentrism**

This problem, then, depends centrally on the treatment of enculturation and ethnocentrism. On the one hand enculturation always determines the perception and acceptance of values, which are arbitrary in other respects. But also ethnocentric enculturation can somehow be cast off by anthropologists when they discern universals and by others capable of discovering the error of their ways—in spite of their ethnocentrism. If the latter is true, then can the former be so? How strong can the determination by enculturation be? Without Renteln herself having said much about it, we cannot go farther in pursuing whatever possibilities she may have had in mind. We can, however, suggest what we take to be an interesting set of variations on her view.

One could understand enculturation to involve active human agents, rather than passive receptors, engagement and struggle rather than blind determination. It would then include peoples’ engagements in their lives and involvements with fellow human beings as much as, or more so than it stems from automatic unconscious indoctrination. Consider, then, that however contingent the values that ensue, they are values that matter to people, in any number of the ways that values matter to us in our everyday lives.

Consider also that ethnocentrism needs to be decomposed into varieties rather than being assumed to be just the one thing, the cognitive failure to recognize that one’s own [culture’s?—RS & LT] ideas are presumed to have a more general validity than they actually possess.”11 It is not that this kind is unimportant. It is rather that it, too, is subject to variation, and it is not the only kind. Another important one is cultural conceit outright, the presumption that one’s own culture’s values are superior to others. The social distribution of this variety is different from that of Renteln’s. It does not always derive from enculturation-induced preju-
indices and might in fact be the more important form, politically and historically.

Our points are that enculturation and ethnocentrism are both diverse and that they concern substantive sources of evaluations, not just the existence and effects of the evaluations. First, no society is without sub-groups and sub-categories, minimally divided along age, sex, and geographical lines. Second, people have concerns that relate to their always belonging to mixed groups, with the potential for conflicts and compromises of interests, values, and meanings in the mixtures. Third, even within groups, there may well be varying understandings and weightings of moral claims. For us to understand fully such variation requires us to conceive enculturation to be non-automatic and variable in its content.12

In given cultures or sets of interacting cultures, we have access to embodiments of values—and possibly systematic distortions of values—which occur in the very living of human lives. Emotional responses and patterns of resistance and cooperation embody values in ways that are incompletely culturally determined. There may well be failure at every turn in our discernments of the sense, import, and sources of moral issues in these responses and patterns. Renteln assumes at the outset that the potential sources of moral defect, in given cases, defeat efforts at grounded moral practice or discernment. This is to put up a standard of skepticism that ignores the partial independence of understanding from enculturation. The danger of cultural relativism becoming a counsel of excessive nihilism or skepticism remains serious, even if some philosophers may have exaggerated it. Moreover, to rest on weak universals (or for that matter stronger ones or absolutes) while recognizing significant cross-cultural variety, or patterning, is to miss a crucial point, which is that moral issues’ greatest import for people is often precisely in the conflicts of goods and bads, at intersections of interests, capacities, passionate involvements, and needs, of groups and individuals. Even if one finds universals, they may not even bear on the details of particular moral claims, especially if they are so abstract.

Finally, there may well be universals which non-ethnocentrically reference the human condition, such as those implied in Okin’s conception of basic needs and capacities grounding human rights, that are in part, even if they are never entirely, culture-free (Okin, 1981). Renteln believes that moral universals (the theory about morality) will validate a moral theory including human rights. Yet the mere fact of common moral ideals would not give us a valid standard of right and wrong. At the very least this consensus would have to be shown reasonable, as for example due to human nature, perhaps coupled with sociocultural forms, or the requirements of social life.

II. Marxism and Relativism

The groups to which Milton Fisk’s theory makes ethics relative are social classes, races, nations, genders, and families; social classes are of paramount importance because “class domination provides the basis for continuing racial and other forms of domination” (Fisk, 1980, p. 19). It is these groups and their differential ranking within a social structure which entail the conflicts between persons and groups which are at the heart of what ethics is about. At the center of Fisk’s enterprise is the notion of the social person, the idea of human needs that have universal and group specific characteristics, a conception of deliberative action, and the notion of social structure as political economy. In respect both to human needs and political economy, Fisk makes group interest central to his conception of ethics.13

Fisk’s social structure consists of dominant and subordinate classes embedded in a sum group, which makes reference to the overall structure of domination. The dominant group’s ethical interests are in preserving domination and stability while the subordinate group’s interests are in ending the domination. The sum group’s norms are prejudiced in favor of the dominant group’s interest, for example in stressing harmony. Subordinate groups may come to experience imposed consciousness or perhaps alienation, which latter “is a tendency to be aware that the realization of one’s needs is being blocked due to the established institutions of one’s society” (p. 124). The sources of imposed consciousness are two: on the one hand, there is “the acceptance by a lower group of values that serve to stabilize domination.” But, on the other hand, indoctrination will not stick unless “the
objective conditions . . . frustrate the needs characteristic of the lower group” and “[i]n their place substitute needs are constructed” (p. 47).¹⁴

Fisk’s social person is the joint product of the important groups to which people belong and people’s human characteristics. “There is something to the person that does not depend on specific groups, something that is needed for social forces to act on,” which “is a system of four survival needs that are basic (i.e. non-derivative) among all needs. These are the needs for food, sex, human support and deliberation.” But there is much that is social since “being in different epochs and being in different groups moulds the person in such a way that there are essential differences between the persons in these epochs and in these groups” (p. 12.). Fisk suggests that “an organization of the basic needs creates historical needs” (p. 120) rather than the latter being the direct product of the former in a social vacuum. For example, workers’ needs for food (and other necessities) coupled with their need for deliberation creates a need for organization. “Since the person is formed in a group some of his or her needs will be formed by the group and their realization will be promoted by the group.” Group interest is fundamental, for “when the interests characteristic of the group are in conflict with other needs of a member of the group, the conflict is to be resolved in favour of group interests. Otherwise, human nature is blocked” (p. 25).

Ethical good, duty, and right are established on the basis of tendencies characteristic of the members of those groups in which common purposes are more important than systematic opposition, where, given the primacy of class, the common purposes are defined in terms of political economy. Ethical principles serve people’s group purposes, subject to the qualification of a “postulate of coherence.” If the groups to which one belongs “generate conflicting forces within human nature” (as established in these groups), no comprehensive ethics can be applied (p. 38).

Otherwise, ethical norms have room for play, especially by way of people deliberatively rejecting imposed needs—which threaten coherence (p. 140)—and resolving conflicts in accordance with assessments of the good of one’s groups and considerations of prudence. A good action, one based in virtues and their motivation structure, helps realize the internal historical needs of the group. (Virtues such as fairness, temperance, and practical wisdom, and other goods which are widespread in human societies may serve different purposes in different contexts and so should not be mistaken for absolutes [p. 157-158].) The linkages from needs to character formation and action are specified in interests, as mediated by feelings and deliberation. But Fisk does not require the linkage from good intentions to good actions (p. 184). In fact, “Not every free action is an exercise of freedom since there are free actions for which the motives and ends are based on needs that are not one’s own or for which deliberation sets out from imposed consciousness” (p. 188).

Its specific focus on an ethics derived from social class interests makes Fisk’s the most substantive—the richest in specific social content—of the proposals we consider; it is, accordingly, the most contentious in regard to that focus. The reduction of ethics to class interests and struggles goes against some strong currents in social and ethical thought:¹⁵ the dethroning of social classes, and political economy more generally, from primacy is celebrated in many quarters, while the range of concerns that fall under the rubric of ethics might be construed more broadly than Fisk does. Injustice could not be perpetrated by one class against another except insofar as the norms of the perpetrating class are violated, a consequence that is difficult to accept.¹⁶ His marked departures from other relativisms suggest the nature of the problems that Fisk’s proposals present: his relativism is based in a notion of pan-human basic needs and universal constraints on their specific historical developments. His proposals require the controversial ideas of imposed consciousness and alienation, controversial especially in the context of those types of relativism, e.g. Harman’s, that take agents’ cognizance to be the final judge.

III. ANALYTICAL NEO-RELATIVISM

What many relativists such as Renteln focus on is the positive social morality of a society, understood as an organized collection of persons who share the same cultural norms—owing perhaps to common concerns or interests. By “positive” is meant that these are the actually accepted rules and values of the group. Renteln
with her emphasis on enculturation seems to have in mind the solidified traditions reproduced over time of "standard" ethnographically reckoned societies, the sense carried by terms such as "the Puka Pukans," the "Nuer" and the like. Harman and Wong seem to have in mind more diffuse, even *ad hoc* groups, held together by agreements or common conceptions of an adequate set of moral rules. For both, as for Fisk, sub-cultural groups are as important, if not more important than larger, fully "societal" groups. The diffuseness of Harman's and Wong's conceptions of moral groups consists in the lack of requirement of a cohesive social group being formed; Harman is particularly attentive to the possibilities of multiplicities of moral communities within societies.

**Harman on Reasons and Inner Judgments**

Gilbert Harman's moral relativism is characterized by his emphasis on tacit agreements or conventions that the members of groups develop as their morality. These agreements give rise to the "inner judgments" that constitute agents' applications of the morality enjoined by the agreements. According to Harman's internalist position, "inner judgments have two characteristics. First, they imply that the agent has reasons to do something that are capable of motivating the agent. Second, the speaker endorses those reasons and supposes that the audience does too." (1975: pp. 4-11). The inner judgments about which Harman is making his relativist claim are moral judgments about what ought to be done (as opposed to the evaluative "ought to be" judgments), as well as judgments about what is morally right for an agent to do (in contrast with judgments about an action in abstraction from the agent being right). Harman's definition of the moral ought is specified as follows: ""Ought (A, D, C, M)" means roughly that, given that A has motivating attitudes M and given [circumstances] C, D is the course of action for A that is supported by the best reasons."

Harman believes that the motivating attitudes implied by judgments about what people ought morally to do "are intentions to adhere to a particular agreement on the understanding that others also intend to do so." He does not claim to be able to establish this thesis; nevertheless, he believes that it explains a number of features of our common moral views, such as our tendency "to assign greater weight to the duty not to harm others than to the duty to help others." Moreover, "morality is . . . continuous with politics," since "moral argument can involve not only argument over the consequences of basic demands but also bargaining over the basic demands themselves" (Harman 1980, p. 115). The idea that morality is political may also be intended to capture Harman's idea that moral disagreements often "concern what implications that agreement has for particular cases" (Harman 1975, p. 16), as in cases of judicial interpretation of legislation or a constitution. Moral bargaining, as Harman conceives of it, is usually tacit and could be understood in terms of exchange theory in sociology and social psychology.

**Problems with Harman's Internalism**

We see as strengths in Harman's account that he tries to delineate in a flexible way a notion of a moral community, although as will be seen below, we fear his account may become vacuously flexible at crucial points. We also think that Harman's slogan "morality is politics" presents fruitful leads and that his thinking about bargaining and agreement stems from serious and reasonable concerns even though their implementation in his arguments suffers from serious problems. Along the same lines, his insistence on the revisability of agreements underlying morality is well-intentioned, even if insufficiently radical in scope and implementation, as we will argue later on. Finally, contrary to the inclinations of some versions of relativism (Renteln's, for example), Harman believes that his theory retains the possibility that some moralities may be objectively better than others.

The most basic problem we find in Harman's theory concerns his version of internalism and what we maintain is an arbitrary application of his "previously unnoticed distinction between inner and non-inner moral judgments" (Harman 1975, p. 22). Harman does not give a rationale for his internalist contention that moral judgments about what an agent ought to do specify that an agent has a good reason for acting in a certain way (in a sense of "reasons" which depends upon the intentions, desires, aims, or motivations of agents). Given Harman's interpretation of morality as politics, it seems appropriate to consider the case of legal obligations, duties, and oughts. It is clear in the case of
law that someone can have an obligation to act or not act in a certain way without having a reason to do so, in Harman’s sense. Why then are moral obligations so different?21

A more plausible account than Harman’s is that of Roger Wertheimer (1972), according to which judgments about obligations, duties, right and wrong, and what one should do or ought to do express the requirements and permissions of relevant adequate systems. (We will discuss this theory in more detail below in conjunction with Wong’s relativism.) It is as reasonable to say that someone has a moral duty not to inflict gratuitous pain even when that person has no reason not to do so as to say that the person has a legal duty not to do so. When we are forced to reflect on the correctness of our judgments about moral obligation and rightness or wrongness, particularly as applied to other agents, considerations of their (intention- or desire-based) reasons for acting typically do not have any central role, and are often entirely irrelevant. Externalism is more consistent with the full range of moral judgments that most people make.

Harman’s classification of moral ought judgments as either having to do with what an agent ought to do or as having to do with what ought to be (so-called evaluative oughts) is misleading at best since we maintain that all judgments in the latter category reduce to judgments of the first type.22 Furthermore, judgments about moral rightness and wrongness of actions in abstraction from particular agents seem neither more nor less “inner” than judgments about actions in relation to particular agents. “Fred’s lie was wrong, but it was not wrong of Fred to lie because he cares nothing about honesty” seems incoherent as a moral claim. Similar arbitrariness is involved in Harman’s exclusion of judgments about good and evil persons from the class of inner judgments. Presumably these are judgments about the excellence or deficiency of people’s character which imply standards of virtue that are worked through in the ways the judgments he includes are worked through, i.e., by bargaining and coming to agreements in intention.

Finally, when Harman allows himself disinterest in matters of institutional justice, he does so without defending his sharp separation of institutional justice from the actions of individual persons within institutions, or from the practices that reproduce or give them form. His classification of judgments about institutional justice as non-inner suggests that he would consider judgments about the actions of individual agents being just or unjust to be properly placed in the class of inner judgments, though nowhere does he address this issue. Indeed, in a more recent essay concerned specifically with justice, Harman appears to have rejected his earlier position, asserting that “justice is entirely conventional,” and further that “all of morality consists in conventions that are the result of continual tacit bargaining and adjustment” (Harman, 1983, pp. 114-31). No mention is made of his earlier distinction between two classes of moral judgments, suggesting that he might have abandoned it. In any event, it would seem an unwarranted demarcation in a moral theory that has as its main goal the establishment of a socially based moral relativism—it comes close to excising the heart of the project leaving but a shell.

Harman’s Social Logic

A separate set of difficulties can be seen in Harman’s admittedly unsupported thesis that the motivational attitude shared by the members of the moral group is the intention to adhere to the agreement provided others do. A number of these problems are not unlike some which Harman himself has found in Gauthier’s (1986) hypothetical contract theory of morality (Harman 1987), e.g., given that it is not always rational to formulate or to act on such an intention, how can the mere having of that intention provide a reason for action? Further, there seem to be other sorts of moral motivation equally fundamental, such as sympathy or a desire to be a person of integrity.

The social basis of Harman’s relativism is the set of moral agreements some people have made. At one point, he relativizes “to those who accept or have reasons to accept certain basic moral demands” (Harman 1980, p. 113). Even though he refers to the relevant demands as “basic” (a notion which unfortunately remains unexplicated), the group sharing acceptance of them is not exclusive: a person can have moral conflicts from belonging to different groups. We have already indicated our sympathy for the flexibility that Harman’s notion of “moral community” involves, but we now have to register
our concern that this flexibility too much weakens the relativization he makes. Consider his recognition of what he terms "the limiting case of group morality, when the group has only one member; then, as it were, a person comes to an understanding with himself" (Harman 1975, p. 21). He gives no grounds for not supposing that this case is wholly general, though clearly his intention is to block it becoming so by reference to bargaining to an agreement. Since his bargained agreements are tacit, however, there is nothing to prevent his relativism from collapsing into subjectivism. (We use the word "subjectivism" broadly to cover both descriptive subjectivism and noncognitivism.)

On the other hand, the way Harman talks about some examples, one suspects that he has in mind more than a tacit agreement, in fact a hardened kind of social determinism. There is for example the "contented employee of Murder, Incorporated" who "was raised as a child to honor and respect members of the 'family' but to have nothing but contempt for the rest of society." Having been assigned someone to murder, and having been confronted by a person not raised by the "family," the murderer will only be amused at efforts to dissuade him from the task (Harman 1975, p. 5). Harman's point is that those external to an agreement cannot be reached by it. The fact that sometimes this is true, however, does not mean it should be taken to be generally so.

Moral Judgments Across Groups

Finally, Harman does not deal adequately with one of his own examples of slavery. He suggests that if in a given society there are no fundamental norms that are part of the agreement that would count against slavery as a practice, then slavery would not be morally wrong for slave owners in that society. This is certainly a standard implication of moral relativism in its usual forms, though a kind of hypothetical contractarian relativism which imposed some constraints of equality on the parties might be able to avoid it. In any case, the operative assumption here is that "our" anti-slavery moral views do not and cannot apply to "them," i.e., those who are part of a different de facto agreement. But why must we assume that they cannot?23

Standard forms of ethical relativism involve at least two distinct theses: (1) Moral judgments presuppose socially accepted values or ideals that can vary among societies and that provide the sole basis for justification of those judgments; (2) Moral judgments apply only to persons who are members of the society (or group) whose values or ideals are the sole basis for their justification. But (1) does not imply (2), and there does not seem to be any more fundamental thesis of relativism that entails both (1) and (2). Why, then, should a relativist accept (2)? Rules can be applied and judgments made with respect to persons who do not share the values on which they are based—again, the example of legal obligation—so to claim that our moral norms and judgments are not applicable to people who do not share our fundamental values must mean that we ought not to apply them, which is obviously a normative thesis, probably a moral one. While it may be reasonable after close examination of given cases to say that people who lack some specific concepts or rules of moral obligation, right, and duty, through no fault of their own, should not be held morally responsible for their wrongdoing, (2) is a much stronger thesis—about obligation, rightness, and wrongness—in need of additional support. Although it might be pointless and ineffective, in the absence of external sanctions, to apply standards of moral right and wrong to those who reject them and are indifferent, if not hostile, to the underlying values, there is nothing logically inappropriate in doing so. Thus (2) seems best understood as a moral judgment, as is the related claim that we ought to tolerate the moral practices of other societies when they conflict with ours, avoiding imposition of our values on their members.

Wong's Conception of an Adequate Moral System

Wong (1984) rejects (2), though he demonstrates that a prima facie principle of tolerance can be derived from his form of relativism in conjunction with a substantive moral principle to the effect that one ought not to interfere with others' pursuits unless such interference could be justified to them were they fully informed and rational (see Wong 1984, Chapter 12; cf. Williams 1985, Chapter 9). He also avoids the internalism of Harman's account, with its "good reasons" analysis of "ought" and related words. Instead he modifies Wertheimer's analysis of these concepts in terms of the requirements and permissions of principles comprising adequate
relevant systems. Wong observes that as a culture develops, "it becomes possible to distinguish different sets of rules the uses of which have different points," e.g., technical rules and rules of etiquette, as well as "the set for resolving internal conflicts of requirements (stemming from an individual's different needs, desires, and goals) that affect others and for resolving interpersonal conflicts of interest in general," which "gives rise to morality." (He thus points out that the functions of morality overlap, to an extent, those of law and psychotherapy.) Rules form systems when given priority orderings; some moral systems will be "adequate with respect to some ideal of morality (that includes an ideal of moral change)," e.g., Kant's conception of humanity as an end-in-itself. Standards of adequacy for moral systems tell us which systems are adequate, and a complete set of standards specifies a moral ideal. "A morally ought to do X" is analyzed as "By not doing X under actual conditions C, A will be breaking a rule of an adequate moral system applying to him or her." Ought-statements of this form can "point to reasons for action without actually specifying them"—they "may be relevant conditions C, which may be left implicit, or they may be rules of an adequate moral system" (see Wong, pp. 38-43).

Since there may be different extensions of "adequate moral system," Wong's position is relativistic in the strong sense opposed to "absolutist." A group in which "adequate moral system" has the same extension for everyone is a "moral community." A contingent association between true moral judgments about what ought to be done, what is right, and so forth, and reasons for action will tend to be made by members of a moral community, Wong maintains, noting "that moral truth is interesting to us only when it provides us with reasons for action."24

Ideals of morality can be rationally criticized on Wong's account, a strength shared by Harman's—e.g., they can be shown to rest on false factual beliefs, and the related systems of rules and standards can be demonstrated to be unfeasible or unacceptable to a sufficient number of people. At the individual level, there are psychological constraints on the choice of moralities that will tend to be fairly restrictive in practice, given the relatively fixed nature of most people's desires, tastes, and characters (see Wong, pp. 73-6). Further, his theory does not depend on a problematic notion of agreement in Harman's sense, Wong emphasizes, and it maintains a distinction between a moral judgment's being true and providing a reason for action. As noted previously, Wong's account permits consistent application of moral rules to people outside one's moral community who do not share them; and he suggests reasons why dealing with people outside of our community will, for consistency's sake, tend to make us apply the same rules to them that we apply to ourselves (see Wong, p. 75). Finally, his theory provides a useful standpoint from which to explain people's actual moral views and disagreements.

The central problem with Wong's theory is that it comes close to being a form of subjectivism but lacks the latter theory's advantages, while having few if any clear compensating advantages of its own. A moral community, Wong specifies, is any group of people who count the same moral system as adequate—not a society or culture. He makes no stipulations about the structure, size, or character of moral communities, leading us to assume that they can be merely collections of persons with the same moral rules, ideals, and standards of adequacy for moral systems. Although he is unclear on the matter, his definition seems to allow for the logical possibility that members of a community do not even subscribe to the system in the sense of being motivated, to a degree, to act as its rules direct. As is the case with Harman's theory, Wong's account seems to allow for the possibility of a moral community of one. Indeed, unless we have a fairly rigorous explanation of what it means to have the same moral beliefs, it will be very uncertain how many moral communities exist in a large and varied society such as ours—perhaps nearly as many as there are people. Would it not be simpler to stipulate that moral judgments are relative to an individual (speaker's) conception of an adequate system, i.e., subjectivism? A focus on the individual's conception (perhaps as it would be in wide reflective equilibrium) would have a number of theoretical advantages, not the least of which is its fit with the agent-centeredness of most moral judgments. On a relativist metaethical theory (that avoids collapse into subjectivism) the moral ideals of the individual have no justificatory status or validity as such, a consequence
that many of us find difficult to accept. Why
would shared moral ideals be necessarily any
more valid?

Whether we understand metaethics as being
partly a prescriptive enterprise—or nothing
more than an attempt to explain what we ordi-
narily mean by moral judgments and what we
commonly count as acceptable methods of sup-
porting them—an interesting case can be made
that some form of subjectivism is the correct
metaethical theory for a divided, liberal, and
individualistic society such as ours. Perhaps rel-
ativism is best treated, therefore, as a meta-
metaethical theory?

IV. CONCLUSION: CRITERIA OF ADEQUACY

The comparison of Harman and Wong with
Fisk is instructive. First, Harman and Fisk have
similar conceptions about what counts as a rela-
tivistic theory. Fisk holds that:

[A]t bottom, relativism is the view that there are
many instances of social conflict which it is not
fruitful to treat in terms of right and wrong valid
for both sides. . . Right and wrong belong inside
a group in which opposition runs less deep than
common purpose (p. 34).

Compare this with Harman’s view:

Such disagreements [as about the relative moral
weighting of bombing temples vs. civilians in the
Vietnam war] would seem to reflect different basic
values. It is hard to believe that in the nature of
things one side is right about this and the other is
wrong. It is hard to believe there is reasoning
which, once appreciated, makes all but one weight-
ing of these values irrational (1983, p. 117).

Second, both Harman and Fisk embrace the slogo
that morality is political and interest-based.
Of course, whereas Harman is neutral between
what he characterizes as the claims of rich and
poor, Fisk works with a stronger conception of
social class divisions and expresses his solidar-
ity with the interests of subordinate classes and
groups. For Fisk, justice is primary and is sub-
stantively based, in the ways explained earlier,
whereas Harman and Wong are noncommittal
about the status of the interests reflected by a
particular society’s conventions and contracts.
Fisk’s relativism is constrained by political
economy, Harman’s and Wong’s seemingly by a
liberal pluralist-inspired conception of what pol-
itics is about. This contrast is, perhaps not coin-
cidentally, related to another contrast between
them: Fisk puts considerable weight on imposed
consciousness and alienation (and the deliber-
ate overcoming of these) whereas Harman and
Wong do not emphasize such notions. It is Fisk’s
purpose to develop an ethics that is critical of
existing orders (of socially stratified societies)
whereas it is Harman’s purpose merely to sug-
gest justifications for social orders, stratified or
not. Wong shares Fisk’s egalitarian commit-
ments but has Harman’s conception of the role
of philosophy and his individualistic conception
of the person, human interests, and the relation
of self to society. Hence his reluctance to make
his metaethics explicitly political. It may be,
however, that Fisk’s morality becomes some-
thing like a special case of Harman’s in the
instance of classless society, wherein ethics may
become universal within a given society, even
though not founded in any absolutes (Fisk, p.
260). On the other hand, Fisk’s conception of the
social identity and welfare of persons (reminis-
cent of Alasdair MacIntyre’s, see note ) makes
Fisk’s theory much less vulnerable than
Harman’s to the charge that it collapses into
subjectivism.

Consideration of the positions of Renteln,
Fisk, Harman, and Wong suggests a set of pro-
visional criteria of adequacy for relativist theories.
These criteria reflect lines of criticism to which
standard forms of moral relativism typically fall
prey. An acceptable relativist theory must:

1. [IDENTIFICATION] Provide an acceptable account
of the notion of a moral community or society;
must state criteria for identification of the funda-
mental ideals and norms of a community and
its parts;
2. [APPLICABILITY & SCOPE]
   a. Explain what it means for a moral norm (or
system of these) to apply to a person or group;
   b. Permit broadening of scope so that moral
norms of a society could apply to persons out-
side the group and allow for an account of how
such extension can occur;
3. [CRITICISM] Avoid rendering incoherent radical
moral criticism of one’s own society or groups, i.e.,
must allow for meaningful moral assessment of
basic social values in terms of considerations of
consistency, feasibility, consequences, etc., tak-
ing account of the importance of individual input;

4. [sociocultural formation] Be consistent with the best available empirical explanation of the nature of sociocultural forms and moral change in both individuals and groups.

None of the three developed forms of moral relativism we have surveyed meets all of our criteria of adequacy. Neither Harman's nor Wong's theory is clearly preferable to, or distinguishable from, subjectivism. Fisk is able to avoid subjectivism with his notion of social class but has difficulties with the criteria of sociocultural formation and criticism.

One way of understanding the point of contention between relativism and subjectivism would be as a question about the locus of moral authority—is it in the individual or the community? The answer that we think best captures what is valuable in the reconsideration of relativism is that this locus is neither in the individual nor in the community. The loci are in individuals given their involvements in differentiated communities. Intra- and inter-community differentiations, neither of which can be taken to be more generally central than the other, mean that the human primate is not very well understood to be a Kantian individual who is fully autonomous and independent of social forms, or who is ahistorical, a free-floater in social-cultural time. The social person is a creature who desires and needs, for the sake of concerns about and for others, to develop concrete social practices. This person is also one who is susceptible to desires to authorize these practices. The person in the community is a creature having its very being, or identity, formed—in part, never in whole—through participation in social practices.

The criteria we propose express our own current guesses about how best to construe the idea of persons in communities as the locus of morality. Each of the criteria is written to capture both the problems and prospects of the construal of persons, and sub-groups, in relation to communities. If anyone ever finds a community that can be taken to be fully and genuinely homogeneous morally, we are prepared to accept the consequences for the IDENTIFICATION criterion. We have to consider the differential SCOPE of moral claims in such a way as to neither assume in advance the unimpeachability of either persons or their communities, save that we take persons to approach unimpeachability in two ways that communities do not, except when acting fully corporately. Persons differ from groups, first, in having personally, in sometimes interesting ways that end up also being social, to own their evaluations themselves and, second, in having to suffer themselves whatever consequences their (or sometimes others') actions have for them. The third criterion allows for possibilities of CRITICISM of a community's practices, either internal (often claims of hypocrisy) or externally based. Finally, our fourth criterion directly faces the possibilities that sociocultural formations may entail constraints that it would be foolish to overlook, as in the case of slave societies vs. non-slave societies, or kin-based societies vs. class-governed ones. The dynamic and open-ended nature of norms, even in societies that appear closed, also has to be appreciated.

Relativists need to demonstrate the overall theoretical and practical advantages as well as the distinctiveness of their metaethical position over those of descriptive subjectivists and non-cognitivists. The recent relativist theories we have surveyed fail to do so. Yet even if our assessments of current proposals have reached negative conclusions, it should be clear that we think the state of the art they espouse, the relativist project, shows some potential. We believe that a better understanding of relativist theories might reduce the fears of some that general acknowledgement of relativism would undermine our moral aims.

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NOTES

2. Max Hocutt (1986, p. 199). Foot remarks that morality "is essentially a social phenomenon," a fact which is too often forgotten in philosophical discussions (1978, p. 189).

3. The moral, political, and judicial assessment of tolerance are not fully addressed by Renteln. At the least one would need to consider how it sometimes becomes more than a weak acceptance of what one finds repugnant or toward which one is neutral. Such investigation is consistent with Renteln's view, which correctly denies any logical ties between tolerance and relativism. See Harrison 1982 and Matilal 1989 for thoughtful discussions of problems in the association of tolerance with relativism.

4. Michael Krausz also holds that universalism is compatible with relativism whereas absolutism is not (personal communication). He defines universalism as involving the claim that all cultures exemplify significant features in common.

5. "This [Renteln is referring to R.B. Brandt's Ethical Theory (1959)] separation of facts and values as ingredients in moral judgments is, for the most part, artificial. All moral judgments depend on factual judgments. These facts are not merely circumstantial but are central to the belief system" (Renteln, 1988, p. 60).


7. We take cross-cultural judgment to be subject to certain natural conditions: minimal social interaction, and some common epistemological presuppositions and experiential grounding. We, along with Renteln, do not suppose in this any general assessments of whole cultures, but specific activities or actions.

8. For important insights on intelligible moral criticism, see the essay by Martha C. Nussbaum and Amartya Sen (1989).

9. Her disavowal is on the grounds that "it is susceptible to the charge of self-refutation, for it asserts an absolute prescription that all prescriptions are relative". Mary Hesse (1980) suggests reasons for thinking that this commonly given argument fails to cognitive relativism.

10. Philosophers have recently questioned the assumption that metaethics and substantive or normative ethics are wholly separable fields of inquiry, a doubt the present authors share. See, e.g., Gilbert Harman (1977, p. viii).

11. See Renteln, p. 63, with citations to Bohannan (1963, p. 9); Westermarck (1924, Vol. II, p. 170); (1932, p. 201); Sumner (1911, pp. 12-13).

12. David Lyons' observation (1976, p. 110) is that "anthropologists have seemed strangely insensitive of the fact that, even within the relatively small societies to which they typically refer, social classes, families, and other real social groups . . . are maintained."

13. Compare with Keith Graham (1987). Graham works with the idea, much discussed of late, that Marx disavowed morality, and that class interests are a substitute or replacement for morality. Marx's "appeal occupies ground closely adjacent to morality because it is concerned with what people have good reason to do." But his appeal was "not itself a moral appeal" (p. 17).


15. See, for example, Jon Elster's "Three Challenges to Class," (1986).


17. We will not reject the objection Rescher raises to Harman's account, reminiscent of Durkheim's criticisms of contract theorists, that "an 'agreement' or an 'understanding' (however tacit or implicit) cannot come to exist in vacuo — in a context where people have as yet no morality in place (1989, p. 87). Among the problems the objection raises is that of how one understands a moral system, or set of mutually co-referring moral norms. Rescher and Harman both perhaps would recognize that a whole moral system is not apt to arise at once de novo. At least, then, Rescher might argue that his objection suggests a basis for delimiting when Harman's process description would and when it would not apply. Harman might acknowledge this and still pursue his thus delimited project. Given that the notion of "a moral system," and the distinction of a more vs. less basic moral norm are nowhere theoretically well worked out, we take the side of caution here.


19. Harman goes on to say that a speaker may withhold endorsement of the reasons he attributes to the agent, in which case we have an inverted commas use of “ought” that is not an inner judgment and hence not a “full-fledged moral judgment.” But if the agent is the one making the judgment, does the judgment necessarily have the latter characteristic? When the judgment is made by someone other than the agent and the second implication is not disavowed, is the speaker then automatically made a party to the agreement?


21. Harman asserts without argument that moral and legal obligation differ in that “[m]oral demands have to be acceptable to those to whom they apply in the way that legal demands do not” (1978, pp. 152-153).

22. Harman (1975, p. 6, fn.) cites Thomas Nagel to the effect that this reduction is often correct, but he provides no clear example of a case in which it is not correct.

23. Again, Harman seems to have recently changed his position to one in which he asserts that the conventional nature of justice does not mean that “social arrangements are just whenever they are in accordance with the principles of justice accepted in that society.” He allows the use of “our own principles of justice in judging the institutions of another society” (1983, p. 114). Lyons distinguishes between agent’s-group relativism (“an act is right if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the agent’s group”) and appraiser’s-group relativism (“a moral judgment is valid if, and only if, it accords with the norms of the appraiser’s social group”). He characterizes Harman’s early theory about moral ought judgments as essentially an agent theory (1976, pp. 109-110). This is supported by Harman’s remarks, p. 158 of his 1978 essay, with the qualification that appraisers, in the absence of explicit disavowal, accept the same morality as the agents they judge. But Harman appears, perhaps inconsistently, to hold an appraiser theory about justice while insisting that he sees no point in talking “about reasons in the evaluative sense”, i.e., reasons which do not reflect the agent’s rational concerns (1983, pp. 115-116).

24. See Wong, pp. 63-5; see pp. 68-71 for his analysis of “X is a good Y.”

25. We accept something like Hocutt’s point (1986, pp. 189-190) that vagueness in the definition of what counts as a society is not necessarily a defect.

26. An additional criterion would require that any substantive moral implications of a relativist metaethical theory cohere with “our” considered moral judgments in wide reflective equilibrium, or that they be consistent with the demands of a moral code “we” would choose for our society were we fully rational. Reasons for preferring one of these alternatives (Rawls’s or Brandt’s) go beyond the scope of the present paper; see Robert M. Stewart, “Coherence, Information, and Moral Justification,” unpublished ms.

27. Thus Lear asserts that “those who are incapable of living a life of Humean dissociation will be unable to have the insight that relativism is true without thereby distancing themselves from the vocabulary of ‘right and wrong.’ . . . Our receptivity to the belief that relativism is true makes us vulnerable in real confrontations — and especially in mortal conflicts — when the other culture tends to be fundamentalist, unreflective and unresponsive to the belief that relativism is true” (1988, p. 93).

28. We wish to thank Richard Brandt, Henning Jensen, Michael Krausz, David White, and the Editor for helpful comments on earlier drafts.

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