

NATURAL MORALITIES

A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism

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For Laura

Pluralism and Ambivalence

Difference and disagreement over moral values is perennially thought to pose a problem for moral universalism. Yet universalists correctly point out that the mere fact of disagreement, even apparently irresolvable disagreement over important or fundamental matters, does not differentiate morality from other bodies of belief concerning, say, history and the sciences, that typically are thought to be true or false in a nonrelative manner. The fact that we might find it hard or even impossible to resolve some disagreement as to whether some historical event occurred in the far distant past, for example, does prevent us from thinking that the event really did occur or that it did not independently of what any group believes about that event. There is, however, a kind of moral disagreement that poses special difficulties for universalism. This kind of disagreement evokes a complex reaction I call "moral ambivalence." We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different judgments than we are inclined to make about these conflicts, and any prior convictions we might have had about the superiority of our own judgments get shaken. Moral ambivalence is the phenomenon of coming to understand and appreciate the other side's viewpoint to the extent that our sense of the unique rightness of our own judgments gets destabilized. In other words, the most discomfiting kind of moral disagreement is not simply one in which both sides run out of reasons that are persuasive to the other but is also a disagreement in which coming to the other side brings along an appreciation of *its* reasons. The three chapters of part I constitute an argument that a naturalistic and pluralistic conception of morality best accounts for the nature of moral ambivalence.

Many of the ideas for the first three chapters of this book were originally expressed in less developed form in "Pluralistic Relativism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 20 (1996): 378-400; "Three Kinds of Incommensurability," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 140-58; and "Comparative Philosophy: Chinese and Western," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Rev. August 22, 2005, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/comparphil-chiwe/>.

In this chapter I introduce moral ambivalence by way of moral value pluralism: conflicts between basic moral values make especially hard cases for moral judgment. I then explain how moral ambivalence is compatible with plausible approaches to the interpretation of others' beliefs, and in particular with the most plausible construals of the principle of charity. On the principle of charity, we render others intelligible by analogizing from the body of beliefs, desires, and values we ourselves have adopted. On the most plausible construals of charity, we allow that the body of our own beliefs, desires, and values is internally diverse and contains elements existing in various relations of tension with one another. These tensions can be resolved in different ways. Coming to understand others is coming to understand that one shares in common important beliefs, desires, and values, but that they can resolve the tensions among these elements in ways different from the ways we have resolved them. We can understand how others could make different choices in the face of conflicts between shared moral values. The kind of moral disagreement that poses the steepest challenge for universalism is the kind in which others share values with us but in which they have made different choices in the face of conflicts among these values. Moral ambivalence comes from an understanding and appreciation of the others' perspectives. Once we grant the reality of moral ambivalence, however, it calls for a deeper explanation than universalist theories of moralities can provide.

1.1 MORAL VALUE PLURALISM: BASIC MORAL VALUES IN TENSION WITH ONE ANOTHER

A primary source of value conflict is the fact of plural and basic moral values. "Moral value pluralism" is the doctrine that there exists a plurality of basic moral values, where such values are not derivable from or reducible to other moral values. I use 'value' here in a very broad sense to include types of obligations and duties, as well as morally desirable ends. To some, it is pretty obvious that there exists such a plurality of moral values, but the history of modern Western moral philosophy is dominated by theoretical commitments to the supremacy of one or another value. It is impossible to conclusively refute moral value monism, but there are good reasons to find the various versions of monism unpersuasive.

To begin with, the nature and source of moral claims and obligations appear to be diverse and resistant to reduction. Consider Thomas Nagel's classification of five different sources of value:¹ first, specific obligations to other people or institutions that depend on some special relation to the person or institution in question; second, constraints on action deriving from general rights that everyone has, such as rights to liberty of certain kinds or freedom from assault or coercion;² third, utility, the effects

1. Thomas Nagel, "The Fragmentation of Value," in *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 128–31.

2. Rights as a nonbasic source of value can be justified instrumentally as promoting utility or relationship and community, as shall be discussed in chapter 3.

of what one does on everyone's welfare; fourth, perfectionist ends or values, such as the intrinsic value of scientific or artistic achievements and creations; and fifth, commitment to one's own projects and undertakings.

One reason why each kind of value appears to be irreducibly basic is that it is easy to see deep tensions between the projects of realizing all of them. To take a well-known pluralist theme from Isaiah Berlin, we can envision no utopia in which the maximal realizations of these different sorts of value are made compatible with each other.³ Therefore, if a morality prescribes a set of values to be realized or observed in human life, it must specify priorities to govern cases of conflict between these values, for example, when honoring individual rights conflicts with promotion of social utility, when an obligation based on friendship or kinship or another kind of special relation conflicts with honoring a right based on someone's humanity or with the promotion of social utility. A Chinese Confucian morality, for example, is partly distinguished by the way it places comparatively greater importance on duties arising from kinship when these come into conflict with duties to nonkin or considerations of public justice.⁴

In recognition of this fact, the anthropologist Ruth Benedict found virtues to appreciate in radically different ways of life and concluded: "It is most unlikely that even the best society will be able to stress in one social order all the virtues we prize in human life."⁵ Note the "we" in Benedict's phrase "the virtues we prize." This suggests a common universe of values from which cultures must select a few to emphasize. If Benedict is right, and no one culture could possibly avoid sacrificing some things that human beings prize while it gives emphasis to other things, then a plurality of different cultures could provide legitimate satisfaction and sustenance to human beings, and in that sense be worthy of respect.

There are other fundamental conflicts that should be taken into account but are not mentioned by Nagel. He leaves off the list those values having to do with different stances that human beings might take toward the natural world, for example, the stance of striving for attunement to it versus the stance of mastering it. Consider the controversy in anthropology as to how to interpret magical rites as practiced by some tribal peoples such as the Azande. These divination rites, which in one form involved poisoning a chicken and seeing whether it lived or died after a certain question was asked, were used to get guidance on crucial matters, such as whether to build a house

3. Isaiah Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, ed. Henry Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 212–7.

4. *Analects* 13.18 presents Confucius responding to the story of Upright Gong, who turned his father in for stealing a sheep. Among his people, Confucius says, upright fathers and sons cover up for one another. I do not take this passage as justifying the concealment of all kinds of crime committed by one's father or son, but it certainly represents the great importance placed on filial loyalty with Confucian morality and within the traditional Chinese culture as a whole.

5. Ruth Benedict, *Patterns of Culture* (New York: Penguin, 1934), 229.

or clear a plot of ground for seed, when there was the possibility that a witch might wreak some mischief.

The earliest interpretations construed these rites as rivals to science, misguided attempts to predict and control nature.⁶ Later interpretations construed them as having another purpose altogether—that of expressing or symbolizing certain social values.⁷ On the later interpretations we should be prepared to impute to the Azande a conception of rational acceptability for beliefs that is different from one aimed toward prediction and control—a conception that is intelligible in relation to a symbolic or expressive purpose. Peter Winch argued that the Zande rites constitute a “form of expression” that provides the individual the opportunity to reflect on how “the life he lives, his relations with his fellows, his chances for acting decently or doing evil, all spring from his relation to his crops.” More specifically, Zande rites express the recognition that “one’s life is subject to contingencies” and constitute a drama in which there are ways of dealing symbolically “with misfortunes and their disruptive effect on man’s relations with his fellows.”⁸

Charles Taylor presents a plausible assessment of the conflict between the older and later interpretations. It is a mistake, he claims, to assume that one or the other interpretation is correct. It is even mistaken, he further argues, to point out that the Zande rites can have both practical and expressive purposes, as if there were two separable purposes for them. The distinction between the two purposes may be an artifact of our conception of rationality and not theirs. Their conception of rationality is one that makes no distinction between understanding the universe and coming into attunement with it. Speaking from within the perspective of this conception, Taylor writes:

We don’t understand the order of things without understanding our place in it, because we are part of this order. And we cannot understand the order and our place in it without loving it, without seeing its goodness, which is what I want to call being in attunement with it. Not being in attunement with it is a sufficient condition of not understanding it, for anyone who genuinely understands must love it; and not understanding it is incompatible with being in attunement with it, since this presupposes understanding.⁹

Taylor believes Plato articulated a striving for attunement and that the European cultural tradition embodied it until the advent of modern science. The beliefs of the

Mbuti of Central Africa provide a vivid contemporary example of this striving. These hunter-gatherers regard the forest as sacred, the source of their existence, of all goodness. They talk, shout, whisper, and sing to the forest, addressing it as mother or father or both, referring to its goodness and its ability to cure or “make good.”¹⁰

Modern science has prompted many to reject this view of the world as the possible object of attunement. Only then was it possible to make a clear-cut distinction between practical and expressive purposes. Taylor himself believes that the severance of understanding and attunement resulted in superior understanding at least of physical nature. But as he is careful to point out, it is difficult to demonstrate the absolute superiority of the modern scientific conception. Our alienation from nature grows along with our technological control of it.

Taylor seems right about the intimate connection between understanding and attunement for the Azande and for the premodern European tradition. He further seems right to point out the possibility of a “cruel dilemma” should our superior understanding be achieved at the cost of attunement. If we can understand the ideal of inhabiting a world one can love and find goodness in, it no longer appears irrational for the Azande to retain beliefs that in our own epistemology require extensive and ad hoc defense in the face of empirical disconfirmation.

While we believe that our own methods are more reliable modes of access to the world, we can recognize that the kind of access we favor is just one among the many things we value. The fact is that attunement is one of the other things still valued by many of us in societies dominated by modern science. Some of us, including significant numbers of scientists, retain a belief in the world’s goodness in such a way that its basis is placed beyond empirical disconfirmation, or so some of us hope. This requires a nonliteral interpretation of older beliefs such as those about Creation that traditionally have accompanied the value of attunement in Western cultures. Others retain a literal interpretation and dispute the idea that such beliefs have ever been threatened by empirical disconfirmation. On the other side, the Azande or the Mbuti do get around in their worlds and accomplish their ends. They have a very sure grasp of causal relations on the level of daily life.

The Azande, therefore, value reliable access to the world in ways we can perfectly comprehend, and we can also understand their magical rites in analogy to premodern modes of thought that are at the roots of current Western cultures. We can understand the difference between the Azande and us as concerning the relative dominance of values in question—attunement versus the mastery found in prediction and control. However, we must understand that in articulating a difference over the relative dominance of two values, we are conceiving them to be distinct and separable, and our way of understanding the difference between them and us is itself another difference.

6. See for example, Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 3rd ed. (London: MacMillan, 1936).

7. J. M. Beattie, for example, asserts that Trobriand canoe magic expresses the importance of canoe building for Trobrianders and that the blood pact ritual emphasizes the need for mutual support between parties. See his *Other Cultures* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

8. Peter Winch, “Understanding a Primitive Society,” in *Rationality*, ed. Bryan Wilson (New York: Harper, 1970), 100, 104–5.

9. Charles Taylor, “Rationality,” in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 95–6.

10. See Colin Turnbull, *The Human Cycle* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 30.

There is another kind of value difference that Nagel's typology allows for but does not highlight. It is very much a salient conflict as we survey human cultures in the twenty-first century. My earlier work on relativism exemplified a contrast between two types of moralities, one of them having at its center the duties arising from the value of community (which I mean to cover relationships to particular others as well as to groups of varying sizes), and the other having at its center the rights persons have purely as individuals.¹¹ In the former type, for example, under Confucian morality, family relationships form a central portion of the good of individuals, and many of their most urgent duties are directed toward sustaining such relationships. In the latter type, individuals are seen as having interests (i.e., the interest in privacy) that need to be defended against others, even those who stand in important relationships to them (a parent's concern for the well-being of an adult child might lead him to invade her privacy). One might contrast these moralities by saying that in one kind relationship is the dominant focus, while autonomy is the dominant focus in the other kind.

This contrast, however, is meant to be consistent with the fact that the value of relationship and community is a part of Western moral traditions. Indeed, much communitarian criticism of liberal political philosophy would not have the force it does unless these themes were part of Western traditions. These traditions are distinct in the centrality they accord to notions of autonomy and individual rights, not by the absence of these other values. When values of relationship and autonomy conflict in the West, there is a comparatively greater tendency to give priority to autonomy.

1.2 HOW MORAL VALUE PLURALISM CAN PROVIDE AN ALTERNATIVE TO "RADICAL DIFFERENCE" ARGUMENTS FOR RELATIVISM

The typical differences between actual moralities lie in the way they respond to such common conflicts of basic values. Note that this characterization of the differences between moralities allows them to share at least some values even if not all of them. Differences between moralities do not typically consist in radical difference: one set of values confronting another totally different set. It is often thought, in contrast to the view defended here, that relativism depends on the assertion of radical difference between moralities. The relativist reasoning, supposedly, is that judging other moralities on the basis of one's own is inappropriate. There is no point in comparing moralities that are radically different.

Such an account raises awkward questions. If the differences between moralities are so stark and complete, it is unclear why we should call the other code a *moral* code. To think of a system of norms as a morality, even when it is completely different from one's own morality, one would have to adopt a purely formal notion of what a morality

is. On such an account, a morality is simply the system of norms to which its members subscribe (e.g., is the system acknowledged to be the appropriate basis for evaluation of their conduct and attitudes, or is the system they are motivated to try to satisfy). There are no restrictions on the content of the norms. One problem with this formal account of morality, however, is that more than one kind of normative system fulfills such a description. Legal systems, rules of etiquette, and norms of prudential rationality, as well as systems more comfortably labeled 'moral', fit the bill. Another move that could be made in light of this problem is to further specify that a moral system of norms is the one taken by those who subscribe to it as the system that overrides all others in case of conflict. However, this move is subject to the objection that not all people in a group for whom there is a morality would acknowledge that system as the overriding normative system for them.

A more fundamental objection to formal accounts required by radical difference relativism, however, is that such accounts merely delay performance of a necessary explanatory task. Even if we were to suppose that all or most members of a group did subscribe in the requisite sense to a system of norms and that all or most acknowledged it to be the overriding system, we still have to make sense of why they have subscribed to those norms, with whatever particular substantial content these norms have. If we find that the acknowledged, overriding system for another group bears very little resemblance with respect to substantial content to our own acknowledged, overriding system, we have a problem. If we see the adherents of that other code to be striving after things so different from what we understand ourselves to be pursuing, we might well suspect that we have not understood these people. When we seek to make sense of others, we must invoke what we think makes sense, and this includes what it makes sense to pursue and to value in the world. This point, in fact, illustrates something fundamental about the nature of interpreting and understanding others. Inevitably, we must use ourselves as models in this task, even as we extend our imaginations and analogize from our own experience to understand people who live and are shaped by very different circumstances.¹² We do on occasion fail to understand other people. The question is whether such failures of understanding can constitute a forceful case for relativism. The problem is that the less we understand others, the less their way of life appears to be a *rival* to our own. If we don't understand how their way of life could be attractive to human beings, it is difficult to conceive of it as *competing* with our own.

The difficulties with using incomprehension as a basis for relativism are illustrated by an argument given by Samuel Fleischacker. He argues that we can understand others just well enough to know that we don't understand them.¹³ His "moderate"

12. See chap. 8 of *Moral Relativity* and my "Three Kinds of Incommensurability," in *Relativism: Interpretation and Confrontation*, ed. Michael Krausz (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 140–58.

13. Samuel Fleischacker, *Integrity and Moral Relativism* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

11. See *Moral Relativity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), chap. 9.

version of "cultural relativism" has roots in Wittgenstein's view that knowledge depends on a background of shared assumptions and standards of evidence. "World pictures" are embedded within cultures. Our world picture involves not only a distinctive set of beliefs about the world but also an ordering of interests that determines how we go about trying to have reliable beliefs. This ordering differs from those dominant in other cultures. We in the West have given precedence to our interests in "egalitarian knowledge" (wanting and believing that people have roughly equal access to the truth) and in prediction and control of this-worldly objects, while others have given precedence to an interest in eternal life and in both wanting and believing that certain people have special access to knowledge. Such differences may render us unable to prove to others that they are wrong, and indeed, unable to fully understand why they value the interests they do. Nevertheless, we understand that they do value these interests highly, and we think they are wrong to do so. We make such judgments despite our merely partial understanding because "we tend to see a certain set of interests as the proper guide for a minimally decent and/or sensible human life."¹⁴

While I think it is entirely possible for us to understand others just enough to realize that we do not fully understand them, it remains puzzling why we should blithely pass the judgment that they have made a mistake *precisely with respect to the matter we do not fully understand*. Consider Fleischacker's example about a Western-educated woman who has converted to fundamentalist Islam. To the charge that she has forsaken her own reflectiveness in order to convert, Fleischacker has her ask what we have gained from our reflectiveness and the institutions that uphold it:

Despair of having any purpose in life, a science unrestrained by moral considerations, and in consequence a violent youth culture, broken marriages, and nuclear weapons. With such a record, who are you to complain of the violence in my tradition? And what with your televisions, and your mind-deadening jobs on assembly lines and at computer terminals, you have dubious claim even to intellectual advantages over us, at least as far as the bulk of your society is concerned.¹⁵

If we accept Fleischacker's assumption that we do not fully understand why the woman would value the benefits of not being reflective in the way Westerners value, it seems presumptuous to judge her *mistaken*. Perhaps she understands something that we don't. Indeed, it is not clear why the woman is any less reflective in *our* way of being reflective, given the retort that Fleischacker attributes to her.¹⁶

Fleischacker's example fails to illustrate the merely partial understanding he has in mind. The Islamic woman's retort to Western criticism has force for us (presents a

14. Fleischacker, *Integrity*, 71.

15. Fleischacker, *Integrity*, 18–9.

16. Thanks to Owen Flanagan for this point.

genuinely rival way of life) precisely to the extent that we *understand* it and *share* some of the values underlying it.¹⁷ Even if we prefer our way of life, with all its costs and failings, we may think that the woman has a substantial reason for choosing another way of life. The same holds true for cultures emphasizing the value of attunement as discussed earlier.

1.3 THE JUDICIOUS APPLICATION OF CHARITY

Such an understanding of the two examples supports Donald Davidson's principle of charity. This principle, under his influential construal, says that we must interpret others on the assumption that they are rational beings, talking about and navigating "the same world" as we are. Otherwise, we shall not be able to interpret them at all as holding beliefs or making intelligible utterances. Charity directs us to "optimize" agreement between them and ourselves where ever it is plausible to do so. The idea is to make them "right, as far we can tell, as often as possible."¹⁸

Charity, Davidson explains, does not enjoin us from attributing intelligible error. As our interpretation of others takes shape, we might find that it makes better sense to attribute mistakes to them, given our emerging conception of how they are interacting with the objects of their beliefs. However, there is a limit to such attribution. To attribute massive error to them is to undermine a crucial assumption of interpretation: that they are forming beliefs about the same world we are. If we were to attribute to ancients the belief that the earth is flat and, what is more, virtually none of the other beliefs we have about the earth, we would undermine the assumption that they have beliefs at all about the earth.¹⁹

17. Consider that Seyyid (or Sayyid) Qutb, perhaps the most influential Islamist fundamentalist of the twentieth century and a staple of the Islamic education of generations of jihadists, both moderate and extreme, peaceful and violent, was preparing to take his place among the liberal, Western-oriented Egyptian elite when he visited the United States for two and a half years. He was repulsed by its racism toward Arabs, its preoccupation with pleasure and material interest, and the cultural encouragement it gave to women to leave what he saw as their proper roles of bringing up children "merely to be attractive, sexy and flirtatious," to use "their ability for material productivity rather than the training of human beings, because material production is considered to be more important, more valuable and more honourable than the development of human character." See Seyyid Qutb, *Milestones* (Damascus, Syria: Kazi, 1993), 97–8. Egalitarians on the left in the West can find much to agree with in Qutb's criticism of the consumerist materialism and glaring inequalities in Western societies, while Christian fundamentalists may find much to agree with in his criticism of sexual permissiveness and gender equality ideals. Consider the Christian evangelist Jerry Falwell's statement that the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and Washington D.C., were God's judgment on America: "I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People for the American Way, all of them who try to secularize America . . . I point the thing in their face and say you helped this happen." A transcript of his remarks on the "700 Club" telecast on Sept 13, 2001, is available at www.truthorfiction.com/rumors/f/falwell-robertson-wtc.htm.

18. Donald Davidson, "Radical Interpretation," in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 136.

19. Donald Davidson, "Thought and Talk," in *Inquiries*, 168.

Davidson notes that in his earlier work on interpretation, he tended to construe charity in terms of "maximizing" agreement in belief and that a more perspicuous statement of what he had in mind all along is that agreement in beliefs should be "optimized."²⁰ Rather than the "most" agreement, we need the "right sort" of agreement that enables understanding of others. We should try to reach agreement "as far as possible, subject to considerations of simplicity, hunches about the effects of social conditioning, and of course our common-sense, or scientific, knowledge of explicable error."²¹ Explicable error, as Davidson recognized, might not be best explained by making most of others' beliefs true. Social conditioning might also have the effect of ramifying rather than minimizing the ways that others believe differently from us.

Matters become further complicated with the recognition that it is agreement not just in belief that must be optimized but also in the desires, values, and intentions we attribute to others, since we must understand their behaviors not only in relation to what they believe about the world but also in relation to what they want of it, value in it, and intend to do in it.²² To make sense of the actions of others, we construe these actions as stemming from intentions, which in turn stem from certain patterns of beliefs, desires, and values. Some patterns make others intelligible to us, and others don't. However, such ways of making sense of others do not prevent us from attributing to them some desires, values, and intentions that are different from ours. For example, I accept that others want and value the having of power over people, even though the idea does not hold much appeal to me. For such reasons, Davidson was right to put some distance between "optimizing" and "maximizing" agreement as a necessary condition for making sense of others.

The earlier and less plausible "maximizing" version of charity shows up in an argument of David Cooper's against moral relativism. David Cooper holds that "We can only identify another's beliefs as moral beliefs about X if there is a massive degree of agreement between his and our beliefs." His conclusion is that the principle of charity refutes any significant form of moral relativism. It is difficult to disagree with Cooper's point that a moral belief must have for its subject matter something connected with "welfare, happiness, suffering, security, and the good life."²³ We would have strong reason to suspect our interpretation of another beliefs as moral beliefs if we were to construe them as having *nothing to do* with welfare, happiness, suffering, security, and the good life. This is not the same as refuting the possibility of significant differences over what is believed about these subjects. Quite a lot depends on how one

20. Donald Davidson, introduction to *Inquiries*, xix; "Radical Interpretation," 136.

21. Donald Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in *Inquiries*, 196.

22. I am going to remain neutral, for the purposes of this chapter, on the question of how to understand a person's values in relation to her beliefs and desires, whether they are beliefs, desires, or some combination thereof.

23. David E. Cooper, "Moral Relativism," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 3 (1978): 101, 104. I discuss this kind of argument in my *Moral Relativity*, 114–6.

applies Cooper's requirement that there be a "massive degree of agreement" between our moral beliefs and those of another person. It seems arbitrary to say that among competing interpretations of another person's beliefs, the best interpretation is the one that simply produces the greatest *number* of overlapping beliefs, even if one had confidence in one's ability to count beliefs, which I do not. This is one of the correct reasons, I believe, why Davidson corrected his earlier statements of the principle of charity, from maximization to optimization.

Michele Moody-Adams gives a more recent formulation of Cooper's argument, starting with the premise that understanding others requires that there be "quite substantial agreement about many of the basic concepts that are relevant to moral reflection."²⁴ She then leaps to the conclusion that "ultimate" or "fundamental" moral disagreement is not possible.²⁵ To validate this conclusion, she must hold that disagreement over concepts relevant to moral reflection is limited to "nonultimate" or "nonfundamental" concepts. This seems a coherent stance to take, but cannot be derived in a priori fashion from a principle of charitable interpretation of others, as Moody-Adams attempts to do. Why must groups have moral beliefs only if they have precisely the same stock of "basic" moral concepts as we do? It would seem sufficient to have agreement on some critical mass, would it not, however the threshold is defined? And with respect to any one basic concept relevant to moral reflection, such as justice,²⁶ what counts as having the same concept? It seems that two groups might have sufficiently different conceptions of justice that it would be truer to say that they have two overlapping but different concepts of justice. Furthermore, when the values of justice and compassion conflict, making sense of others does not require us to interpret them as setting precisely the same value priorities as we do. This kind of disagreement can qualify as a fundamental disagreement even as it presupposes a sharing of values.

A Davidsonian principle of charity, properly interpreted as calling for optimization rather than maximization, cannot possibly resolve these questions by itself because the requirement of optimization itself requires interpretation. In illustrating this point, Henry Richardson has pointed out that interpreting a philosophical text requires taking account of the cognitive aims the authors had in writing what they did. Is it more charitable, Richardson asks, for a translator of Machiavelli's *The Prince* to resolve ambiguities and seek to maximize agreement between Machiavelli and the relevant audience? Or is it more charitable to set him out as intentionally provocative and deliberately cryptic?²⁷

24. Michele M. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork in Familiar Places: Morality, Culture, and Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 55.

25. Moody-Adams, *Fieldwork*, 56.

26. Justice and compassion were examples of some basic concepts given by Moody-Adams in "The Idea of Moral Progress," *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999): 168–85.

27. Henry S. Richardson, *Practical Reasoning about Final Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 268–9.

The answer to such questions can only be supplied within a larger context of inquiry: the attempt to explain that person and her actions. In such a larger context, attribution of beliefs different from ours may be more or less reasonable depending on how it fits into a reasonable explanation of that person. And what counts as a reasonable explanation of a particular person will be set within the context of one's larger theories about persons and societies, among other things. One's explanation of a person can reasonably attribute error and false belief on an indefinite number of important matters that might even deserve to be called "fundamental," as long as it seems plausible to attribute error to him in his epistemic situation as we construe it.

Similarly, it might be reasonable to allow a large degree of overlap between the moral concepts of different cultures without insisting on an identity in the stock of moral concepts available to different cultures. Two moral concepts can overlap in meaning yet not be identical. Another common cause of what reasonably could be called "fundamental" moral disagreement is that different priorities are set between important values when they come into conflict. We can understand that the moral codes of others confront familiar tensions between values that we ourselves recognize as important, but we do not have to understand these others as setting the same priorities in the face of these tensions. This is consistent with optimizing agreement between them and us, where the evidence dictates that they are not exactly like us.

1.4 CONFUCIAN EXAMPLES OF THE FAMILIAR YET DIFFERENT

The way we understand others by modeling them after ourselves is more like the way we use analogies to understand others. I stress analogies because they highlight similarities between others and us while allowing for significant differences. To see some illustrations of understanding through analogy, consider three significant and distinctive features of the Confucian ethic as it is represented in classical works of Chinese philosophy, primarily the *Analects*.²⁸ We understand these features through noting their similarity with themes we find to be familiar and present in our own culture, but as with all analogies, the similarities coexist with significant differences. In all three cases, I shall claim, we have little reluctance to accept the differences.

The first feature is the centrality of *xiao*, usually translated as "filial piety." It is a common feature of many cultures that one should honor thy father and mother, of course, and it is not difficult to find analogies within American society to Confucian filial piety. At the same time, the Confucian tradition is unusual in the stringency of its duties to parents. *Analects* 2.7 identifies the requirements of *xiao* as going beyond

28. A discussion of these examples is contained in my "Where Charity Begins," in *Davidson's Philosophy and Chinese Philosophy: Constructive Engagement*, ed. Bo Mou (Leiden: Brill Academic, forthcoming).

providing parents material support when they are elderly but more fundamentally showing that it's not just about giving them food (supporting them when elderly) but *jing*—originally conceived as an attitude one should have when sacrificing to ancestors, an attitude of devotion to carrying out great responsibilities to one's ancestral spirits. *Analects* 2.8 amplifies the nature of *jing* in saying that the young should take on the burden when there's work to be done and let the old enjoy the wine and food, but that hardly deserves to be called filial. It's the expression on one's face or demeanor that is difficult to manage.

The scope of duties to parents includes taking care of what they alone could have given one—one's body. Cengzi, one of Confucius's students, is portrayed in *Analects* 8.3 as gravely ill and near death. He bids his students to look at his hands and feet, and quotes lines from the *Book of Poetry* to convey the idea that all his life he has been keeping his body intact as part of his duty to his parents. It is only now near death, he says, that he can be sure of having been spared and thus fulfilling this duty to parents. This very idea, that one must keep one's body intact as a duty of gratitude to one's parents, has remained a central idea in Chinese culture.

Why is *xiao* so central a virtue in the Confucian ethic? Part of the reason seems to be a view about its centrality to the development of ethical character. In *Analects* 1.2, one of Confucius's most prominent students, Youzi, says that being good as a son and obedient as a young man (meaning that one is obedient to one's elder brothers) is perhaps the root of character, the basis of respect for authority outside the family. One learns respect for others first by learning it for those within the family. Another part of the reason for the centrality given to filial piety is the need to express gratitude to those who have given one life and nurture. In *Analects* 17.21, Zaiwo objects to the traditional length of mourning for one's deceased parents. One year is enough to disrupt one's normal life in those ways, but the traditional period of three years is too long, he says. Confucius comments on Zaiwo's lack of feeling in this regard. All children are completely dependent on their parents for the first three years of life, he observes. Did not Zaiwo receive three years' worth of love from his parents?

The virtue and its rationale have analogues in American culture. We can certainly recognize the themes of gratitude, the need to reciprocate in some fashion for great gifts received, and the conception of family relationships as pivotal in the development of character. Such similarities of theme, however, seem to underdetermine the centrality of filial piety and the stringency of its duties in Confucianism and in the larger traditional culture. While we recognize such rationales for filial piety, we generally do not accord it nearly as central a place in the catalogue of moral virtues, nor do we conceive its duties to be so stringent. And the theme that one owes one's body to one's parents and that it is deep ingratitude not to take care of such a great gift is something that can be understood from an American perspective, but is not generally accepted.

Do such differences suggest that we have not correctly understood Confucianism or traditional Chinese culture? I submit that we accept such differences as part of the

normal range of human possibility, perhaps because we can imagine ourselves having taken a path we have not taken. The themes of gratitude, reciprocity, and the importance of the family in moral development are familiar to Americans and at the same time have the potential for justifying a value of respecting parents that is far more stringent than the one many Americans accept. And indeed, taking the Confucian perspective, an American might come to have the strange feeling that that perspective makes more sense.

Consider another significant feature of Confucian ethics: its inclusion of an aesthetic dimension in its conception of a good and worthwhile life. Right action in Confucian is fitting action. It expresses appropriate care and respect for others in a manner that befits the nature of one's social relationship to them and to other, more particular features of their situation and one's own. There are often conventional forms for the expression of these ethical attitudes, ritual forms called *li*. To fashion oneself into a better person is to become practiced in the performance of such *li* such that they become second nature, but they must always express the appropriate attitudes. To attain the proper balance between form and feeling is to ennoble and beautify human nature. Antonio Cua's translation of a passage from Xunzi puts the point nicely: "human nature provides raw material, and constructive human effort is responsible for the glorification and flourishing of elegant form and orderly expression. Without constructive human effort, human nature cannot beautify itself."²⁹

It is instructive that Cua draws analogies to the perception of qualities in works of art, likening the grace or joy that can be seen in accomplished ritual activity to the grace of a curve in a painting or joy in a piece of music.³⁰ David Hall and Roger Ames observe that the Confucian notion of the 'right' action has much in common with the artist's choice of the 'right' brush or the 'right' color in the execution of a painting.³¹ For the Confucian, doing the right thing not only means doing one's duty—and not just for the right reason, and not just with the right feeling, but also with the proper grace and elegance that is both an aesthetic end in itself and bespeaks the ease and contentment of one who has attained the virtues and realized her humanity. These uses of analogy help to make intelligible the aesthetic dimension of Confucian ethics, but they also illustrate how analogy can help. They take what is familiar to us in one context (in this case, painting or music) and point to its occurrence in a different context. The analogy illuminates if we can conceive of the familiar taking place in that different context.

The third feature of Confucian virtue ethics is its emphasis on harmonious relationships as a central part of the ethical life, as illustrated by the *Analects* on an adult's

relation to her parents. Notice that in *Analects* 1.2, the crucial dimension of moral development that is started in the family is respect for authority. The strong Chinese preference for harmony emerges in 2.6, where the Master says one should give parents no cause for anxiety except for illness. Consider 4.18, where Confucius considers occasions on which one's own opinions as to what is right or best can conflict with one's parents' wishes. One should remonstrate with one's parents gently, he says. The value placed on harmony, as indicated by 4.18, does not require silence in the face of real disagreement with one's superiors. Indeed, the Confucian tradition celebrates the scholar-intellectual who says what he thinks about the ruler's methods and ends, often to the ruler's face. However, the ends served by such moral courage include the end of harmony. Rulers who fail to govern for the good of the community, the state, and the nation must be called to account precisely for the good of all.

Someone must have the authority to settle conflicts, if only in the sense of saying whose view prevails this time. Human beings have yet to invent a society without having to designate such authority and to inculcate some degree of respect for it. The reasons for preferring harmony are quite intelligible, but here again, the reasons undetermine the degree of preference for it manifested in the culture: for example, informal negotiation involving interaction and reconciliation between the contending parties is still the traditional way of resolving business disputes in China; informal mediation committees operate to resolve disputes at the grassroots rural village and urban neighborhood levels; and Chinese courts encourage mediation between contending parties even after litigation proceedings have begun.

That Chinese culture should show this high degree of preference for harmony does not seem to threaten its intelligibility to those on the outside. Why? Some preference for harmony exists on the American side of the comparison, to which analogy can be made, however major the differences the analogy leaves in place. The American side, after all, embraces a significantly diverse range of subcultures in which a high degree of preference for harmony is shown. These subcultures include, of course, Chinese American and other Asian American subcultures, as well as Latino and Mexican American subcultures. Moreover, the various European-descended subcultures of American society have in the past demonstrated a stronger preference for family harmony and cooperation within various levels of community than they do now. It is in part this internal diversity that helps to make Confucian values intelligible as a path we ourselves could and in some cases have taken.

So far, I have been assuming that the relevant reference point for understanding Confucianism is the contemporary American perspective, and up until the previous paragraph I have assumed that this perspective is more or less unified. Of course, that is false. In reality, we treat such perspectives as unified only for the sake of certain comparisons, for the sake of certain comparative purposes. In other contexts, and for other purposes, we make much ado about the differences. The unification is at best relative to the purpose of understanding a presumably distant culture that is more difficult to comprehend. The 'us' in the comparison between them and us is diverse,

29. Antonio S. Cua, "The Ethical and Religious Dimensions of *Li*," *Review of Metaphysics* 55 (2002): 481, translating from Dishen Li, *Xunzi jishi* (Taipei: Zueshong, 1979), 439.

30. Cua, "Ethical and Religious Dimensions," 483.

31. David L. Hall and Roger T. Ames, "Chinese Philosophy," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. Craig. Rev. 1998. Available at www.rep.routledge.com/article/G001SECT4.

and such diversity provides some of the analogies we use to make sense of 'them'. This raises the question of how this diverse group became 'us' in the first place.

If we are limited to beginning from our individual selves as models for understanding others, it seems quite unlikely that we could get the range of beliefs, desires, and values that we take for granted even within relatively small circles. I accept that some people are attracted to holding power and exercising it over others, even though my own psychology does not bear much resemblance to theirs in this respect. I accept that some of my students believe in the extreme libertarianism of Ayn Rand, even though there is an inevitable point where I fail to follow their thought processes when they explain them to me. I accept that some people believe that they have been abducted by alien beings, even though there is very little from my own experience that I could use to illuminate whatever experience and thought processes could have led to such a belief. I suggest that our self-understandings comprehend significant diversity because the very concepts we use to interpret both ourselves and others embody diversity in what we value and in how much we value it relative to other values.

1.5 MORAL AMBIVALENCE

Understanding others is therefore compatible with understanding them to be different from us in significant ways. Understanding other moral codes and the ways of life in which they are embedded is not to see them as alien and incomprehensible but in some respects familiar and in other respects constituting a challenge to our own codes and ways of life. Since we ourselves are complex and ambivalent moral beings, we are able to see that at least some other codes and ways of life may just as reasonably be adopted by decent and informed human beings as our own. We can recognize significant overlaps of value between cultures, contrary to Fleischacker's argument, and yet not collapse them all into one, contrary to Moody-Adams's argument. Neither sameness nor difference should obscure the other from view.

This complexity and ambivalence over the priorities to be given in case of conflict among plural values is reflected in our own moral traditions. For example, the source of disagreement in the United States over the moral permissibility of abortion seems not so much to be a difference in the ultimate moral principles held by opposing sides as partly a difference over the applicability of a commonly held principle requiring the protection of human life and partly a difference over the relative weight to be given in the circumstances to another widely held principle requiring the protection of individual autonomy. Philippa Foot has also suggested that there is no one universally acceptable moral principle concerning what to do when the interests of the individual and those of the community clash. Consider, for example, the decision between treating a cancer patient so that she will have the best chances of survival versus the course of action that, through knowledge gained, will enable doctors to save the most patients in the end. Foot believes that "we ourselves" would strongly object to using a patient for the benefit of others, but that it is unclear how one could rule out of court a strict

utilitarian view that would allow such things.³² This seems to be a conflict between the values of individual rights and utility, although I am not sure whether there is as much unanimity among "ourselves" as Foot seems to presume. As the recent debate over health care has emphasized, doctors face the prospect of having to "ration" care because of the increasing cost of medical technology. Many of us are reluctantly endorsing such a move, and it is not clear to me how we could rationalize such a move except on the utilitarian grounds that more people, or more people with more of their lives ahead of them, are helped. Therefore, serious value conflict occurs within a moral tradition not just in the sense that different strands of that tradition conflict but also in the sense that individuals can and do subscribe to both strands and feel within themselves the conflict.

Another example involves tensions between what Nagel calls impersonal values, such as rights and utility on the one hand and the duties arising from special relations with particular people and communities and from personal commitments and projects on the other. We do face serious conflicts between the need to address the severe deprivation and violations of rights in our own country or across the world on the one hand and tending to our special obligations to particular others and to our own projects and commitments on the other.

These sorts of conflict pose special difficulties because we can understand both sides. Even if we are firm in taking a side, we can understand that something of moral value is lost when we act on that side, and the loss is of such a nature that we cannot simply dismiss it as a regrettable though justifiable result of the right decision. This is no mere psychological phenomenon of being torn between different possible ways of addressing value conflicts. It is a problem in moral epistemology. We see that reasonable and knowledgeable people could have made different decisions, and any prior convictions we might have had about the superiority of our own decisions get shaken. Such conflicts between values in our own moral traditions help us to understand how other traditions might have embodied different priorities in similar conflicts.

And lest we think that this sort of ambivalence within a society is just an outcome of the heterogeneity and pluralism of modern Western democracies, consider an example from Samoa given by the anthropologist Brad Shore. Following the violent murder of his father, a young man receives public counsel from a village pastor in formal Samoa that he must resist the temptation to avenge his father's death, and keep in mind the values of peace and harmony and forgiveness. Yet later this same pastor, this time in colloquial Samoan, warned the young man that if he *failed* to kill the murderer of his father, he would not be his father's son. Shore doesn't draw the conclusion that the pastor is a hypocrite or confused. Rather, he concludes that the pastor's two pieces of conflicting advice illustrate the difficulty that any society has in making rigid choices between competing values. The pastor expresses both the value of

32. Philippa Foot, "Morality and Art," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 56 (1970): 133.

social harmony in a community threatened by civil war and the value of filial piety and evening scores. What is culturally particular is the way each society attempts to partially resolve such conflicts between values by emphasizing one or the other value. The value not emphasized may recede into the background but may nevertheless appear in ethical discourse.³³

Another example concerns the contrast between moralities oriented toward rights as a basic source of value and moralities oriented toward relationships and community. Rights as a basic source of value have in the West come to be conceived as owed to individuals independently of their potential contributions to any community. That is why a central kind of right protects against interference from others. A characteristic justification for rights is the idea that the individual's morally legitimate interests should be protected in case of conflicts with communal interests. Let me associate the value of "autonomy" with these ideas that rights have an independent justification apart from the individual's contribution to community and that rights are needed to protect the individual's morally legitimate interests in case of conflict with communal interests. In contrast to autonomy, the value of community concerns the goods of a shared life of relationships and what is required of individuals to maintain that shared life. A morality centered on the value of community need not be construed as denying that individuals have morally legitimate interests, but the individual's welfare is conceived as lying in proper relationship to the community, in a kind of harmonization between the individual and the community.

Autonomy and community often function as counterpoints to *each other*, in that one value is asserted against the other value because it is seen as addressing the liabilities of asserting the other value strongly. Autonomy gets asserted against the sort of collective responsiveness to individual need that can be a great benefit of community when that responsiveness turns into the liability of oppressive suffocation or an alienating exclusion of those who fall from good standing. On the other side, community gets asserted against the barriers to intervention afforded by autonomy when this benefit blocks responsiveness to need. The U.S. moral tradition, I believe, exhibits this kind of dynamic between autonomy and community, and compared to many Asian traditions, gives far greater priority to rights as the expression of individual autonomy, but the presence of the value of community is nevertheless real even if relatively recessive. Indeed, much of the appeal of communitarian critiques of the U.S. tradition lies in its pointing to the receding nature of community and its alleged result of decreasing responsiveness to individual need.

Sometimes "cultures" are thought to be rather simple affairs in which people share the same values and practices and ways of making meaning of their worlds. I want to suggest that a culture can to some extent consist of commonly recognized values, but

that these values provide a counterpoint to one another. The identity of a culture is in part defined by which values are the most salient and which ones serve as counterpoints to others. A shared culture just is this dynamic configuration of values, but the configuration typically leaves a significant degree of openness and ambiguity in how conflicts between values are to be resolved. This is one important reason why moral ambivalence exists not only across different moral traditions but also within a single moral tradition. Values correspond to compelling human needs and derive much of their force from the satisfaction of those needs. But because human beings are many-sided and not necessarily harmonious wholes with respect to their needs, there will always be uncertainty and fluctuation as to how the needs and corresponding values are to be balanced against each other.

Cultures in part differ from one another to the extent that they provide at least partial value priorities. American culture, as I have suggested, contains both autonomy and communal themes. For example, civil liberties receive an autonomy-oriented interpretation when conceived as owed to people as individuals and are claimed against the larger society as protections against intrusive measures to advance the public interest. Civil liberties also receive community-oriented interpretations when conceived as empowering protections enabling the individual to contribute to the governance of her society as an end in itself. Liberties under this interpretation are among those goods enabling people to be and perform as good citizens. However, the autonomy-oriented themes are more dominant in the United States when compared to many Asian societies. Japan is a society in which both themes are present and in which the democratic tradition receives both autonomy-oriented and community-oriented traditions, but the latter are dominant compared to, say, the United States.

For example, Kenneth Winston has observed that police and prosecutors in Japan have the power to hold a suspect for interrogation for extended periods, in some instances up to twenty-three days, before filing charges. The exclusion of confessions obtained under such circumstances is very rare and virtually unheard-of in cases where a guilty person would go free as a result. Such practices are at odds with the right to silence embodied in the new constitution adopted by Japan after World War II, a constitution largely written by U.S. occupation forces. The actual powers granted to police and prosecutors reflect social norms that make confession the morally expected form of conduct, a moral duty owed to other citizens and an expectation shared by the public at large, as well as police, prosecutors, and judges.³⁴ Indeed, as John Haley observes, the vast majority of accused criminals in Japan confess, display repentance, negotiate for their victims' pardon, and submit to the mercy of the authorities.³⁵

34. Kenneth Winston, "On the Ethics of Exporting Ethics: The Right to Silence in Japan and the U.S.," *Criminal Justice Ethics* 22 (2003): 6-7.

35. John Owen Haley, "Confession, Repentance and Absolution," in *Mediation and Criminal Justice: Victims, Offenders and Community*, ed. Martin Wright and Burt Galaway (London: Sage, 1989), 195. Quoted in Winston, "On the Ethics of Exporting Ethics," 5.

33. Brad Shore, "Human Ambivalence and the Structuring of Moral Values," *Ethos* 18 (1990): 165-79.

Another example of difference in relative priorities appears in the film *A Great Wall*, in which a Chinese American takes his family to Beijing to visit his sister and her family. The two young people in this meeting of families, his son and her daughter, cross the cultural divide most easily, and the young woman learns the American concept of privacy, which she applies with indignation to her mother's opening and reading her mail before handing it to her. The mother reacts with incomprehension: why should she need permission to learn what is going on with her daughter? In a small and intimate way, this incident illustrates a conception of personal autonomy coming into collision with a conception of life as social relationship and shared fate. Immigrant families who have parents rooted in the mother culture and offspring rooted in a new home culture often experience a kind of ambivalence about what is gained and what is lost when new ways replace the old.

1.6 HOW MORAL AMBIVALENCE MAKES TROUBLE FOR UNIVERSALISM

Conflicts exhibiting moral ambivalence clearly constitute a challenge for universalist moral theories asserting a single true morality. The dominant response in universalist theory has rested on denying the underlying phenomenon of moral value pluralism. Much of the work of Kantians and utilitarians, for example, is aimed at showing that the apparently irreducible and potentially conflicting sources of value are reducible to one source, whether it be the goal of promoting the greatest happiness or respect for rational-natures. Consider one such conflict. Philosophers working from the impersonal perspective, from which one's actions must be rooted in the recognition that no person is more or less morally important than other persons, have tried to subsume special duties under that perspective. They argue that impersonal values are best fulfilled through the recognition and performance of these obligations.

Peter Railton attempts to subsume special obligations to family under a sophisticated act consequentialism by arguing that certain goods are reliably attainable only if people have certain enduring motivational patterns, traits, or commitments (such as those that involve acting for the good of loved ones) that sometimes override acting for the best. He gives the example of a commuting couple; the husband must decide whether to make an unscheduled trip to see his wife, who is feeling depressed. He could donate extra money to Oxfam if he does not go and thereby produce better consequences overall. The act consequentialist can allow that the husband perhaps should have the kind of character that would move him to such actions as making the trip. His overall contribution to human welfare would be less in the end if he were less devoted to his wife, "perhaps because he would become more cynical and self-centered."³⁶ Furthermore, these impersonal

goods include a plurality of mutually irreducible goods such as knowledge, friendship, solidarity, and autonomy.

Such attempted reductions of the different sources of value to one supreme source must stand examination against the kind of justifications we are strongly inclined to give for different value claims. Persuasive considerations need to be given for a theory that requires radical revision of our conceptions of what seems most morally important to us. In this spirit, it is relevant to ask how many of us would say that the rightness of devoting more of our attention and resources to loved ones should depend on the long-term consequences of such devotion to human welfare in general. How many of us really think that the rightness of taking special care of our children should depend on the making the case that it's really better for everyone if we do such things? And how many of us think that the *reason* it is right to care for our children is that it is part of a general arrangement that promotes welfare? While Railton's theory recognizes these things as irreducible goods, the rightness of claiming them for ourselves depends on whether doing so ultimately promotes such goods for all. But the claims generated by our moral ties to family members and particular others such as friends seem more basic than this. Their pull on us seems independent of their justifiability by reference to the goal of promoting impersonal good. On the other hand, when we take the impersonal perspective and are not specially concerned to show how that perspective justifies every moral value we hold dear, we see as unjustifiable many of the mundane acts of care and devotion we direct to particular others. The unjustifiability emerges when we compare what is at stake for those close to us and what is at stake for millions of people elsewhere in the world: life itself, and some small measure of human dignity in the face of brutality and degradation.³⁷ Denials of moral value pluralism run up against the widespread sense that different value claims often require different kinds of justification.

More generally, Railton's theory connects moral rightness with what would be rationally approved were the interests (naturalistically conceived) of all potentially affected individuals counted equally under circumstances of full (and perhaps vivid) information.³⁸ The doubts just raised about his approach to special duties suggest that utility is just one among competing values and that we are ambivalent about its ranking with respect to the others. Furthermore, to generate a contentful morality this view needs to assume some controversial notion of human well-being or welfare, and this notion would correspond to some specific priority set among conflicting moral values. It is no accident, I think, that monistic theories contribute very little to the resolution of genuinely controversial normative issues. They give either

37. Peter Singer articulates an eloquent and lucid defense of this point of view in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1 (1972): 229-43.

38. An example of this view is Peter Railton's, in "Moral Realism," *Philosophical Review* 95 (1986): 163-207.

36. Peter Railton, "Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984): 134-71, 159.

vague advice that fails to favor one side or another or advice that is reasonably rejected outright by those who do not already accept a rather controversial interpretation of the alleged supreme value.

Other attempts to deal with this conflict stop short of assuming moral value monism and attempt to show that definite priorities between the plural values can be established. Samuel Scheffler has distinguished two moral ideals that correspond to this conflict. On the one hand, the "Ideal of Humanity" carves out a space for us to live our own lives and makes only a moderate demand on us to meet the needs of others. On the other hand, the "Ideal of Purity" requires us to act from the impersonal viewpoint from which our lives are no more important than the lives of other human beings. Both ideals, Scheffler grants, have roots in our morality, but Humanity has "broader and deeper" roots. He argues that the Ideal of Humanity better fits our belief in the legitimacy of a space in which to live our own lives. Very rarely, he claims, does anyone question our right to have this space, except when we purchase luxuries that could have gone to meet desperate need. Further, he argues, living our own lives generates personal relationships that in turn generate special duties, so it is not just that Humanity carves out a space of moral permission for the individual. That space of permission inevitably generates its own duties. Finally, Scheffler argues that the Ideal of Humanity can accommodate to some extent the Ideal of Purity, but not the other way around. From the perspective defined by the former, one can regard the latter as a supererogatory ideal.³⁹

However, Scheffler cannot claim both that our special duties weigh in favor of the Ideal of Humanity and that we can view Purity as supererogatory. If, on the one hand, our special duties can override all other duties we have (for example, if the duty to care for our children well really does override duties we might have that require devoting most of our resources to the care of many other children in the world in desperate need) then Purity cannot be supererogatory.⁴⁰ On the other hand, if our impersonal duties to others override our special duties to particular people, then the primacy of Humanity appears implausible. Furthermore, people *do* question our right to live our own lives, and not just when our purchase of luxuries is in question. We help ourselves to goods that are hardly essential to human life, or even to a decent minimum, and some have questioned whether we ought to do so when others are in desperate need.⁴¹ We in fact should expect such questioning in a moral tradition with deep roots in early Christianity, with its radical challenge to material comfort and to partiality.

However, Scheffler is right to resist giving priority to the Ideal of Purity. Such an option would conflict with the facts that he points out: that we do believe in a space

for people to live their own lives; and that living in such a space generates special duties. The problem is that our tradition contains both strains of thought and there seems no compelling, deeper rationale for subordinating one to the other. There is, I believe, no determinate ranking within our tradition that orders these two values. On some occasions we do think there is a right answer as to how a conflict should be resolved, and we are pretty confident about what that answer is. However, we encounter troubling ambivalence often enough that theoretical attempts to provide some general resolution look unpersuasive.

Consider Richard Boyd's view that some sort of balance among plural values is at the center of the truth conditions of moral judgments.⁴² The problem lies in supporting the claim that *balance* between competing values is what the moralities of all societies and cultures *are after*. If the maximization of some values is incompatible with the maximization of other values, then some selection of values to be emphasized must be made, unless the idea is that we somehow strive to moderately satisfy all values. Even if that were possible, it seems unlikely that all societies and cultures are aiming at *that*, and not at all obvious that they *should*.

So far, I have discussed views denying moral ambivalence through asserting general priorities among values. The assumption of such an approach is that if there are resolutions to be found for conflicts between values in particular cases, these resolutions can be derived from general principles that assert priorities among values over a significant range of cases. This emphasis on deriving conclusions about particular cases from general principles represents a dominant trend in modern moral philosophy. For all their differences, the Kantian and the utilitarian both conceive ethical reasoning to be governed from the top down by the most general and abstract principles. In what I have elsewhere called "top-down reasoning," ethical judgments get deduced from general principles or at least validated by their consistency with such principles, never the other way around.⁴³ While Kant's categorical imperative does not entail substantive and specific maxims of action, acting according to such maxims is only morally permissible when they are consistent with the categorical imperative, which applies to all rational beings a priori in the conception of pure practical reason.⁴⁴ For John Stuart Mill, specific moral judgments are deduced from more general

42. See Richard Boyd, "How to Be a Moral Realist," in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 181–228. Boyd's view is a sort of consequentialism like Railton's, but he assumes that what is to be promoted is a "homeostatic cluster" of goods such as love and friendship, autonomy, and intellectual and artistic appreciation and expression. By calling them homeostatic, he means that they are mutually supporting, at least in moderation. See "How to Be a Moral Realist," 203.

43. See David B. Wong, "Crossing Cultures in Moral Psychology," *Philosophy Today* 3 (2002): 7–10, and "Reasons and Analogical Reasoning in Mengzi," in *Essays on the Moral Philosophy of Mengzi*, ed. Xiuhsing Liu and Philip J. Ivanhoe (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002), 187–220.

44. Immanuel Kant, preface of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Thomas E. Hill Jr. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

39. Samuel Scheffler, *Human Morality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

40. In fact, Scheffler provides a subtle discussion of such possible conflicts in "Families, Nations and Strangers" and "Relationships and Responsibilities," both in *Boundaries and Allegiances: Problems of Justice and Responsibility in Liberal Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

41. For example, Railton in "Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality," and Singer in "Famine, Affluence, and Morality."

goals, and ultimately the most general goal of advancing social utility. The direction of ethical justification runs from general goals to particular judgments.⁴⁵

Recently, a renewed interest in particularism has emerged in response to perceived shortcomings of the top-down models. Particularists of various theoretical persuasions share the view that moral judgments about particular cases are not primarily derived from general principles. Many particularists hark back to the Aristotelian notion of a *phronesis* or practical wisdom that depends significantly on knowledge of particulars acquired through experience. Good moral judgment, they argue, is more akin to good perception than it is to deduction from the right principles. John McDowell, one influential representative of this view, holds that we perceive irreducibly moral properties and requirements, as well as the priorities among them when they imply different actions.⁴⁶ To say that moral properties or requirements are irreducible is not to deny that one perceives nonmoral aspects of a given situation as morally salient, but following Aristotle, McDowell argues that articulable rules cannot capture the moral sensibility of a person of good moral character.

The idea that we simply perceive moral properties or requirements is most compelling when perceptions involve an unproblematic application of a "thick" ethical concept, to use Bernard Williams's phrase.⁴⁷ We apply such concepts as being kind and being courageous in virtue of complex sets of factual considerations. They are not prescriptive labels we can paste onto anything we like. It may seem that in applying these concepts we refer to properties that supervene on these factual considerations. It may seem plausible, when reflecting on a situation and concluding that kindness is required, that this requirement is really something we perceive in the situation.

However, serious conflict between important ethical considerations in a given situation can create the kind of moral ambivalence I have described. While I have considerable sympathy for particularism, as shall become evident later in this book, it remains unclear how it can help us deal with moral ambivalence. One might argue that in cases of conflict of ethical considerations there is a correct priority that can be perceived by someone with sufficient moral experience and whose vision is unclouded by passion or self-interest. But the ways in which priorities between conflicting values are systematically different across societies and cultures demand some deeper explanation. Of course one may claim that whole societies and cultures have made fundamental mistakes in setting their priorities, but moral ambivalence problematizes attempts to say which priorities are the mistakes.

45. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 4th (University of Toronto) ed. (Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1871), 205.

46. John McDowell has formulated a formidable, contemporary version of such realism in articles such as "Virtue and Reason," *Monist* 62 (1979): 331–50; see also Mark Platts, *Ways of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979); and David McNaughton, *Moral Vision: An Introduction to Ethics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), chap. 5.

47. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 129.

Pluralistic Relativism

I have argued for the necessity of accounting for moral value pluralism and moral ambivalence. I have further argued that these features of moral life make problems for universalism. In this chapter, I give an accounting of them within a naturalistic framework, leading to the conclusion of pluralistic relativism. The first task is to explain what I mean by a naturalistic approach.

2.1 DIFFERENT STRANDS OF NATURALISM

Naturalism is identifiable with a number of themes, only some of which are endorsed here. One very general root sense of naturalism often opposes belief in the supernatural—that which exists beyond nature and is not subject to nature's laws. A related sense of naturalism stands opposed to various forms of ontological dualism between the inanimate and nonhuman "lower" forms of life (rocks, trees, bugs, dogs and cats) on the one hand and human and "higher" nonhuman forms of life (spirits, ghosts, gods, God). Cartesian dualism between thinking and extended substance provides a paradigm of nonnaturalism in this sense. The root sense of naturalism that is opposed to the supernatural and the ontologically nonnatural is a belief in one single natural world, in which human beings and other purportedly radically different beings must be situated. This root sense of a single world (compatible with the existence of multiple perspectives of belief on that world) is accepted here.

More specific forms of naturalism derive from the root sense. The root sense is often interpreted as a view about what kinds of things there are. In line with the idea of

In my discussion of Hume, I have especially benefited from discussions with Aaron Garrett and Knud Haakonssen. I am indebted to Charles Griswold Jr. for bringing to my attention the similarity between Protagoras's account of morality and the one defended here.