The Elements of Moral Philosophy

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CHAPTER 2

The Challenge of Cultural Relativism

Morality differs in every society, and is a convenient term for socially approved habits.

Ruth Benedict, Patterns of Culture (1934)

2.1. Different Cultures Have Different Moral Codes

Darius, a king of ancient Persia, was intrigued by the variety of cultures he met in his travels. He had found, for example, that the Callatians, who lived in India, ate the bodies of their dead fathers. The Greeks, of course, did not do that—the Greeks practiced cremation and regarded the funeral pyre as the natural and fitting way to dispose of the dead. Darius thought that a sophisticated outlook should appreciate the differences between cultures. One day, to teach this lesson, he summoned some Greeks who happened to be at his court and asked what it would take for them to eat the bodies of their dead fathers. They were shocked, as Darius knew they would be, and replied that no amount of money could persuade them to do such a thing. Then Darius called in some Callatians and, while the Greeks listened, asked them what it would take for them to burn their dead fathers’ bodies. The Callatians were horrified and told Darius not to speak of such things.

This story, recounted by Herodotus in his History, illustrates a recurring theme in the literature of social science: Different cultures have different moral codes. What is thought right within one group may horrify the members of another group, and vice versa. Should we eat the bodies of the dead
or burn them? If you were a Greek, one answer would seem obviously correct; but if you were a Callatian, the other answer would seem equally certain.

There are many examples of this. Consider the Eskimos of the early and mid-20th century. The Eskimos are the native people of Alaska, northern Canada, Greenland, and northeastern Siberia, in Asiatic Russia. Today, none of these groups call themselves “Eskimos,” but the term has historically referred to that scattered Arctic population. Prior to the 20th century, the outside world knew little about them. Then explorers began to bring back strange tales.

The Eskimos lived in small settlements, separated by great distances, and their customs turned out to be very different from ours. The men often had more than one wife, and they would share their wives with guests, lending them out for the night as a sign of hospitality. Moreover, within a community, a dominant male might demand—and get—regular sexual access to other men’s wives. The women, however, were free to break these arrangements simply by leaving their husbands and taking up with new partners—free, that is, so long as their former husbands chose not to make too much trouble. All in all, the Eskimo custom of marriage was a volatile practice that bore little resemblance to our custom.

But it was not only their marriages and sexual practices that were different. The Eskimos also seemed to care less about human life. Infanticide, for example, was common. Knud Rasmussen, an early explorer, reported meeting one woman who had borne 20 children but had killed 10 of them at birth. Female babies, he found, were especially likely to be killed, and this was permitted at the parents’ discretion, with no social stigma attached. Moreover, when elderly family members became too feeble, they were left out in the snow to die. In Eskimo society, there seemed to be remarkably little respect for life.

Most of us would find these Eskimo customs completely unacceptable. Our own way of living seems so natural and right to us that we can hardly conceive of people who live so differently. When we hear of such people, we might want to say that they’re “backward” or “primitive.” But to anthropologists, the Eskimos did not seem unusual. Since the time of Herodotus, enlightened observers have known that conceptions of right and
wrong differ from culture to culture. If we assume that our ethical ideas will be shared by all cultures, we are merely being naïve.

### 2.2. Cultural Relativism

To many people, this observation—“Different cultures have different moral codes”—seems like the key to understanding morality. There are no universal moral truths, they say; the customs of different societies are all that exist. To call a custom “correct” or “incorrect” would imply that we can judge that custom by some independent standard of right and wrong. But no such standard exists; every standard is culture-bound. The sociologist William Graham Sumner (1840–1910) put it like this:

> The “right” way is the way which the ancestors used and which has been handed down. . . . The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right. This is because they are traditional, and therefore contain in themselves the authority of the ancestral ghosts. When we come to the folkways we are at the end of our analysis.

This line of thought, more than any other, has persuaded people to be skeptical about ethics. Cultural Relativism says, in effect, that there is no such thing as universal truth in ethics; there are only the various cultural codes, and nothing more. Cultural Relativism challenges our belief in the objectivity and universality of moral truth.

The following claims have all been made by cultural relativists:

1. Different societies have different moral codes.
2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.
3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.
4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.
5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.
These five propositions may seem to go together, but they are independent of one another, meaning that some of them may be true even while others are false. Indeed, two of the propositions appear to be inconsistent with each other. The second says that right and wrong are determined by the norms of a society; the fifth says that one should always be tolerant of other cultures. But what if the norms of one’s society favor intolerance? For example, when the Nazi army invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, thus beginning World War II, this was an intolerant action of the first order. But what if it conformed to Nazi ideals? A cultural relativist, it seems, cannot criticize the Nazis for being intolerant, if all they’re doing is following their own moral code.

Given that cultural relativists take pride in their tolerance, it would be ironic if their theory actually supported the intolerance of warlike societies. However, their theory need not do that. Properly understood, Cultural Relativism holds that the norms of a culture reign supreme within the bounds of the culture itself. Thus, once the German soldiers entered Poland, they became bound by the norms of Polish society—norms that obviously excluded the mass slaughter of innocent Poles. “When in Rome,” the old saying goes, “do as the Romans do.” Cultural relativists agree.

2.3. The Cultural Differences Argument

Cultural Relativists often employ a certain form of argument. They begin with facts about cultures and end up drawing a conclusion about morality. Thus, they invite us to accept this reasoning:

(1) The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead, whereas the Callatians believed it was right to eat the dead.

(2) Therefore, eating the dead is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Or:

(1) The Eskimos saw nothing wrong with infanticide, whereas Americans believe infanticide is immoral.
(2) Therefore, infanticide is neither objectively right nor objectively wrong. It is merely a matter of opinion, which varies from culture to culture.

Clearly, these arguments are variations of one fundamental idea. They are both examples of a more general argument, which says:

(1) Different cultures have different moral codes.
(2) Therefore, there is no objective truth in morality. Right and wrong are only matters of opinion, and opinions vary from culture to culture.

We may call this the Cultural Differences Argument. To many people, it is persuasive. But is it a good argument—is it sound?

It is not. For an argument to be sound, its premises must all be true, and the conclusion must follow logically from them. Here, the problem is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise—that is, even if the premise is true, the conclusion might still be false. The premise concerns what people believe—in some societies, people believe one thing; in other societies, people believe something else. The conclusion, however, concerns what really is the case. This sort of conclusion does not follow logically from that sort of premise. In philosophical terminology, this means that the argument is invalid.

Consider again the example of the Greeks and Callatians. The Greeks believed it was wrong to eat the dead; the Callatians believed it was right. Does it follow, from the mere fact that they disagreed, that there is no objective truth in the matter? No, it does not follow; it could be that the practice was objectively right (or wrong) and that one of them was simply mistaken.

To make the point clearer, consider a different matter. In some societies, people believe the earth is flat. In other societies, such as our own, people believe that the earth is a sphere. Does it follow, from the mere fact that people disagree, that there is no “objective truth” in geography? Of course not; we would never draw such a conclusion, because we realize that the members of some societies might simply be wrong. There is no reason to think that if the world is round, everyone must know it. Similarly, there is no reason to think that if there is moral truth, everyone must know it. The Cultural Differences Argument
tries to derive a substantive conclusion about a subject from the mere fact that people disagree. But this is impossible.

This point should not be misunderstood. We are not saying that the conclusion of the argument is false; for all we have said, Cultural Relativism could still be true. The point is that the conclusion does not follow from the premise. This means that the Cultural Differences Argument is invalid. Thus, the argument fails.

2.4. What Follows from Cultural Relativism

Even if the Cultural Differences Argument is unsound, Cultural Relativism might still be true. What would follow if it were true?

In the passage quoted earlier, William Graham Sumner states the essence of Cultural Relativism. He says that the only measure of right and wrong is the standards of one’s society: “The notion of right is in the folkways. It is not outside of them, of independent origin, and brought to test them. In the folkways, whatever is, is right.” Suppose we took this seriously. What would be some of the consequences?

1. We could no longer say that the customs of other societies are morally inferior to our own. This, of course, is one of the main points stressed by Cultural Relativism. We should never condemn a society merely because it is “different.” This attitude seems enlightened, so long as we concentrate on examples like the funerary practices of the Greeks and Callatians.

However, we would also be barred from criticizing other, less benign practices. For example, the Chinese government has a long history of repressing political dissent within its own borders. At any given time, thousands of political prisoners in China are doing hard labor, and in the Tiananmen Square episode of 1989, Chinese troops slaughtered hundreds, if not thousands, of peaceful protesters. Cultural Relativism would preclude us from saying that the Chinese government’s policies of oppression are wrong. We could not even say that a society that respects free speech is better than Chinese society, for that would also imply a universal standard of comparison. The failure to condemn these practices does not seem enlightened; on the contrary, political oppression seems wrong wherever it occurs. Nevertheless, if we accept Cultural Relativism, we have to regard such practices as immune from criticism.
2. *We could no longer criticize the code of our own society.* Cultural Relativism suggests a simple test for determining what is right and what is wrong: All we need to do is ask whether the action is in line with the code of the society in question. Suppose a resident of India wonders whether her country’s caste system—a system of rigid social hierarchy—is morally correct. All she has to do is ask whether this system conforms to her society’s moral code. If it does, there is nothing to worry about, at least from a moral point of view.

This implication of Cultural Relativism is disturbing because few of us think that our society’s code is perfect—we can think of ways in which it might be improved. Moreover, we can think of ways in which we might learn from other cultures. Yet Cultural Relativism stops us from criticizing our own society’s code, and it bars us from seeing ways in which other cultures might be better. After all, if right and wrong are relative to culture, this must be true for our own culture, just as it is for all other cultures.

3. *The idea of moral progress is called into doubt.* We think that at least some social changes are for the better. Throughout most of Western history, the place of women in society was narrowly defined. Women could not own property; they could not vote or hold political office; and they were under the almost absolute control of their husbands or fathers. Recently, much of this has changed, and most people think of it as progress.

But if Cultural Relativism is correct, can we legitimately view this as progress? Progress means replacing the old ways with new and improved ways. But by what standard do we judge the new ways as better? If the old ways conformed to the standards of their time, then Cultural Relativism would not judge them by our standards. Sexist 19th-century society was a different society from the one we now inhabit. To say that we have made progress implies that present-day society is better—just the sort of transcultural judgment that Cultural Relativism forbids.

Our ideas about social *reform* will also have to be reconsidered. Reformers such as Martin Luther King Jr. have sought to change their societies for the better. But according to Cultural Relativism, there is only one way to improve a society: to make it better match its own ideals. After all, the society’s ideals are the standard by which reform is assessed. No one, however, may
challenge the ideals themselves, for they are by definition cor-
rect. According to Cultural Relativism, then, the idea of social
reform makes sense only in this limited way.

These three consequences of Cultural Relativism have led
many people to reject it. Slavery, we want to say, is wrong wher-
ever it occurs, and one’s own society can make fundamental
moral progress. Because Cultural Relativism implies that these
judgments make no sense, it cannot be right.

2.5. Why There Is Less Disagreement
Than It Seems

Cultural Relativism starts by observing that cultures differ dra-
matically in their views of right and wrong. But how much do
they really differ? It is true that there are differences, but it is
easy to exaggerate them. Often, what seemed at first to be a big
difference turns out to be no difference at all.

Consider a culture in which people believe it is wrong to
eat cows. This may even be a poor culture, in which there is not
enough food; still, the cows are not to be touched. Such a soci-
ety would appear to have values very different from our own.
But does it? We have not yet asked why these people won’t eat
cows. Suppose they believe that after death the souls of humans
inhabit the bodies of animals, especially cows, so that a cow may
be someone’s grandmother. Shall we say that their values differ
from ours? No; the difference lies elsewhere. The difference is
in our belief systems, not in our value systems. We agree that
we shouldn’t eat Grandma; we disagree about whether the cow
could be Grandma.

The point is that many factors work together to produce
the customs of a society. Not only are the society’s values impor-
tant, but so are its religious beliefs, its factual beliefs, and its
physical environment. Thus, we cannot conclude that two soci-
eties differ in value just because they differ in custom. After
all, customs may vary for a number of different reasons. Thus,
there may be less moral disagreement than there appears to be.

Consider again the Eskimos, who killed perfectly healthy
infants, especially girls. We do not approve of such things; in
our society, a parent who kills a baby will be locked up. Thus,
there appears to be a great difference in the values of our two
cultures. But suppose we ask why the Eskimos did this. The
explanation is not that they lacked respect for human life or
did not love their children. An Eskimo family would always pro-
tect its babies if conditions permitted. But the Eskimos lived in
a harsh environment, where food was scarce. To quote an old
Eskimo saying: “Life is hard, and the margin of safety small.” A
family may want to nourish its babies but be unable to do so.

As in many traditional societies, Eskimo mothers would
nurse their infants over a much longer period than mothers in
our culture—for four years, and perhaps even longer. So, even
in the best of times, one mother could sustain very few children.
Moreover, the Eskimos were nomadic; unable to farm in the
harsh northern climate, they had to keep moving to find food.
Infants had to be carried, and a mother could carry only one
baby in her parka as she traveled and went about her outdoor
work. Finally, the Eskimos lacked birth control, so unwanted
pregnancies were common.

Infant girls were more readily killed for two reasons. First,
in Eskimo society, the males were the primary food providers—
they were the hunters—and food was scarce. Males were thus
more valuable to the community. Second, the hunters suffered
a high casualty rate, so the men who died prematurely far out-
numbered the women who died young. If male and female
infants had survived in equal numbers, then the female adult
population would have greatly outnumbered the male adult
population. Examining the available statistics, one writer con-
cluded that “were it not for female infanticide . . . there would
be approximately one-and-a-half times as many females in the
average Eskimo local group as there are food-producing males.”

Thus, Eskimo infanticide was not due to a fundamental
disregard for children. Instead, it arose from the recognition
that drastic measures were needed to ensure the group’s sur-
vival. Even then, however, killing the baby would not be the
first option considered. Adoption was common; childless cou-
ples were especially happy to take a fertile couple’s “surplus.”
Killing was the last resort. I emphasize this in order to show that
the raw data of anthropology can be misleading; it can make
the differences in values between cultures seem greater than
they are. The Eskimos’ values were not all that different from
our own. It is only that life forced choices upon them that we
do not have to make.
2.6. Some Values Are Shared by All Cultures

It should not surprise us that the Eskimos were protective of their children. How could they not be? Babies are helpless and cannot survive without extensive care. If a group did not protect its young, the young would not survive, and the older members of the group would not be replaced. Eventually the group would die out. This means that any culture that continues to exist must care for its young. Neglected infants must be the exception, not the rule.

Similar reasoning shows that other values must be more or less universal across human societies. Imagine what it would be like for a society to place no value on truth telling. When one person spoke to another, there would be no presumption that she was telling the truth, for she could just as easily be lying. Within that society, there would be no reason to pay attention to what anyone says. If I want to know what time it is, why should I bother asking anyone, if lying is commonplace? Communication would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, in such a society. And because societies cannot exist without communication among their members, society would become impossible. It follows that every society must value truthfulness. There may, of course, be situations in which lying is thought to be okay, but the society will still value honesty in most situations.

Consider another example. Could a society exist in which there was no prohibition against murder? What would this be like? Suppose people were free to kill one another at will, and no one disapproved. In such a “society,” no one could feel safe. Everyone would have to be constantly on guard, and everyone would try to avoid other people—those potential murderers—as much as possible. This would result in individuals trying to become self-sufficient. Society on any large scale would thus collapse. Of course, people might band together in smaller groups where they could feel safe. But notice what this means: They would be forming smaller societies that did acknowledge a rule against murder. The prohibition against murder, then, is a necessary feature of society.

There is a general point here, namely, that there are some moral rules that all societies must embrace, because those rules are necessary for society to exist. The rules against lying and murder are two examples. And, in fact, we do find these rules in force in all
cultures. Cultures may differ in what they regard as legitimate exceptions to the rules, but this disagreement exists against a broad background of agreement. Therefore, we shouldn’t overestimate the extent to which cultures differ. Not every moral rule can vary from society to society.

2.7. Judging a Cultural Practice to Be Undesirable

In 1996, a 17-year-old named Fauziya Kassindja arrived at Newark International Airport in New Jersey and asked for asylum. She had fled her native country of Togo, in West Africa, to escape what people there call “excision.” Excision is a permanently disfiguring procedure. It is sometimes called “female circumcision,” but it bears little resemblance to male circumcision. In the Western media, it is often referred to as “female genital mutilation.”

According to the World Health Organization, excision is practiced in 28 African nations, and about 135 million females have been painfully excised. Sometimes, excision is part of an elaborate tribal ritual performed in small villages, and girls look forward to it as their entry into the adult world. Other times, the practice is carried out in cities on young women who desperately resist.

Fauziya Kassindja was the youngest of five daughters. Her father, who owned a successful trucking business, was opposed to excision, and he was able to defy the tradition because of his wealth. Thus, his first four daughters were married without being mutilated. But when Fauziya was 16, he suddenly died. Fauziya then came under the authority of her aunt, who arranged a marriage for her and prepared to have her excised. Fauziya was terrified, and her mother and oldest sister helped her escape.

In America, Fauziya was imprisoned for nearly 18 months while the authorities decided what to do with her. During this time, she was subjected to humiliating strip searches, denied medical treatment for her asthma, and generally treated like a criminal. Finally, she was granted asylum, but not before her case aroused a great controversy. The controversy was not about her treatment in America, but about how we should regard the customs of other cultures. A series of articles in The New York
Times encouraged the idea that excision is barbaric and should be condemned. Other observers were reluctant to be so judgmental. Live and let live, they said; after all, our culture probably seems just as strange to outsiders.

Suppose we say that excision is wrong. Are we merely imposing the standards of our own culture? If Cultural Relativism is correct, that is all we can do, for there is no culture-independent moral standard to appeal to. But is that true?

Is There a Culture-Independent Standard of Right and Wrong?
Excision is bad in many ways. It is painful and results in the permanent loss of sexual pleasure. Its short-term effects can include hemorrhage, tetanus, and septicemia. Sometimes it causes death. Its long-term effects can include chronic infection, scars that hinder walking, and continuing pain.

Why, then, has it become a widespread social practice? It is not easy to say. The practice has no obvious social benefits. Unlike Eskimo infanticide, it is not necessary for group survival. Nor is it a matter of religion. Excision is practiced by groups from various religions, including Islam and Christianity.

Nevertheless, a number of arguments are made in its defense. Women who are incapable of sexual pleasure are less likely to be promiscuous; thus, there will be fewer unwanted pregnancies in unmarried women. Moreover, wives for whom sex is only a duty are less likely to cheat on their husbands; and because they are not thinking about sex, they will be more attentive to the needs of their husbands and children. Husbands, for their part, are said to enjoy sex more with wives who have been excised. Unexcised women, the men feel, are unclean and immature.

It would be easy, and perhaps a bit arrogant, to ridicule these arguments. But notice an important feature of them: They try to justify excision by showing that excision is beneficial—men, women, and their families are said to be better off when women are excised. Thus, we might approach the issue by asking whether excision, on the whole, is helpful or harmful.

This points to a standard that might reasonably be used in thinking about any social practice: Does the practice promote or hinder the welfare of the people affected by it? But this looks like the sort of independent moral standard that Cultural Relativism forbids. It is a single standard that may be brought to bear
in judging the practices of any culture, at any time, including our own. Of course, people will not usually see this principle as being “brought in from the outside” to judge them, because all cultures value human happiness.

**Why, Despite All This, Thoughtful People May Be Reluctant to Criticize Other Cultures.** Many people who are horrified by excision are nevertheless reluctant to condemn it, for three reasons. First, there is an understandable nervousness about interfering in the social customs of other peoples. Europeans and their descendants in America have a shameful history of destroying native cultures in the name of Christianity and enlightenment. Because of this, some people refuse to criticize other cultures, especially cultures that resemble those that were wronged in the past. There is a difference, however, between (a) judging a cultural practice to be deficient and (b) thinking that we should announce that fact, apply diplomatic pressure, and send in the troops. The first is just a matter of trying to see the world clearly, from a moral point of view. The second is something else entirely. Sometimes it may be right to “do something about it,” but often it will not be.

Second, people may feel, rightly enough, that we should be tolerant of other cultures. Tolerance is, no doubt, a virtue—a tolerant person can live in peace with those who see things differently. But nothing about tolerance requires us to say that all beliefs, all religions, and all social practices are equally admirable. On the contrary, if we did not think that some things were better than others, then there would be nothing for us to tolerate.

Finally, people may be reluctant to judge because they do not want to express contempt for the society being criticized. But again, this is misguided: To condemn a particular practice is not to say that the culture on the whole is contemptible. After all, the culture could still have many admirable features. Indeed, we should expect this to be true of most human societies—they are mixtures of good and bad practices. Excision happens to be one of the bad ones.

**2.8. Back to the Five Claims**

Let us now return to the five tenets of Cultural Relativism that were listed earlier. How have they fared in our discussion?
1. Different societies have different moral codes.

This is certainly true, although there are some values that all cultures share, such as the value of truth telling, the importance of caring for the young, and the prohibition against murder. Also, when customs differ, the underlying reason will often have more to do with the factual beliefs of the cultures than with their values.

2. The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society.

Here we must bear in mind the difference between what a society believes about morals and what is really true. The moral code of a society is closely tied to what people in that society believe to be right. However, that code, and those people, can be in error. Earlier, we considered the example of excision—a barbaric practice endorsed by many societies. Consider three more examples, all of which involve the mistreatment of women:

- In 2002, an unwed mother in Nigeria was sentenced to be stoned to death for having had sex out of wedlock. It is unclear whether Nigerian values, on the whole, approved of this verdict, given that it was later overturned by a higher court. However, it was overturned partly to appease the international community. When the Nigerians themselves heard the verdict being read out in the courtroom, the crowd shouted out their approval.
- In 2005, a woman from Australia was convicted of trying to smuggle nine pounds of marijuana into Indonesia. For that crime, she was sentenced to 20 years in prison—an excessive punishment. Under Indonesian law, she might even have received a death sentence.
- In 2007, a woman was gang-raped in Saudi Arabia. When she complained to the police, the police discovered in the course of their investigation that she had recently been alone with a man she was not related to. For that crime, she was sentenced to 90 lashes. When she appealed her conviction, this angered the judges, and they increased
her sentence to 200 lashes plus a six-month prison term. Eventually, the Saudi king pardoned her, although he said he supported the sentence she had received.

Cultural Relativism holds, in effect, that societies are morally infallible—in other words, that the morals of a culture can never be wrong. But when we see that societies can and do endorse grave injustices, we see that societies, like their members, can be in need of moral improvement.

3. There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s. There are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times.

It is difficult to think of ethical principles that hold for all people at all times. However, if we are to criticize the practice of slavery, or stoning, or genital mutilation, and if such practices are really and truly wrong, then we must appeal to principles that are not tethered to any particular society. Earlier I suggested one such principle: that it always matters whether a practice promotes or hinders the welfare of the people affected by it.

4. The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many.

It is true that the moral code of our society has no special status. After all, our society has no heavenly halo around its borders; our values do not have any special standing just because they happen to be ours. However, to say that the moral code of one’s own society “is merely one among many” seems to imply that all codes are the same—that they are all more or less equally good. In fact, it is an open question whether a given code “is merely one among many.” That code might be among the best; it might be among the worst.

5. It is arrogant for us to judge other cultures. We should always be tolerant of them.

There is much truth in this, but the point is overstated. We are often arrogant when we criticize other cultures, and tolerance is generally a good thing. However, we shouldn’t tolerate everything. Human societies have done terrible things, and it is a mark of progress when we can say that those things are in the past.
2.9. What We Can Learn from Cultural Relativism

So far, in discussing Cultural Relativism, I have dwelt mostly on its shortcomings. I have said that it rests on an unsound argument, that it has implausible consequences, and that it suggests greater moral disagreement than exists. This all adds up to a rejection of the theory. Nevertheless, you may have the feeling that this is a little unfair. The theory must have something going for it—why else has it been so influential? In fact, I think there is something right about Cultural Relativism, and there are two lessons we should learn from it.

First, Cultural Relativism warns us, quite rightly, about the danger of assuming that all of our practices are based on some absolute rational standard. They are not. Some of our customs are merely conventional—merely peculiar to our society—and it is easy to lose sight of that fact. In reminding us of this, the theory does us a service.

Funerary practices are one example. The Callatians, according to Herodotus, were “men who eat their fathers”—a shocking idea, to us at least. But eating the flesh of the dead could be understood as a sign of respect. It could be seen as a symbolic act which says, “We wish this person’s spirit to dwell within us.” Perhaps this is how the Callatians saw it. On this way of thinking, burying the dead could be seen as an act of rejection, and burning the corpse as positively scornful. Of course, the idea of eating human flesh may repel us, but so what? Our revulsion may be only a reflection of our society. Cultural Relativism begins with the insight that many of our practices are like this—they are only cultural products. Then it goes wrong by inferring that, because some practices are like this, all of them must be.

Or consider modesty of dress. In America, a woman is not supposed to display her breasts in public. For example, during the 2004 Super Bowl halftime show, Justin Timberlake ripped off part of Janet Jackson’s costume, exposing one of her breasts to the audience. CBS quickly cut to an aerial view of the stadium, but it was too late. Half a million viewers complained, and the federal government fined CBS $550,000. In some cultures, however, it is considered unremarkable for a woman to
show her upper torso in public. Objectively speaking, such displays are neither right nor wrong.

Finally, consider an even more complex and controversial example: that of monogamous marriage. In our society, the ideal is to fall in love with, and to marry, one person, and then one is expected to remain faithful to that person forever. But aren’t there other ways to pursue happiness? The advice columnist Dan Savage lists some possible drawbacks of monogamy: “boredom, despair, lack of variety, sexual death and being taken for granted.” For such reasons, many people regard monogamy as an unrealistic goal—and as a goal whose pursuit would not make them happy.

What are the alternatives to this ideal? Some married couples reject monogamy by giving each other permission to have the occasional extramarital fling. Allowing one’s spouse to have an affair is risky—the spouse might not come back—but greater openness in marriage might work better than our current system, in which many people feel sexually trapped and, on top of that, feel guilty for having such feelings. Other people deviate from monogamy more radically by practicing polyamory, which is having more than one long-term partner, with the consent of everyone involved. Polyamory includes group marriages such as “triads,” involving three people, or “quads,” involving four people. Some of these arrangements might work better than others, but this is not really a matter of morality. If a man’s wife gives him permission to have an affair, then he isn’t “cheating” on her—he isn’t betraying her trust, because she has consented to the affair. Or, if four people want to live together and function as a single family, with love flowing from each to each, then there is nothing morally wrong with that. But most people in our society would disapprove of any deviation from the cultural ideal of monogamy.

The second lesson has to do with keeping an open mind. As we grow up, we develop strong feelings about things: We learn to see some types of behavior as acceptable, and other types as outrageous. Occasionally, we may find those feelings challenged. For example, we may have been taught that homosexuality is immoral, and we may feel uncomfortable around gay people. But then someone suggests that this may be prejudice; that there is nothing wrong with being gay; and that gay people are just people, like anyone else, who happen to
be attracted to members of the same sex. Because we feel so strongly about this, we may find it hard to take this line of reasoning seriously.

Cultural Relativism provides an antidote for this kind of dogmatism. When he tells the story of the Greeks and Callatians, Herodotus adds:

For if anyone, no matter who, were given the opportunity of choosing from amongst all the nations of the world the set of beliefs which he thought best, he would inevitably, after careful consideration of their relative merits, choose that of his own country. Everyone without exception believes his own native customs, and the religion he was brought up in, to be the best.

Realizing this can help broaden our minds. We can see that our feelings are not necessarily perceptions of the truth—they may be due to cultural conditioning and nothing more. Thus, when we hear it suggested that some element of our social code is not really the best, and we find ourselves resisting the suggestion, we might stop and remember this. Then we will be more open to discovering the truth, whatever it might be.

We can understand the appeal of Cultural Relativism, then, despite its shortcomings. It is an attractive theory because it is based on a genuine insight: that many of the practices and attitudes we find natural are really only cultural products. Moreover, keeping this thought in mind is important if we want to avoid arrogance and remain open to new ideas. These are important points, not to be taken lightly. But we can accept them without accepting the whole theory.
3.1. The Basic Idea of Ethical Subjectivism

In 2001 there was a mayoral election in New York, and when it came time for the city’s Gay Pride Day parade, every single Democratic and Republican candidate showed up to march. Matt Foreman, the director of a gay rights organization, described all the candidates at the march as “good on our issues.” He said, “In other parts of the country, the positions taken here would be extremely unpopular, if not deadly, at the polls.” The national Republican Party apparently agrees; for decades, it has opposed the gay rights movement.

What do people around the country actually think? Since 2001, the Gallup Poll has been asking Americans whether they personally believe gay relations to be morally acceptable or morally wrong. In 2001, 53% of Americans considered gay relations to be “morally wrong,” with only 40% calling them “morally acceptable.” By 2011, these numbers had changed dramatically: 56% called gay relations “morally acceptable,” and only 39% deemed them “morally wrong.”

People on both sides have strong feelings. Michele Bachmann, a Republican congresswoman from Minnesota, once told a conservative audience, “If you’re involved in the gay and lesbian lifestyle, it’s bondage. It is personal bondage, personal despair, and
personal enslavement.” Bachmann and her husband offer troubled gays a way to break free from their alleged chains: they run a “Christian Counseling Center” in Minnesota, which offers its clients “Reparative Therapy” as a “cure” for homosexuality. Ms. Bachmann is an evangelical Lutheran. The Catholic view may be more nuanced, but it agrees that gay sex is wrong. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, homosexuals “do not choose their homosexual condition” and “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.” Nonetheless, “homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered” and “under no circumstances can they be approved.” Therefore, if gay people want to be virtuous, then they must resist their desires.

What attitude should we take? We might say that homosexuality is immoral, or we might say that it is all right. But there is a third alternative. We might say:

People have different opinions, but where morality is concerned, there are no “facts,” and no one is “right.” People just feel differently, and that’s all there is to it.

This is the basic thought behind Ethical Subjectivism. Ethical Subjectivism is the idea that our moral opinions are based on our feelings and nothing more. On this view, there is no such thing as “objective” right or wrong. It is a fact that some people are homosexual and some are heterosexual; but it is not a fact that one is good and the other is bad. So, when someone such as Bachmann says that homosexuality is wrong, she is not stating a fact about homosexuality. Instead, she is merely saying something about her feelings.

Of course, Ethical Subjectivism is not merely an idea about the assessment of homosexuality. It applies to all moral matters. To take a different example, it is a fact that the Nazis exterminated millions of innocent people; but according to Ethical Subjectivism, it is not a fact that what they did was evil. When we call their actions “evil,” we are only saying that we have negative feelings toward them. The same applies to any moral judgment whatever.

3.2. The Evolution of the Theory

A philosophical theory may go through several stages. At first, it is put forward in simple terms, which many people find attractive. That simple formulation, however, is examined and found to
have defects. At this point, some people are so impressed with the objections that they abandon the theory. Others, however, retain confidence in the basic idea, and so they refine it. For a while, it looks like they can rescue the theory. But then further arguments cast doubt on the new version. Those new objections, like the old, cause some people to abandon the idea, while others keep the faith and propose another “improved” version. The whole process of revision and criticism then begins again.

The theory of Ethical Subjectivism has developed in just this way. It began as a simple idea—in the words of David Hume, that morality is a matter of sentiment rather than fact. But as objections were raised to the theory, and its defenders tried to answer them, the theory became more sophisticated.

3.3. The First Stage: Simple Subjectivism

The simplest version of the theory is this: When a person says that something is morally good or bad, this means that he or she approves of that thing, or disapproves of it, and nothing more. In other words:

- “X is morally acceptable” all mean: “I (the speaker) approve of X”
- “X is right”
- “X is good”
- “X ought to be done”

And similarly:

- “X is morally unacceptable” all mean: “I (the speaker) disapprove of X”
- “X is wrong”
- “X is bad”
- “X ought not to be done”

We may call this version of the theory Simple Subjectivism. It expresses the basic idea of Ethical Subjectivism in a plain, uncomplicated form, and many people have found it attractive. However, it is open to some serious objections.

**Simple Subjectivism Cannot Account for Disagreement.** Gay rights advocate Matt Foreman does not believe that homosexuality is immoral. Congresswoman Michele Bachmann, however, believes it is. So, Foreman and Bachmann appear to disagree. But consider what Simple Subjectivism implies about this situation.
According to Simple Subjectivism, when Foreman says that homosexuality is not immoral, he is merely making a statement about his attitudes—"I, Matt Foreman, do not disapprove of homosexuality." Would Bachmann disagree with that? No, Bachmann would agree that Foreman does not disapprove of homosexuality. At the same time, when Bachmann says that homosexuality is immoral, she is only saying, "I, Michele Bachmann, disapprove of homosexuality." And how could anyone disagree with that? Thus, according to Simple Subjectivism, there is no disagreement between them; each should acknowledge the truth of what the other is saying. Surely, though, this is incorrect, because Bachmann and Foreman do disagree about homosexuality.

There is a kind of eternal frustration implied by Simple Subjectivism: Bachmann and Foreman are deeply opposed to one another, yet they cannot even state their positions in a way that gets at the issue. Foreman may try to deny what Bachmann says, but according to Simple Subjectivism, he succeeds only in talking about himself.

The argument may be summarized like this: When one person says, "X is morally acceptable," and someone else says, "X is morally unacceptable," they are disagreeing. However, if Simple Subjectivism were correct, there could be no disagreement. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

**Simple Subjectivism Implies That We’re Always Right.** We are sometimes wrong in our moral evaluations. But if Simple Subjectivism were correct, this would be impossible.

Again, consider Bachmann, who said that being gay is like being enslaved. In saying this, she probably meant that homosexuals are "slaves" to their wicked desires; they are living in the bonds of sin. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Bachmann called homosexuality "enslavement," she was merely saying that she, Bachmann, disapproves of homosexuality. Of course, she might have been speaking insincerely—it is possible that she didn’t really mind homosexuality but was merely playing to her conservative audience. However, if Bachmann was speaking sincerely, then what she said was true. So long as someone is honestly representing her own feelings, her moral judgments will always be correct. But this contradicts the plain
fact that we sometimes make mistakes about ethics. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

These arguments, and others like them, suggest that Simple Subjectivism is a flawed theory. In the face of such arguments, some philosophers have chosen to reject the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism. Others, however, have worked to improve the theory.

3.4. The Second Stage: Emotivism

The improved version came to be known as Emotivism. Emotivism was popular during the mid-20th century, largely due to the work of the American philosopher Charles L. Stevenson (1908–1979).

Language, Stevenson said, is used in many ways. One way is to make statements—that is, to state facts. Thus we may say:

“Gas prices are rising.”

“Lance Armstrong beat cancer and then won the Tour de France bike race seven times.”

“Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*.”

In each case, we are saying something that is either true or false, and the purpose of our utterance is, typically, to convey information to the listener.

However, language is also used for other purposes. Suppose I say, “Close the door!” This utterance is neither true nor false. It is not a statement, intended to convey information; it is a command. Its purpose is to get the listener to do something.

Or consider utterances such as these, which are neither statements nor commands:

“Aaargh!”

“Way to go, Lance!”

“Damn Hamlet!”

We understand these sentences easily enough. But none of them can be true or false. (It makes no sense to say, “It is true that ‘way to go, Lance’” or “It is false that ‘aaargh.’”) These sentences are not used to state facts or to influence behavior. Their purpose is to express the speaker’s attitudes—about gas prices, about Lance Armstrong, or about Hamlet.
Now think about moral language. According to the first theory, Simple Subjectivism, moral language is about stating facts—ethical statements report the speaker’s attitudes. According to Simple Subjectivism, when Bachmann says, “Homosexuality is immoral,” her utterance means “I (Bachmann) disapprove of homosexuality”—a statement of fact about Bachmann’s attitude.

According to Emotivism, however, moral language is not fact-stating language; it is not used to convey information or to make reports. It is used, first, as a means of influencing people’s behavior. If someone says, “You shouldn’t do that,” he is trying to persuade you not to do it. Thus, his utterance is more like a command than a statement of fact: “You shouldn’t do that” is like saying “Don’t do that!” Also, moral language is used to express one’s attitudes. Calling Lance Armstrong “a good man” is thus like saying “Way to go, Lance!” And so, when Bachmann says, “Homosexuality is immoral,” emotivists interpret her utterance as equivalent to something like “Homosexuality—gross!” or “Don’t be gay!”

This difference between Simple Subjectivism and Emotivism may seem trivial. But it is important. To see why, consider again the arguments against Simple Subjectivism. While those arguments were severely embarrassing to Simple Subjectivism, they are less effective against Emotivism.

1. The first argument had to do with moral disagreement. If Simple Subjectivism is correct, then when one person says, “X is morally acceptable,” and someone else says, “X is morally unacceptable,” they are not really disagreeing. They are, instead, talking about different things: each person is making a claim about his or her own attitude—a claim which the other person doesn’t dispute. But, the argument goes, such people really do disagree. Thus, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

In response, Emotivism emphasizes that disagreement comes in different forms. Compare these two kinds of disagreement:

- I believe that Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone in the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, and you believe there was a conspiracy. This is a disagreement about the facts—I believe something to be true which you believe to be false.
I am rooting for the Atlanta Braves to win, and you want them to lose. Our beliefs are not in conflict, but our desires are—I want something to happen which you want not to happen.

In the first case, we believe different things, both of which cannot be true. Stevenson calls this disagreement in belief. In the second case, we want different outcomes, both of which cannot occur. Stevenson calls this disagreement in attitude. As Stevenson observes, we may disagree in attitude even if we don’t disagree in belief. For example, you and I may have all the same beliefs regarding the Atlanta Braves baseball team: we both believe that the Braves’ players are overpaid; we both believe that I am rooting for the Braves just because I am from the South; and we both believe that Atlanta is not a great baseball town. Yet despite all this common ground—despite our agreement in belief—we may still differ in attitude. I may still want the Braves to win, and you may still want them to lose.

According to Stevenson, moral disagreement is disagreement in attitude only. Matt Foreman’s attitudes about homosexuality are very different from Michele Bachmann’s, even if Foreman and Bachmann agree about all the facts. For Emotivism, then, moral conflict is real. By contrast, Simple Subjectivism interprets moral disagreement as disagreement in belief—moral judgments express beliefs about the speaker’s attitudes—so, when people disagree, they must disagree about what attitudes the speaker has. However, this gets things wrong. Foreman and Bachmann do disagree about homosexuality, but they do not disagree about what their own attitudes are.

2. The second argument was that if Simple Subjectivism is correct, then we are always right in our moral judgments. But, of course, we are not always right. Therefore, Simple Subjectivism cannot be correct.

This argument is effective only because Simple Subjectivism interprets moral judgments as statements that can be true or false. “Always right” means that one’s judgments are always true; and Simple Subjectivism assigns moral judgments a meaning that will always be true, so long as the speaker is sincere. That is why, on that theory, people turn out to be right all the time. Emotivism, on the other hand, does not interpret moral judgments as statements that are true or false. Because commands and expressions of attitude cannot be true or false,
people cannot “be right” with respect to them, much less “be right all the time.”

Emotivism, then, also avoids this objection to Simple Subjectivism. However, it is susceptible to a related complaint. Although we’re not always right in our evaluations, we’re right some of the time. Sometimes our moral judgments are true and sometimes they are false. Emotivists, however, cannot say this, because they deny that moral discourse is about stating facts.

Consider this example. On January 26, 2004, an 8-year-old girl named Katie Shelton was walking down a street in Seymour, Indiana. Suddenly she was confronted by two rottweilers, each weighing over 80 pounds. The dogs knocked Katie down and bit her repeatedly. The little girl’s life, however, was saved by the heroic actions of 14-year-old Mark Friedrich, who lived nearby. When Mark saw what was going on, he rushed out of his family’s house with two sticks and attacked the dogs. Predictably, Mark got bitten, but he was able to keep the dogs off Katie until a police officer arrived with a gun. Both children recovered from their wounds (the dogs were not so lucky).

Now suppose that, upon hearing this story, someone said that Mark Friedrich acted badly: “If he was a good kid, he would have minded his own business and stayed in his house.” As long as this strange person was speaking sincerely, the Simple Subjectivist would have to say that his moral judgment was true. The emotivist’s position is different, but like the Simple Subjectivist, she is barred from saying that this person’s judgment is false. She must say that he is merely expressing his feelings.

Although Emotivism is an improvement on Simple Subjectivism, both theories imply that our moral judgments are, in a sense, beyond reproach. For Simple Subjectivism, our judgments cannot be criticized because they will always be true. For Emotivism, our moral judgments cannot be criticized because they are not judgments at all; they are mere expressions of attitude, which cannot be false. That is one problem for Emotivism. Another problem is that Emotivism cannot explain the role reason plays in ethics.

3.5. The Role of Reason in Ethics

If someone says, “I like peaches,” she does not need to have a reason; she may be making a statement about her personal taste and nothing more. But moral judgments are different. If
someone tells you that a particular act would be wrong, you may ask why, and if there is no satisfactory answer, then you may reject that advice as unfounded. A moral judgment—or for that matter, any kind of value judgment—must be supported by good reasons. Any adequate theory of ethics should be able to explain how reasons can support moral judgments.

What do emotivists say about reasons? Remember that for the emotivist, moral judgments have two functions: to express one’s attitudes, and to try to influence other people’s attitudes and conduct. Can the expressive function of moral language find a place for reasons? Insofar as moral judgments are mere expressions of attitude, they are like personal preferences. When I say, “Letting people be free is morally better than enslaving them,” the emotivist hears this as similar to “Peaches are better than apples.” The emotivist can recognize some differences between those two utterances. However, they are basically alike. Reason can play no important role here.

Thus, emotivists have usually looked to the command function of moral language to find a role for reasons. Suppose I had said to you in 2008, “You shouldn’t vote for Barack Obama.” If this utterance is like a command—if it is like saying, “Don’t vote for Obama”—then what role can reasons play in such a judgment? If I am trying to influence your conduct, then perhaps the emotivist should say that a reason is any consideration that will influence your conduct. But consider what this means. Suppose I know that you are prejudiced against Muslims. And I say, “Obama, you know, is a Muslim.” That does the trick; you now decide not to vote for Obama. For the emotivist, the claim that Obama is a Muslim would, given the right audience, a moral reason not to vote for him. In fact, Stevenson takes exactly this view. In his classic work *Ethics and Language* (1944), he says, “Any statement about any matter of fact which any speaker considers likely to alter attitudes may be adduced as a reason for or against an ethical judgment.”

Obviously, something has gone wrong. Not just any claim can count as a reason in support of just any judgment. For one thing, it must be relevant to the judgment, and psychological influence does not always bring relevance with it. Being Muslim is irrelevant to one’s ability to be a good president, regardless of the psychological connections in anyone’s mind. Also, to be
a legitimate reason, a claim must be true, and yet false claims can be persuasive. President Obama is not in fact a Muslim.

There are two lessons to be learned from this. The small lesson is that a particular moral theory, Emotivism, is flawed, which casts doubt on the whole idea of Ethical Subjectivism. The larger lesson has to do with the importance of reason in ethics.

Hume said that if we examine wicked actions—“wilful murder, for instance”—we will find no “matter of fact” corresponding to the wickedness. The universe, apart from our attitudes, contains no such facts. What can we conclude from this? Admittedly, value is not a tangible thing like a planet or a spoon. But this does not mean that ethics has no objective basis. A fundamental mistake, which many people fall into, is to assume just two possibilities:

1. There are moral facts, in the same way that there are planets and spoons.
2. Our values are nothing more than the expression of our subjective feelings.

This is a mistake because it overlooks a third possibility. People have not only feelings but reason, and that makes a big difference. It may be that

3. Moral truths are truths of reason; that is, a moral judgment is true if it is backed by better reasons than the alternatives.

On this view, moral truths are objective in the sense that they are true independently of what we might want or think. We cannot make something good or bad just by wishing it so, because our will cannot determine what the reasons are. And this also explains our fallibility: We can be wrong about what is good or bad because we can be wrong about what reason recommends. Reason says what it says, regardless of our opinions or desires.

3.6. Are There Proofs in Ethics?

If Ethical Subjectivism is not true, why are so many people attracted to it? One reason is that science provides our paradigm of objectivity, and when we compare ethics to science, ethics seems lacking. For example, there are proofs in science, but there are no proofs in ethics. We can prove that the earth
is round, that dinosaurs lived before humans, and that there is no largest prime number. But we can’t prove that abortion is acceptable or unacceptable.

The general idea that moral judgments can’t be proved sounds appealing. Anyone who has ever argued about something like abortion knows how frustrating it can be to try to “prove” one’s opinion. However, if we inspect this idea more closely, it turns out to be flawed.

Suppose we consider something much simpler than abortion. A student says that a test was unfair. This is clearly a moral judgment—fairness is a basic moral value. Can this judgment be proved? The student might point out that the test covered a lot of material that was trivial while ignoring material the teacher had stressed as important. The test also included questions that were not covered in either the readings or the class discussions. Moreover, the test was so long that nobody could finish it in the time allowed.

Suppose all this is true. And further suppose that the teacher, when asked to explain, can offer no defense. In fact, the teacher, who is rather inexperienced, seems confused about the whole thing. Now, hasn’t the student proved that the test was unfair? What more in the way of proof could we want?

It is easy to think of other examples that make the same point:

- **Jones is a bad man:** Jones is a habitual liar; he toys with people; he cheats at cards; he once killed someone in a dispute over 27 cents; and so on.
- **Dr. Smith is irresponsible:** He bases his diagnoses on superficial considerations; he refuses to listen to other doctors’ advice; he drinks beer before performing delicate surgery; and so on.
- **A certain used-car dealer is unethical:** She conceals defects in her cars; she tries to pressure people into paying too much; she runs misleading ads on the Web; and so on.

The process of giving reasons might even be taken one step further. If we criticize Jones for being a habitual liar, we can go on to explain why lying is bad. Lying is bad, first, because it harms people. If I give you false information, and you rely on it, things may go wrong for you in all sorts of ways. Second, lying is bad because it is a violation of trust. Trusting another person means leaving oneself vulnerable and unprotected. When I
trust you, I simply believe what you say, without taking precautions; and when you lie, you take advantage of my trust. And finally, the rule requiring truthfulness is necessary for society to exist—if we could not assume that other people would speak truthfully, communication would be impossible, and if communication were impossible, society would fall apart.

So we can support our judgments with good reasons, and we can explain why those reasons matter. If we can do all this, and, for an encore, show that no comparable case can be made on the other side, what more in the way of “proof” could anyone want? In the face of all this, it is absurd to say that ethical judgments are nothing but “opinions.”

Nevertheless, the impression that moral judgments are “unprovable” is remarkably persistent. Why do people believe this? Three points might be raised.

First, when proof is demanded, people often want scientific proof. They want something like experimental verification, and because ethical judgments cannot be experimentally tested, they say there is no proof. But in ethics, rational thinking consists in giving reasons, analyzing arguments, setting out and justifying principles, and so on. The fact that ethical reasoning differs from scientific reasoning does not make it deficient.

Second, when we think about proving our ethical opinions, we tend to think of the most difficult issues. The question of abortion, for example, is enormously complicated. If we consider only issues like abortion, it is easy to believe that “proof” in ethics is impossible. But the same could be said of the sciences. There are complicated matters that physicists cannot agree on; and if we focused entirely on them, we might conclude that there are no proofs in physics. But, of course, there are many simpler issues on which all physicists agree. Similarly, in ethics, there are many simple issues about which all reasonable people agree.

Finally, it is easy to run together two matters that are really very different:

1. Proving an opinion to be correct
2. Persuading someone to accept your proof

When your argument fails to persuade your audience, it is tempting to think, “Well, that argument didn’t work.” But the argument might have failed merely because your audience
was stubborn, or biased, or not really listening. As a proof, your argument might have been perfect.

3.7. The Question of Homosexuality

Let’s return to the dispute about homosexuality. If we consider the relevant reasons, what do we find? The most pertinent fact is that gays are pursuing the only kind of life that can make them happy. Sex, after all, is a particularly strong urge, and few people can be happy without satisfying their sexual needs. But we should not focus solely on sex. Homosexuality is not merely about who you have sex with; it’s about who you fall in love with. Gay people fall in love in the same way that straight people do. And, like straights, gays often want to be with, live with, and build a life with, the person they love. To say that homosexuals shouldn’t act on their desires is thus to condemn them to frustrating lives. It should be added that gay people cannot avoid the frustration by choosing to become straight. Both homosexuals and heterosexuals discover who they are, once they reach a certain age; nobody decides which sex to be attracted to.

Why do people oppose gay rights? Some people think that homosexuals pose a danger to others. Often the charge, whether stated or not, is that gay men are likely to be child molesters. There have, for example, been several campaigns in America to get gay public schoolteachers fired, and the fear of pedophilia has always loomed large in these discussions. Congresswoman Bachmann exploited this fear when she said of gay marriage, “This is a very serious matter, because it is our children who are the prize for this community—[the gay community] are specifically targeting our children.” Such a fear, however, has never had any basis in fact. It is a mere stereotype, like the idea that blacks are lazy or that Muslims are terrorists. There is no difference between gays and heterosexuals in their moral characters or in their contributions to society.

The most common objection to homosexuality may be that it is “unnatural.” What should we make of this? To assess the argument, we need to know what “unnatural” means. There seem to be three possibilities.

First, “unnatural” might be taken as a statistical notion. In this sense, a human quality is unnatural if most people don’t
have it. Being gay would be unnatural in this sense, but so would being left-handed, being tall, and even being immensely nice. Clearly, this is no reason to criticize homosexuality. Rare qualities are often good.

Second, the meaning of “unnatural” might be connected with the idea of a thing’s *purpose*. The parts of our bodies seem to serve particular purposes. The purpose of the eyes is to see, and the purpose of the heart is to pump blood. Similarly, the purpose of our genitals is to procreate: Sex is for making babies. It may be argued, then, that gay sex is unnatural because it is sexual activity that is divorced from its natural purpose.

This seems to express what many people have in mind when they object to homosexuality as unnatural. However, if gay sex were condemned for this reason, then a number of other, widely accepted practices would also have to be condemned: masturbation, oral sex, sex using condoms, and even sex by women during pregnancy or after menopause. These practices would be just as “unnatural” (and, presumably, just as bad) as gay sex. But there is no reason to accept these conclusions, because this whole line of reasoning is faulty. It rests on the assumption that it is wrong to use parts of one’s body for anything other than their natural purposes. Why should we accept that assumption? The “purpose” of the eyes is to see; is it therefore wrong to use one’s eyes for flirting or for giving a signal? The “purpose” of the fingers may be to grasp and poke; is it therefore wrong to snap one’s fingers to get someone’s attention? The idea that things should be used only in “natural” ways cannot be maintained, and so this version of the argument fails.

Third, because the word *unnatural* has a sinister sound, it might be understood simply as a term of evaluation. Perhaps it means something like “contrary to what a person ought to be.” But if that is what “unnatural” means, then to say that homosexuality is wrong because it is unnatural would be vacuous. It would be like saying that homosexuality is wrong because it is wrong. That sort of empty remark provides no reason for condemning anything.

The idea that homosexuality is unnatural, and so it must be immoral, seems right to many people. Nevertheless, it is an unsound argument. It fails on every interpretation.

But what about the claim, often made, that homosexuality is “contrary to family values”? James Dobson, founder of
the conservative Christian group, Focus on the Family, told his followers: “For more than 40 years, the homosexual activist movement has sought to implement a master plan that has had as its centerpiece the utter destruction of the family.” But how, exactly, are homosexuals trying to destroy the family? Gay activists are actually trying to expand the family. They do not wish to take any rights away from heterosexual couples. Instead, they want to make it easier for gays to form families—they support same-sex marriage, domestic partner benefits, the right of gay couples to adopt children, and so on. Gays find it ironic that supporters of “the family” want to prevent them from having families.

Perhaps all this talk of “family values” really amounts to saying, “Let’s make sure we don’t have families like that.” But if so, then the question arises: What is wrong with a family in which the children are raised by two mothers, or two fathers? Common sense suggests that two parents are better than one: raising a child is a huge task, and two people can perform big tasks more easily than one. But even if the number of parents in a household matters, it is not clear why their gender should. The largest study of gay families is the U.S. National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study, which has followed a group of gay mothers since the 1980s. Their data suggest that the teenage children of lesbians actually do better than teenagers from traditional homes. Sometimes the children of gay parents are made fun of at school, and this is difficult for them. But, in general, these children have fewer behavioral problems, and they do better both socially and academically than their peers. There is no good reason to be against gay families.

Meanwhile, homosexuals in America continue to be disadvantaged. Sometimes the disadvantage is a matter of law. Legally, heterosexuals can tie the knot in any state, but gay marriage exists in only a half-dozen states. Moreover, the federal government does not recognize gay marriage as legitimate, and so it provides marital benefits to heterosexual couples only. There are hundreds of such benefits, including the social security benefits that a spouse may receive after the other spouse’s death. Finally, in Florida and Arkansas, gay people cannot legally adopt children, although, of course, heterosexuals can. The law in America certainly discriminates against gays. Yet, in many other places, the laws are even more extreme.
In 76 countries, gay sex is illegal. In some countries, the punishment is death.

Apart from the law, there are social drawbacks to being gay in America. It is tough to grow up in a place where four-tenths of your neighbors believe that something is wrong with you. Even worse, you find that some of your neighbors are hateful—they are repulsed by you and see you as less than human. It is especially sad when a young person who has been taught to despise homosexuality begins to realize that he or she is gay. Many gays, whether out of fear or shame, choose to live in the closet. But in the long run, it is almost impossible to hide one’s sexuality from friends, family members, and co-workers. Gays in America lead stressful lives. Among American college students, gays are twice as likely to attempt suicide as their straight classmates. And closeted gays are six times more likely to try it.

One more argument must be discussed, namely, that homosexuality is condemned in the Bible. For example, Leviticus 18:22 says, “You may not lie with a man as with a woman; it is an abomination.” Some commentators have said that, contrary to appearances, the Bible is really not so harsh toward homosexuality; and they explain how each relevant passage (there seem to be nine of them) should be understood. But suppose we accept that the Bible condemns homosexuality. What may we infer from this? Are we supposed to believe what the Bible says, simply because it says it?

This question will offend some people. To question the Bible, they believe, is to challenge the word of God. And this, they think, is an act of arrogance coming from creatures who should be showing gratitude to the Almighty. Questioning the Bible can also make people feel uncomfortable, because it may seem to challenge their whole way of life. However, thoughts like these cannot hold us back. Philosophy is about questioning whole ways of life. When the argument is given that homosexuality must be wrong because the Bible says so, this argument must be assessed on its own terms.

The problem with the argument is that, if we look at other things the Bible says, it does not appear to be a reliable guide to morality. Leviticus condemns homosexuality, but it also forbids eating sheep’s fat (7:23), letting a woman into the church’s sanctuary who has recently given birth (12:2–5), and seeing your uncle naked. The latter, like homosexuality, is deemed
an abomination (18:14, 26). Even worse, Leviticus condemns to death those who curse their parents (20:9) and those who commit adultery (20:10). It says that a priest’s daughter, if she “plays the whore,” shall be burned alive (21:9), and it says that we may purchase slaves from nearby nations (25:44). In Exodus, it even says that it’s okay to beat your slaves, so long as you don’t kill them (21:20–21).

The point of all this is not to ridicule the Bible; the Bible, in fact, contains much that is true and wise. But we can conclude from examples like these that the Bible is not always right. And because it’s not always right, we can’t conclude that homosexuality is an abomination just because it says so in Leviticus.

At any rate, nothing can be morally right or wrong simply because an authority says so. If the precepts in a sacred text are not arbitrary, there must be some reason for them—we should be able to ask why the Bible condemns homosexuality and then to get an answer. That answer will then give the real explanation of why the thing is wrong.

But the main point of this chapter is not about homosexuality. The main point concerns the nature of moral thinking. Moral thinking and moral conduct are a matter of weighing reasons and being guided by them. But being guided by reason is very different from following one’s feelings. When we have strong feelings, we may be tempted to ignore reason and go with the feelings. But in doing so, we would be opting out of moral thinking altogether. That is why, in focusing on attitudes and feelings, Ethical Subjectivism seems to be going in the wrong direction.