Moral Dispute or Cultural Difference?

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...Imagine me to be a middle-aged woman of middle-class origin who grew up in middle America. I went to college, graduated, then went on to get a master's degree in business, after which I worked on Wall Street and made a lot of money—so much that I retired early. I never married or had children, which was a source of regret to my parents. But they are proud of me. We are all committed to the ideals of liberal individualism, and agree that each of us is responsible for his or her own life, financially and otherwise.

Shortly after retirement, I decide to travel, and during a visit to a rural village in the Punjab I meet a woman my age named Anjali. The main facts of her life are: her parents arranged her marriage when she was a very young girl, she was married in her early teens and since then she has had many children. She is already a grandmother. Her life has been organized entirely around family responsibilities.

Initially, Anjali finds my decision not to marry or have children repugnant, especially since my parents clearly wished it. She tells me, through an interpreter, that we are all morally obliged to defer to our parents' wishes. I initially take myself to have a moral disagreement with her, for I believe that I was not morally obliged to defer to my parents' wishes.

Many Westerners may think this moral disagreement can easily be resolved in my favor: I have done no wrong in seeking my fortune, and Anjali should be allowed to do the same. But this Western attitude overlooks an important fact: it does not generally lie within human power to remake a whole culture at will.

Anjali's actual cultural circumstances, however, make it impossible for her to set off to seek her fortune on her own, apart from her family network, any more than it is an option for me to take up the various traditional duties that befall females in extended families in rural Punjab. Owing to these differences in our cultural circumstances, Anjali and I need very different moral truths to live by, in order to navigate the specific moral options that we face. Does this mean that we are bound to live by conflicting values—that we face an irresolvable moral disagreement, about whether it is morally obligatory to defer to our parents' wishes?

No. When Anjali recognizes her moral obligation to defer to her parents' wishes, she conceives it as one among many special duties that she bears to her parents, which sit alongside other special duties to other members of her extended family, all of which go by the name katarvya. When I deny that I have any moral obligation to defer to my parents' wishes, I am not thinking of katarvya, and in fact before I got to know Anjali I had no conception of katarvya at all. I was thinking in terms of the sorts of obligations that are recognized within the framework of liberal individualism; I was not violating my parents' rights when I fashioned my life plan according to my own wishes rather than theirs. So Anjali and I never really contradicted each other concerning what we owe our parents. She had been affirming that she owes her parents the special duties of katarvya, while I had been denying that my parents' rights include dictating my major life decisions.

What we really confront here, then, is a kind of difference which is not a disagreement. We come to see that we are each right to live by our respective moral beliefs, due to the way in which they speak to our respective circumstances, and the specific moral issues that arise within them. Yet although we each come to regard the other's moral beliefs as true, neither of us adopts the other's moral beliefs for herself, as truths to live by. When this occurs, we have occasion to adopt a distinctively rel-
 ativist stance, which is a stance of disengagement rather than disagreement. As we learn about one anothers' moral beliefs, we do not thereby gain any moral insight into how we should live our own moral lives, and nor do we try to instruct others about how they should live theirs.

The moral relativism I am proposing makes sense of this situation by concluding that while moral truths hold objectively, they do not hold universally, only locally. If Anjali and I require different moral beliefs to live by, this shows that we live in different moral worlds, in which different moral truths hold.

This conception of moral relativism is not without its problems. It seems more plausible for some cases, such as the one I just gave, than for others. Take, for example, such practices as sati (widow burning), female genital mutilation and honor killing. Our immediate response is likely to be: We deem these practices wrong; they must be stopped, preferably by convincing those who participate in them that they are wrong. If we cannot convince them, then we take ourselves to face irresoluble moral disagreements, in the face of which we should remain true to our moral beliefs, by continuing to insist that the practices are wrong, and opposing them by all the usual means available in a polity—legislation, state intervention, etc.

The response I just described is essentially anti-relativist. And note that it opposes relativism on both of the conceptions I have been discussing. It insists that the parties to a disagreement cannot both be right, that there are objective matters to be right or wrong about. It also insists that we should not disengage from those who morally differ from us, but should retain a sense of disagreement with them, by putting forward the moral truths by which we live as universal truths that hold for everyone.

But before we reject moral relativism, we should explore one other possibility. While the relativist does want to say, in a general way, that people with moral differences probably are responding to very different cultural circumstances, she does not have to say that those who participate in the specific practices of sati, female genital mutilation and honor killing are right to do so. She may also say that they are wrong by their own standards. For there may be local moral truths, which hold in the very cultural conditions in which those practices have arisen, in the light of which they are wrong. If that is so, then the participants in these practices misunderstand what their own moral principles entail. This is one perfectly plausible way of understanding how American society came to realize that it was wrong to give only white males full civil rights. And it would be a particularly parochial form of self-congratulation to say that what was true of America is not feasible for other societies.

Of course, it is conceivable that there are no local truths in the light of which sati, female genital mutilation and honor killing would count as wrong. But, the point is, only then—that is, only if there are no local truths that stand in tension with these practices—would the moral relativist have to conclude that our moral differences over them are like the case I described above about Anjali and me, in the respect that both parties are actually right.

Moral relativism, as I propose understanding it, calls for an exploratory approach to encounters with moral difference. It discourages us from taking the appearance of irresoluble moral disagreements at face value, without first exploring the possibility that the parties might not actually be disagreeing, but addressing quite different moral circumstances, for which they need quite different moral truths to live by. If we arrived at this relativist conclusion, which gives up on the universality of moral truth, we would not then abandon the idea of moral objectivity. It is still possible for the parties involved to be in error, insofar as they misunderstand their own moral principles.