

CHAPTER 5: RELATIVISM

*A little learning is a dangerous thing
Drink deep or taste not the Pyrean spring
These shallow draughts intoxicate the brain
But drinking deeply sobers us again*

-----Alexander Pope

'America is awash in tolerance', writes William B. Irvine.

In my own life I confront this epidemic of tolerance every time I discuss value theory in the college philosophy classes that I teach. Relativism runs rampant among the undergraduates, and those undergraduates who cling to absolutes often do so surreptitiously, fearing the scorn of the relativists around them...The first task in any college ethics class, then, is to confront relativism.¹

And it should also be one of the first tasks in any logic class since one of the hard sayings of classical logic is that truth is 'objective'—in particular that it is not relative to persons or to cultures. Many people find this view not only implausible but also offensive, particularly when it is held as regards disputed questions in theology and ethics. Relativism however not as good as it's cracked up to be. Some forms of relativism—in particular *subjectivism*, the view that whatever anyone believes is true—are logically incoherent. Other forms of relativism have consequences that most of us would find unacceptable. In this chapter we will consider and respond to some objections to the notion of 'objective truth', including claims about the objective truth of moral claims.

1 SUBJECTIVISM

Relativism is not a modern invention. Protagoras, one of the Pre-Socratic philosophers who lived in Greece over 2500 years ago held that we, in effect, make our own truth. In the most famous of the surviving fragments of his writing he states:

"Man is the measure of all things: of things which are, that they are, and of things which are not, that they are not"

Like many fragments of the Pre-Socratics, this phrase has been passed down to us without any context, and its meaning is open to interpretation. Plato ascribes relativism to Protagoras

¹ William B. Irvine, "Confronting Relativism," in *Academic Questions* vol. 14, No. 1, 42-49 (2000)., <http://0-www.springerlink.com.sally.sandiego.edu/content/mw7jqntd16fc6y53/?p=b885ed17be2641b693daa3cdf9c5168&pi=8>.

and uses Protagoras' teachings as a foil for his own commitment to objective realities and transcendent values. Plato writes,

“Protagoras, admitting as he does that everyone’s opinion is true, must acknowledge the truth of his opponent’s’ belief about his own belief, where they think he is wrong.”²

Plato here is arguing that Protagoras' view, which he interprets as the claim that whatever a person believes is true, is logically incoherent. His argument against this subjectivist thesis is in the form of a *reductio ad absurdum*.

1.1 REDUCTIO AD ABSURDEM ('PROOF BY CONTRADICTION')

A *reductio* argument proves that a thesis is false by showing that it leads to an 'absurdity'—in particular, that implies a *contradiction* (a statement of the form 'P and not-P'). This argument form, therefore, is often called 'proof by contradiction'—and it is *very* handy! In doing formal logic we will study this argument form, also called 'indirect proof' since it is typically used to prove a thesis is true 'indirectly' by showing that assuming it to be false leads to a contradiction.

To do a *reductio* proof we begin by assuming the *opposite* of what we want to prove. So, if we want to prove a thesis, T, we assume NOT-T: that is the 'assumption for reductio'. We then derive contradiction from it, which shows that NOT-T is false by “reducing” it to absurdity. If NOT-T is false, then T itself must be true. So, having derived a contradiction from NOT-T, we have proved T.

Here is Plato's *reductio* argument against subjectivism

1. Suppose subjectivism is true, i.e. that if a person believes that P, then P. [assume subjectivism for *reductio*]
2. X believes that P and y believes that x is wrong in believing that P, i.e. y believes that NOT-P. [empirical fact: people disagree]
3. P and Not-P [follows from 1 and 2]
4. Therefore subjectivism is false [*reductio!* Given that people disagree, subjectivism implies a contradiction.]

The claim is that, given the fact of disagreement, subjectivism implies a contradiction and is therefore shown to be false.

² Plato, “Theaetetus,” 171 a, trans F. M. Cornford, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), p. 876.

Premise 1 is just a ‘what-if’—‘*what if* subjectivism were true’—as the assumption for *reductio*. We aren’t claiming that subjectivism is true. We’re just playing Let’s Pretend: let’s try it out the subjectivist thesis (the view that whatever anyone believes is true) and see what happens. If bad things happen, then we know we have to reject it. Premise 2 is uncontroversial. People disagree: *x* and *y* are any old guys, and *P* is any old proposition. It doesn’t matter who they are, or what *P* is: in 2, we’re just claiming that there is at least one case of disagreement. If *y* believes that *x*’s claim is false, then *y* believes that NOT-*P*. Given their disagreement, we have *x* believing *P* and *y* believing Not-*P*. Now according to subjectivism whatever anyone believes is true. So, since *x* believes *P*, *P* is true and, since *y* believes Not-*P*, Not-*P* is true. We can therefore infer Premise 3, the contradiction *P* and Not-*P*, which is necessarily false. Given the fact of disagreement, subjectivism implies a contradiction, and therefore must itself be false.

Summing up: in a *reductio* argument, strange as it sounds, we assume a thesis we want to refute (the ‘assumption for *reductio*’) which we put it together with other premises that are clearly true; we then show that the set of sentences implies a contradiction—something that must be false and so conclude that the premises can’t all be true. But we know the other premises are ok: it is uncontroversial that people disagree. So the problem must be the assumption for *reductio*—the subjectivist thesis, that whatever anyone believes is true. We conclude, therefore, that the subjectivist thesis is false.

1.2 IT’S ALRIGHT TO BE WRONG!

Most people aren’t tempted by subjectivism, or by relativism about all propositions whatsoever. Very few people are tempted by relativism when it comes to ordinary, uncontroversial claims. The temptation is to be a relativist about claims that are controversial—which are generally held to be matters of opinion because there doesn’t seem to be any generally accepted, conclusive reason to accept or reject them. These include most notably moral judgments.

We will argue in the next chapter, in our discussion of knowledge as justified true belief, that is, that it is a matter of having good reasons for one’s belief, and that relativism about controversial claims is a consequence of confusing truth with justification. When it comes to difficult questions, which are disputed, including questions in ethics, metaphysics and theology, there is a lot of disagreement and smart, educated, informed people quite often disagree. When it comes to such claims, people on both sides may have very good reasons for the views they hold. But this is not to say that their views are both true (or that neither are true, or that there is no objective fact of the matter when it comes to such claims). We can have very good reasons for holding beliefs that are false. Indeed we are sometimes *justified* in holding beliefs that are in fact false. To this extent ***it’s alright to be wrong!***

For now however, let us consider relativism as regards a special class of controversial claims, viz. moral judgments. Many otherwise reasonable people, who would never be tempted by Protagoras’ subjectivism, nevertheless hold that moral judgments are mere matters of

opinion, which are not, in any objective sense, either true or false or which are true or false relative to persons or cultures. Unlike unrestricted subjectivism, ethical relativism, is not logically incoherent. But as we shall argue, it is not as good as it's cracked up to be.

2 ETHICAL RELATIVISM

Moral judgments are claims to the effect that some action, or kind of action, is right, wrong or obligatory or that some moral agent is good or bad, and so on.

Ethical relativists hold that there are no true universal moral judgments. Some hold that moral judgments are only true relative to individuals: crudely, that what's right for one person may not be right for another. Others hold that moral judgments are only true or false relative to cultures.

Ethical relativism is the denial of *ethical universalism*. To be an ethical universalist is to hold that there are some moral judgments that are true everywhere, always and for all moral agents. We note that in logic 'some' always means 'at least one'. It does not mean 'a few' and it certainly does not mean 'not all'. So the ethical universalist's claim is minimalist: he holds only that there is *some* moral judgment or other that goes for everyone—not that all moral judgments go for everyone.

This means that ethical universalism is the 'weaker' and hence more readily defensible position. All the ethical universalist needs to show is that there is at least one moral principle—however minimal, however abstract—that holds for all people. *You can bring up case after case of moral judgments that don't apply universally without undermining his position.* Are there circumstances in which lying is morally ok? Sure. Lots. This doesn't bother the ethical universalist who can (and likely will) just respond, 'Thou shalt not lie' isn't the universal moral principle I have in mind'. How about 'Thou shalt not steal'? There are plenty of exceptions but the ethical universalist doesn't care. He's simply committed to the claim that there is *some* moral principle or other that goes for everyone. And that principle will not likely be any of the ethical rules of conventional morality, which aren't sufficiently abstract and so admit of exceptions.

Ethical relativism is much harder to defend. Ethical relativists hold that there is *no* kind of action that is always, everywhere and for everyone right or wrong. That is a strong claim and so it is more vulnerable to refutation. To show it false, we only need to produce one moral judgment that holds for everyone. Just one and it's toast.

Willaim H. Gass produced a candidate in 'The Case of the Obliging Stranger'. 'Imagine', writes Gass, 'I approach a stranger on the street and say to him, "If you please, sir, I desire to perform an experiment with your aid."'

The stranger is obliging, and I lead him away. In a dark place conveniently by, I strike his head with the broad of an axe and cart him home. I place him, buttered and trussed, in an ample electric oven. The thermostat reads 450° F. Thereupon I go off to play poker with friends and forget all about the obliging stranger in the stove. When I return, I realize I have overbaked my specimen, and the experiment, alas, is ruined.³

Gass argues that any ethic that fails to condemn such an action is vicious and that ‘no more convincing refutation of any ethic could be given than by showing that it approved of my baking the obliging stranger’.⁴

If Gass is right then the moral judgment that baking an obliging stranger in circumstances like those described is wrong for everyone and that is enough to refute ethical relativism. Maybe you are not persuaded by Gass: maybe you can imagine circumstances in which slaughtering and baking an obliging stranger would be morally ok. If however you can think of such conditions, then just add to the description of the case the *denial* that those conditions obtain and that case will work. If you don’t care for this case or its variants, just come up with some kind of action of other that is either so perfectly awful that no one should do it or so utterly innocuous that it could not be morally wrong for anyone. *One case is enough to refute ethical relativism!*

3 MORAL PRINCIPLES

To be an ethical universalist, you only have to agree that there is *some* kind of action that’s either always right or always wrong. The relevant kind may be something very general, for example, ‘doing something that brings about the greatest good for the greatest number’ or ‘doing unto others what you would have them do unto you’ or ‘treating every person as an end in himself.’

We’re interested in coming up with some reasonable moral principle or principles that capture our moral intuitions about cases where we have them and provide guidance in cases where we’re clueless. How could we go about looking for such principles? According to John Rawls, perhaps the greatest ethicist and political philosopher of the 20th century, the business of theory construction in ethics is much like theory construction in the natural sciences. We form hypotheses, test them against data, modify them if necessary and then test the modified hypothesis against further data. We go on like this until we’re satisfied that we’ve reached a ‘reflective equilibrium’.

³ “The Case of the Obliging Stranger” William H. Gass *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 66, No. 2 (Apr., 1957), pp. 193-204 at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2182374>

⁴ op. cit.

Ethical issues are controversial, but that doesn't mean we can't reason about them. One way of understanding moral reasoning is as a back-and-forth process where we consider our feelings or moral 'intuitions' in clear cases, try to formulate general principles on the basis of these intuitions, and then test our principles against further cases until we reach a "reflective equilibrium." The following quote from the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (an online resource for all your philosophical needs at <http://plato.stanford.edu>) describes this process:

The method of **reflective equilibrium** consists in working back and forth among our considered judgments (some say our 'intuitions') about particular instances or cases [and] the principles or rules that we believe govern them...revising any of these elements wherever necessary in order to achieve an acceptable coherence among them. The method succeeds and we achieve reflective equilibrium when we arrive at an acceptable coherence among these beliefs. An acceptable coherence requires that our beliefs not only be consistent with each other...but that some of these beliefs provide support or provide a best explanation for others. Moreover, in the process we may not only modify prior beliefs but add new beliefs as well.

In practical contexts, this deliberation may help us come to a conclusion about what we ought to do when we had not at all been sure earlier. We arrive at an optimal equilibrium when the component judgments, principles, and theories are ones we are un-inclined to revise any further because together they have the highest degree of acceptability or credibility for us.

The key idea underlying this view of justification is that we 'test' various parts of our system of beliefs against the other beliefs we hold, looking for ways in which some of these beliefs support others, seeking coherence among the widest set of beliefs, and revising and refining them at all levels when challenges to some arise from others. For example, a moral principle or moral judgment about a particular action...would be justified if it cohered with the rest of our beliefs about right action...on due reflection and after appropriate revisions throughout our system of beliefs.⁵

Moral reasoning understood in this way is not very different from commonsense and scientific reasoning, where we make observations, formulate hypotheses, and test them against further data until we arrive at principles that are, at least provisionally, satisfactory. In formulating moral principles the 'observations' are our moral intuitions. Like other observations however they are incomplete and fallible, so we generalize in order to arrive at principles to guide us where we have no clear intuitions, test our principles against further data and, because we recognize that our intuitions are not infallible, remain open to the possibility some are misleading.

⁵ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reflective-equilibrium/>

If this is correct then even if in the end we agree to disagree, we can still reason about moral issues. Ethics, on this account, is not a game without rules: it is not merely 'subjective'; it is not just a matter of personal feelings; and it is not something we have to take on faith.

4 CULTURAL RELATIVISM

One worry we may have about this account is that our 'moral intuitions' are formed by our culture. Even if the truth of moral judgments isn't relative to individuals, could it be relative to cultures? Should we be cultural relativists?

Well, it depends on what you mean by 'cultural relativism'...

'Cultural relativism means different things: here are three ways in which it has traditionally been understood:

- (1) People's beliefs, attitudes, tastes, etc. are significantly affected by their culture--and people in different cultures have very different beliefs, attitudes, tastes, etc.
- (2) Methodological cultural relativism: cultures should be studied on their own terms.
- (3) **Actions are right or wrong to the extent that they conform or don't conform to cultural norms.**

(1) is of course true. Who can deny it? It is a plain empirical fact. The study of different cultures over the past centuries has shown us the extent of human diversity.

(2) is also true, and it is what anthropologists usually mean when they talk about cultural relativism. The idea is that we should study cultures on their own terms and not try to squeeze them into a template provided by our own culture. This is just good science. Adopting our own culture as a model distorts our understanding of other cultures in much the way that taking the grammar of one language as a universal model makes it difficult to make sense of the way in which other languages work. This is why, for example, English grammar is screwed up. When the formal grammar of English was developed, the model was Latin. This is a lousy model since English is a Germanic language and adopting Latin as the model meant squeezing English into a grammatical structure suitable for Romance languages. So, for example, we are not supposed to 'split infinitives', e.g. to say things like 'to never stop trying' or 'to always remember.' There is no good English reason why we shouldn't say things like this. But the Prescriptive Grammarians forbid us because in Latin, and Romance languages, *infinitives can't be 'split.'*

Good linguistics, and good anthropology understand other languages and cultures on their own terms. But that doesn't mean (3)—holding that actions are right or wrong to the extent that they conform or don't conform to cultural norms. So we happily accept (1) and (2) but reject (3).

Is this a problem? Let us consider some worries people have about the rejection of cultural relativism in the sense of (3). We note the following:

(i) Actions that are wrong may be *excusable* so that people who do them are not blameworthy.

Lots of cultures practiced human sacrifice because they believed that the deaths of some were necessary to insure the life and well-being of many more. Their goal was reasonable even if their means to achieving it was ridiculous. Should we blame them? I don't think so. What they did was wrong but, on this account, not blameworthy. They were doing the best they could.

(ii) Even if an action is wrong, it doesn't follow that it would be right to stop people from doing it.

James Fergusson, author of several books on Afghanistan, writing in the UK publication *The Observer* asks whether British soldiers should be dying for the rights of Afghan women—and answers that they should not.

'The case of Bibi Sanubar, the Afghan widow brutally flogged and shot dead by the Taliban for the crime of being pregnant', he writes, 'caused outrage in the west. Earlier in the month, Time magazine published a truly shocking picture of Aisha, an 18-year-old girl whose nose had been cut off because she had run away from her in-laws'.

With so much talk recently of political reconciliation with the Taliban leadership, their attitude towards women is fast becoming as urgent and emotive a topic as it was when they first came to power in the mid-1990s.

However nauseating the treatment of Bibi or Aisha, it would be a mistake to let our stomachs rule our heads. However much westerners would like to see change in Afghan society, this was never the reason our military went to Afghanistan – and nor does it justify our staying there now... This does not mean the west should stand by in silence. On the contrary, it is our duty to go on arguing the case for gender equality and to keep Afghans engaged in that old debate. But we have no right to be shrill and it will do no good to dictate. If social change is to come, it must come from within, which, eventually, it will.

It might help if we understood the Taliban better. The harshness of the punishments they sometimes mete out only seems incomprehensible to the west. The strict sexual propriety the Taliban insist upon is rooted in ancient Pashtun tribal custom, the over-riding purpose of which is to protect the integrity of the tribe, and nothing threatens the gene pool like extramarital relations. "The Pashtun must breed well if he is to breed fighters," wrote the poet Ghani Khan in 1947. "The potential mother of the man of tomorrow is the greatest treasure of the tribe and is guarded jealously... death

to those who dare to risk the health of the tribe. It is treachery and sabotage which you also punish with death." The system, as Ghani Khan acknowledges, is "hard and brutal", but it works. The Pashtuns are, famously, the largest tribal society in the world. Some 42m of them are divided into about 60 tribes and 400 sub-clans and they are intensely proud of their culture which has survived three millenniums of almost constant invasion and occupation...

I am certain, after 14 years of encounters with the Taliban, that they are not beyond redemption. It seems a paradox, but in the 1990s the Taliban leadership did not see themselves as oppressors of women but as their defenders. Westerners forget the historical context in which the Taliban emerged in 1994, although no Afghan ever will. The Taliban's first purpose was to bring law and order to a country that had been devastated by five years of vicious civil war and in those areas that came under their control, they succeeded brilliantly. "The real source of their success," the US assistant secretary of state Robin Raphel told a closed UN session in New York in November 1996, "has been the willingness of many Afghans, particularly Pashtuns, to tacitly trade unending fighting and chaos for a measure of peace and security, even with several social restrictions." To many Afghans, including many Afghan women, oppression was a small price to pay in exchange for an end to the wholesale rape and slaughter of the preceding years. The Taliban appeared the lesser of two evils, and – in a year when 1,250 civilians have so far been killed in the fighting with Nato – to many they still do...

The west views gender equality as an absolute human right and so we should. But...women's suffrage in Britain was achieved not by imposition from abroad but through long internal social debate, which is as it should be in so obviously sovereign a matter. Emmeline Pankhurst would not have succeeded had she been a foreigner. Social change will come eventually to Afghanistan, but it must come from within, and at its own pace. Our soldiers shouldn't die for it.⁶

Fergusson argues that even though Pashtun treatment of women is morally wrong, it would be wrong also for Western countries to intervene.

That is a judgment call. While the 'long internal social debate' about women's rights goes on, women and girls are beaten, mutilated and killed. But still we weigh this against the lives of British (and other!) soldiers and consider also whether, even if Western powers intervene, they can achieve the cultural change they want. And on this there is disagreement. There were over 200 responses to Fergusson's piece including this one:

There is nothing more cold blooded than the cultural relativist. Yes in the west women did not gain suffrage until the middle of the 20th century BUT...when they protested they were not sentenced to death. When an Afghan woman gets out of line

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/15/james-fergusson-afghanistan-women-west>

she is beaten, shot, or stoned to death. There is absolutely no way for these women to ever gain equal rights much less the right to live on their own...Here is the truth for you amoral idiots, if you get your way and NATO leaves the country to the Taliban the blood of thousands will be on your hands...

There is no easy answer and, indeed, Fergusson's article was a response to an editorial arguing that 'if we betray Afghan women, we have lost'. The point however is that it is an open question whether intervention is morally justified in this case. *In general, even if an action is morally wrong it does not follow that we are justified in trying to stop it.*

(iii) Practices that produce good results in one culture may not produce good results in another.

'During the 1980s', Susan Okin notes in her classic essay, 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women', 'the French government quietly permitted immigrant men to bring multiple wives into the country, to the point where an estimated 200,000 families in Paris are now polygamous...Overcrowded apartments and the lack of each wife's private space lead to immense hostility, resentment, even violence both among the wives and against each other's children. In part because of the strain on the welfare state caused by families with 20-30 members, the French government has recently decided to recognize only one wife and consider all the other marriages annulled'.

In an agrarian society, outside of the money economy, where wives and children work the farm, polygamy is a viable arrangement. Women benefit from the help of co-wives sharing the work and the more wives and children there are to work the land the better off the family is. But as Okin notes, polygamy plays out differently in urban, European settings. This shouldn't worry ethical universalists since we are not committed to holding that polygamy is always morally ok or always morally not ok. An ethical universalist can hold that polygamy ok in circumstances where it promotes human happiness but is not ok in circumstances where it results in hostility, resentment and violence. Promoting human happiness is universally ok; undermining human happiness is universally not ok.

In short, an ethical universalist who rejects cultural relativism can recognize that people who engage in culturally mandated practices that are wrong are not to be blamed, that even where a practice is morally wrong it might be wrong to stop it and that practices that are wrong in one context may be morally ok in another.

5 THE 'PARADOX OF TOLERANCE'

Ethical relativism is attractive because it seems to promote tolerance. But, arguably, there are some practices that we should not tolerate. Moreover, ethical relativism generates the 'Paradox of Tolerance'. Ethical relativism is attractive because it seems to be a justification for

universal tolerance. We rehearse anodyne platitudes: ‘who’s to say?’; ‘what’s right for one person may not be right for another’; ‘who am I to judge?’ However, an ethical relativist *cannot* support a principle of universal tolerance because, as a relativist, he cannot support *any* universal principle. So, to the extent that ethical relativism is motivated by an interest in promoting universal tolerance it is paradoxical.

Moreover, ethical relativists who endorse cultural relativism, according to which an action is right just in case as it conforms the mores of the culture in which it is done have an additional problem: they are committed to holding that members of intolerant cultures are morally obliged to be intolerant. The cultural relativist says ‘when in Rome do as the Romans do.’⁷ We should remember however that the Roman’s did perfectly awful things. They crucified Christians—starting with Jesus. They owned slaves and enjoyed blood sports at which slaves were made to kill one another for the entertainment of citizens. Christianity did not greatly improve the Romans: Constantine fought to secure and maintain power, killed off his rivals and had his wife and his son from an earlier liaison executed for unknown reasons. Subsequent Byzantine emperors blinded, mutilated, tortured and executed competitors, waged endless war and, reversing Constantine’s policy of religious toleration, persecuted pagans, heretics and Jews.

No one in his right mind would, from the moral point of view, recommend doing as these Romans did.

Summing up: Ethical relativism is attractive because it seems to support universal tolerance. But ethical relativism does not support any universal moral principles, including the principle of tolerance. Moreover, if we are cultural relativists, committed to the view that the mores of a person’s culture determine what is right for him, we shall have to hold that members of intolerant cultures ought to be intolerant. So we have argued here that ethical relativism isn’t as attractive as it may seem at first. And cultural relativism is seriously problematic. We conclude with Susan Okin’s classic essay, ‘Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?’, an argument intended to show this. The discussion of cultural relativism is not just of theoretical interest. As Okin argues, it has real world consequences.

6 SUSAN OKIN: ‘IS MULTICULTURALISM BAD FOR WOMEN?’⁸

Until the past few decades, minority groups—immigrants as well as indigenous peoples—were typically expected to assimilate into majority cultures. This assimilationist expectation is now often considered oppressive, and many Western countries are seeking to devise new policies that are more responsive to persistent cultural differences...[O]ne issue recurs across all

⁷ Hey, do you know where this comes from? St. Augustine went to Rome and discovered that the liturgical practices there were different from those of his native Carthage. He wrote to his mentor, St. Ambrose, to inquire what to do. Ambrose’s response was, “When in Rome, do as the Roman’s do.” How’s that for a factoid?

⁸ <http://www.bostonreview.net/BR22.5/okin.html> Footnote references link to the online version at the Boston Review website.

contexts, though it has gone virtually unnoticed in current debate: What should be done when the claims of minority cultures or religions clash with the norm of gender equality that is at least formally endorsed by liberal states (however much they continue to violate it in their practice)?...

During the 1980s, the French government quietly permitted immigrant men to bring multiple wives into the country, to the point where an estimated 200,000 families in Paris are now polygamous...Overcrowded apartments and the lack of each wife's private space lead to immense hostility, resentment, even violence both among the wives and against each other's children.

In part because of the strain on the welfare state caused by families with 20-30 members, the French government has recently decided to recognize only one wife and consider all the other marriages annulled. But what will happen to all the other wives and children? Having neglected women's view on polygamy for so long, the government now seems to be abdicating its responsibility for the vulnerability that women and children incurred because of its rash policy...

[Multiculturalism] is the claim, made in the context of basically liberal democracies, that minority cultures or ways of life are not sufficiently protected by ensuring the individual rights of their members and as a consequence should also be protected with special *group* rights or privileges...

Demands for such group rights are growing—from indigenous native populations, minority ethnic or religious groups, and formerly colonized ...Some proponents of group rights argue that even cultures that "flout the rights of [their individual members] in a liberal society" should be accorded group rights or privileges if their minority status endangers the culture's continued existence. Others do not claim that all minority cultural groups should have special rights, but rather that such groups—even illiberal ones, that violate their individual members' rights, requiring them to conform to group beliefs or norms—have the right to be "let alone" in a liberal society. Both claims seem clearly inconsistent with the basic liberal value of individual freedom, which entails that group rights should not trump the individual rights of their members; thus, I will not address the problems they present for feminists here. But some defenders of multiculturalism largely confine their defense of group rights to groups that are internally liberal. Even with these restrictions, feminists—anyone, that is, who endorses the moral equality of men and women—should remain skeptical. So I will argue...

6.1 GENDER AND CULTURE

Advocates of group rights for minorities within liberal states have not adequately addressed this simple critique of group rights, for at least two reasons. First, they tend to treat cultural groups as monoliths—to pay more attention to differences between and among groups than to differences within them... Second, advocates of group rights pay no or little attention to

the private sphere. Some of the best liberal defenses of group rights urge that individuals need "a culture of their own," and that only within such a culture can people develop a sense of self-esteem or self-respect, or the capacity to decide what kind of life is good for them. But such arguments typically neglect both the different roles that cultural groups require of their members and the context in which persons' senses of themselves and their capacities are first formed and in which culture is first transmitted—the realm of domestic or family life...

[M]ost cultures have as one of their principal aims the control of women by men...While the powerful drive to control women—and to blame and punish them for men's difficulty controlling their own sexual impulses—has been softened considerably in the more progressive, reformed versions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, it remains strong in their more orthodox or fundamentalist versions. Moreover, it is by no means confined to Western or monotheistic cultures. Many of the world's traditions and cultures, including those practiced within formerly conquered or colonized nation states—certainly including most of the peoples of Africa, the Middle East, Latin America and Asia—are quite distinctly patriarchal. They too have elaborate patterns of socialization, rituals, matrimonial customs, and other cultural practices (including systems of property ownership and control of resources) aimed at bringing women's sexuality and reproductive capabilities under men's control. Many such practices make it virtually impossible for women to choose to live independently of men, to be celibate or lesbian, or not to have children.

Those who practice some of the most controversial such customs—clitoridectomy, the marriage of children or marriages that are otherwise coerced, or polygamy—sometimes explicitly defend them as necessary for controlling women, and openly acknowledge that the customs persist at men's insistence. In an interview with New York Times reporter Celia Dugger, practitioners of clitoridectomy in Cote d'Ivoire and Togo explained that the practice "helps insure a girl's virginity before marriage and fidelity afterward by reducing sex to a marital obligation." As a female exciser said, "[a] woman's role in life is to care for her children, keep house and cook. If she has not been cut, [she] might think about her own sexual pleasure." In Egypt, where a law banning female genital cutting was recently overturned by a court, supporters of the practice say it "curbs a girl's sexual appetite and makes her more marriageable." Moreover, in such contexts, many women have no economically viable alternative to marriage. Men in polygamous cultures, too, readily acknowledge that the practice accords with their self-interest and is a means of controlling women. As a French immigrant from Mali said in a recent interview: "When my wife is sick and I don't have another, who will care for me? . . . [O]ne wife on her own is trouble. When there are several, they are forced to be polite and well behaved. If they misbehave, you threaten that you'll take another wife." Women apparently see polygamy very differently. French African immigrant women deny that they like polygamy, and say not only that they are given "no choice" in the matter, but that their female forebears in Africa did not like it either.¹³ As for child or otherwise coerced marriage: this practice is clearly a way not only of controlling whom the girls or young women marry, but also

of ensuring that they are virgins at the time of marriage and, often, enhancing the husband's power by creating a significant age difference between husbands and wives...

While virtually all of the world's cultures have distinctly patriarchal pasts, some—mostly, though by no means exclusively, Western liberal cultures—have departed far further from them than others. Western cultures, of course, still practice many forms of sex discrimination...But women in more liberal cultures are, at the same time, legally guaranteed many of the same freedoms and opportunities as men...This, as we have seen, is quite different from women's situation in many of the world's other cultures, including many of those from which immigrants to Europe and Northern America come.

6.2 GROUP RIGHTS?

Most cultures are patriarchal, then, and many (though not all) of the cultural minorities that claim group rights are more patriarchal than the surrounding cultures. So it is no surprise that the cultural importance of maintaining control over women shouts out to us in the examples given in the literature on cultural diversity and group rights within liberal states. Yet, though it shouts out, it is seldom explicitly addressed...

[T]he overwhelming majority of "cultural defenses" that are increasingly being invoked in US criminal cases concerning members of cultural minorities are connected with gender—in particular with male control over women and children...In a number of such cases, expert testimony about the accused's or defendant's cultural background has resulted in dropped or reduced charges, culturally-based assessments of *mens rea*, or significantly reduced sentences. In a well-known recent case, an immigrant from rural Iraq married his two daughters, aged 13 and 14, to two of his friends, aged 28 and 34. Subsequently, when the older daughter ran away with her 20-year-old boyfriend, the father sought the help of the police in finding her. When they located her, they charged the father with child abuse, and the two husbands and boyfriend with statutory rape. The Iraqis' defense is based in part, at least, on their cultural marriage practices...

Western majority cultures, largely at the urging of feminists, have recently made substantial efforts to avoid or limit excuses for brutalizing women. ...[C]ultural defenses violate their rights to the equal protection of the laws. When a woman from a more patriarchal culture comes to the United States (or some other Western, basically liberal, state), why should she be less protected from male violence than other women are? Many women from minority cultures have protested the double standard that is being applied to their aggressors...

6.3 PART OF THE SOLUTION?

In the Iraqi child marriage case mentioned above, if the father himself had not called in agents of the state, his daughters' plight might well not have become public. And when Congress in 1996 passed a law criminalizing clitoridectomy, a number of US doctors objected to the law as unjustified, since it concerned a private matter which, as one said, "should be decided by a

physician, the family, and the child."³² It can take more or less extraordinary circumstances for such abuses of girls or women to become public or for the state to be able to intervene protectively.

Thus it is clear that many instances of private sphere discrimination against women on cultural grounds are never likely to emerge in public, where courts can enforce their rights and political theorists can label such practices as illiberal and therefore unjustified violations of women's physical or mental integrity. Establishing group rights to enable some minority cultures to preserve themselves may not be in the best interests of the girls and women of the culture...

When liberal arguments are made for the rights of groups, then, special care must be taken to look at within-group inequalities. It is especially important to consider inequalities between the sexes, since they are likely to be less public, and less easily discernible. Moreover, policies aiming to respond to the needs and claims of cultural minority groups must take seriously the need for adequate representation of less powerful members of such groups. Since attention to the rights of minority cultural groups, if it is to be consistent with the fundamentals of liberalism, must be ultimately aimed at furthering the well-being of the members of these groups, there can be no justification for assuming that the groups' self-proclaimed leaders...represent the interests of all of the groups' members.