

Moral Questions

Everyone is interested in ethics. We all have our own ideas about what is right and what is wrong and how we can tell the difference. Philosophers and bishops discuss moral “mazes” on the radio. People no longer behave as they should.

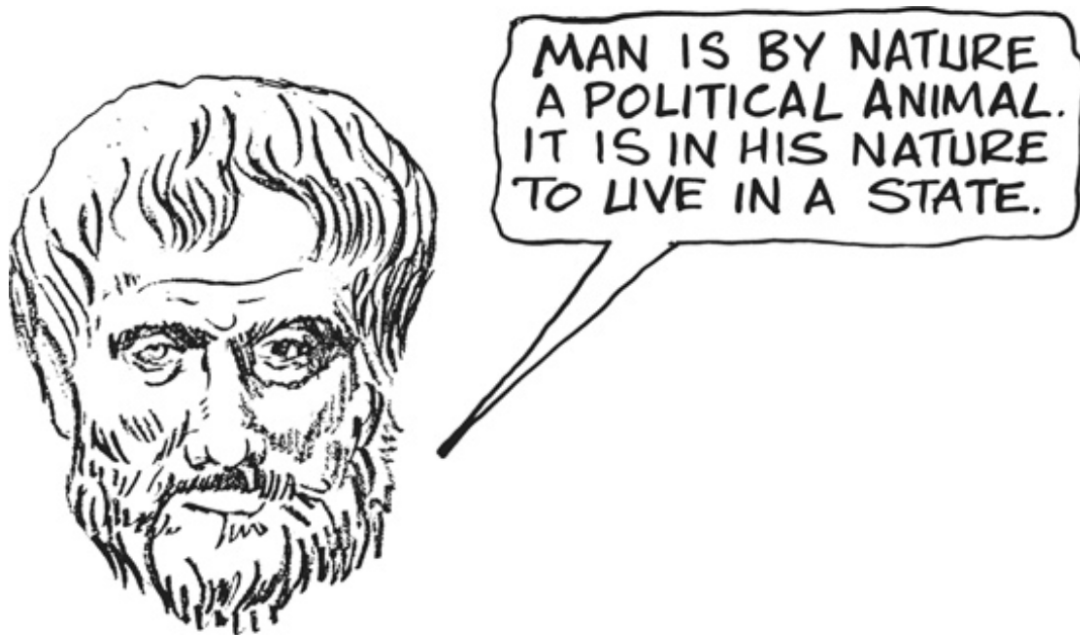


So we're told. But there have always been "moral panics". Plato thought 4th century B.C. Athens was doomed because of the wicked ethical scepticism of the Sophist philosophers and the credulity of his fellow citizens.



Social Beings

We are all products of particular societies. We do not “make ourselves”. We owe much of what we consider to be our “identity” and “personal opinions” to the community in which we live. This made perfect sense to Aristotle. For Aristotle, the primary function of the state was to enable collectivist human beings to have philosophical discussions and eventually agree on a shared code of ethics.



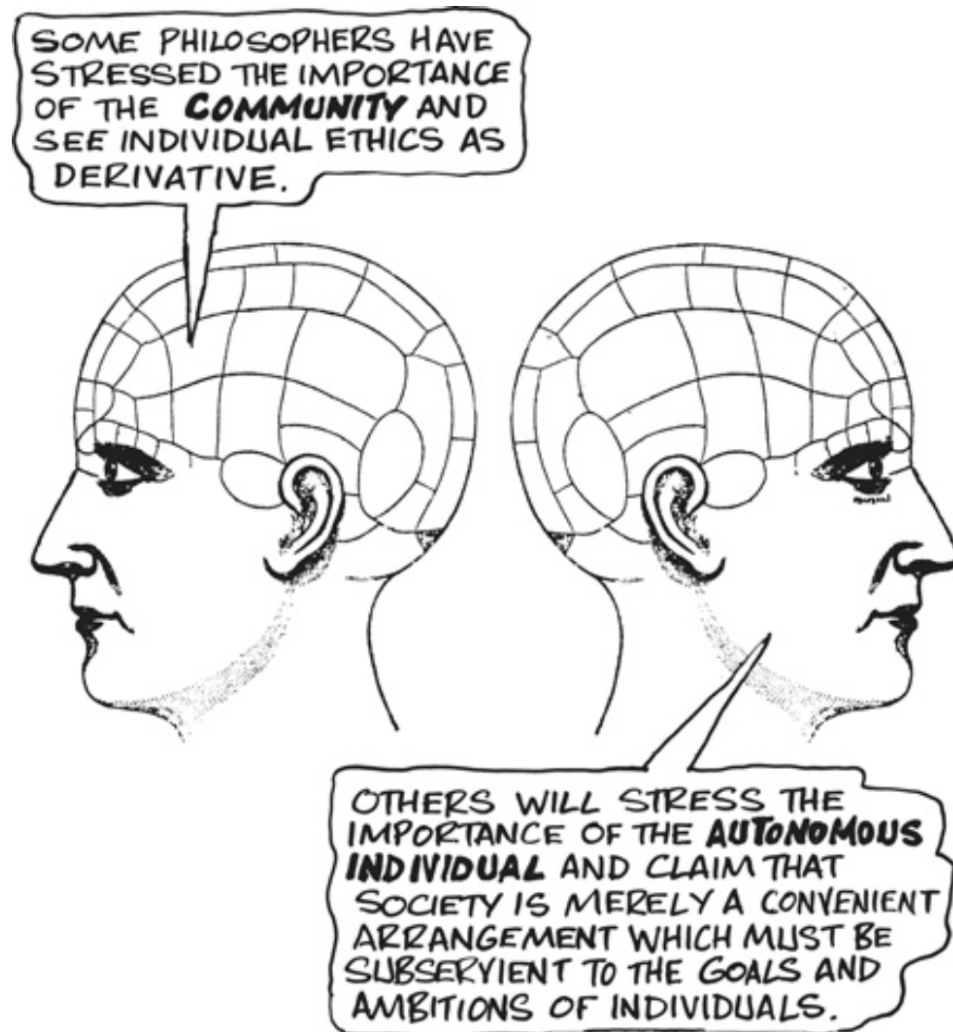
But as soon as we are formed, most of us start to question the society that has made us, and do so in a way that seems unique to us. Socrates stressed that it was in fact our duty.



The State may decide what is legally right and wrong, but the **law** and **morality** are not the same thing.

Communitarians or Individualists?

Ethics is complicated because our morality is an odd mixture of received tradition and personal opinion.



Both **individualist** and **communitarian** philosophers are reluctant to explain away ethics as no more than “club rules” agreed upon and formalized by members. Both want to legitimize either communal ethics or the need for an individual morality by appealing to some kind of “neutral” set of ideals. Much of this book is about these different attempts to provide a foundation for ethics.

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Setting the Stage

Ten Central Questions

Let's begin, as philosophers do, by asking some odd and awkward questions. These questions are important, even if clear and positive answers to them are few.

Are there any differences between moral laws and society's laws?
If there are, why is this?

What are human beings really like: selfish and greedy or generous and kind?

Are some people "better" at morality than others, or is everyone equally capable of being good?

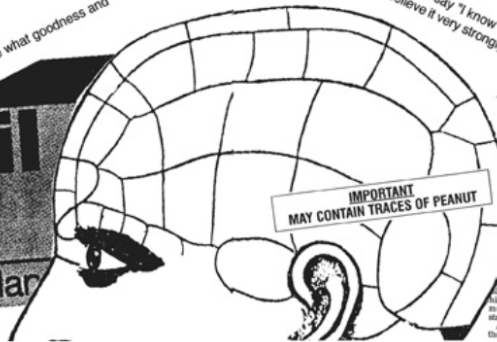
Are there good ways of teaching children to behave morally?

Does anyone have the right to tell anyone else what goodness and wickedness are?

outlook

Does evil exist?

Henry Porter on Dunblane



Are there certain kinds of acts (like torturing children) that are always wrong? If so, what are they?

What do you think is the best answer to the question, "Why should I be a good person?"

Is ethics a special kind of knowledge? If so, what sort of knowledge is it and how do we get hold of it?

Is morality about obeying a set of rules or is it about thinking carefully about consequences?

When people say "I know murder is wrong", do they know it is wrong or just believe it very strongly?

Vegetarian

Case raises doubts over doctors' ability to diagnose 'brain deaths'

Dyer
Correspondent
A MAN who for seven years was thought to be in the same permanent unconscious state as the "right to die" laborer, Tony Bland, has become aware of his surroundings and is communicating with hospital staff.
At one time the health authority caring for the man in the north of England discussed asking the High Court to sanction the withdrawal of the artificial feeding keeping him alive. But his wife was implacably opposed and the idea was not pursued, although relatives have no right legally to veto doctors' decisions in such cases.
The case of the former busman, diagnosed as in a persistent vegetative state (PVS), puts a huge question mark over experts' ability to

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The Social Origins of Belief Systems

It seems very unlikely that any society has ever existed in which individual members have thought the murder of others to be acceptable. Although the odd serial killer does occasionally surface in any society, most of us think of one as an exceptional aberration, or even as “non-human”.



There have always been rules about when men may kill other men – usually outsiders as opposed to insiders.



Such moral understandings are often codified and regulated by religious and legal taboos of various kinds. Human beings seem reluctant to accept that morality is something invented by themselves and so tend to legitimize moral rules by mythologizing their origins: “The Great White Parrot says stealing is wrong”. The story of ethics is to some extent a description of attempts like these to legitimize morality.

Morality and Religion

Most people living in Western Christian societies would say that they base their ethical beliefs and behaviour on the ten negative commandments, rather inconveniently carved on stone tablets handed to Moses by God. (Of the ten, only about six are actually **ethical**.)



This “reciprocity rule” has a long track record and is found in many different religions worldwide. It is a bit like prudent insurance – a sensible way of getting along in the world, even if it’s not quite what Jesus Christ says. (His moral code is much more radical and not at all “reciprocal”. You have to do good deeds to those who have done you no good at all. This is why real Christianity is a hard act to follow.)

Is religion where morality comes from? Is being moral simply a matter of obeying divine commands? Independently-minded individuals, like Socrates (in Plato’s **Euthyphro**), said that there is more to morality than religious obedience. One reason for this is that religious commands vary from one religion to another.



Atheists and agnostics would refuse to obey any order from God they believed to be wrong. Religion on its own doesn't seem to be a complete and satisfactory foundation for human ethical beliefs. What many philosophers search for is a way of justifying moral values which are independent of religious belief.

Morality and Human Nature

One alternative answer is to say that morality comes not from external supernatural sources but from ourselves. This raises one of the **big questions** of **all time**.



Thinking on ethics often begins with assumptions about human nature, either negative or positive. For instance, the Christian notion of “original sin” takes the view that our nature is “fallen” and essentially bad. If this is the case, then it is our social environment and its legal sanctions that force us all to be moral. But the reason most of us don’t torture children is because we think it is **wrong**, not because we fear a visit from the police.

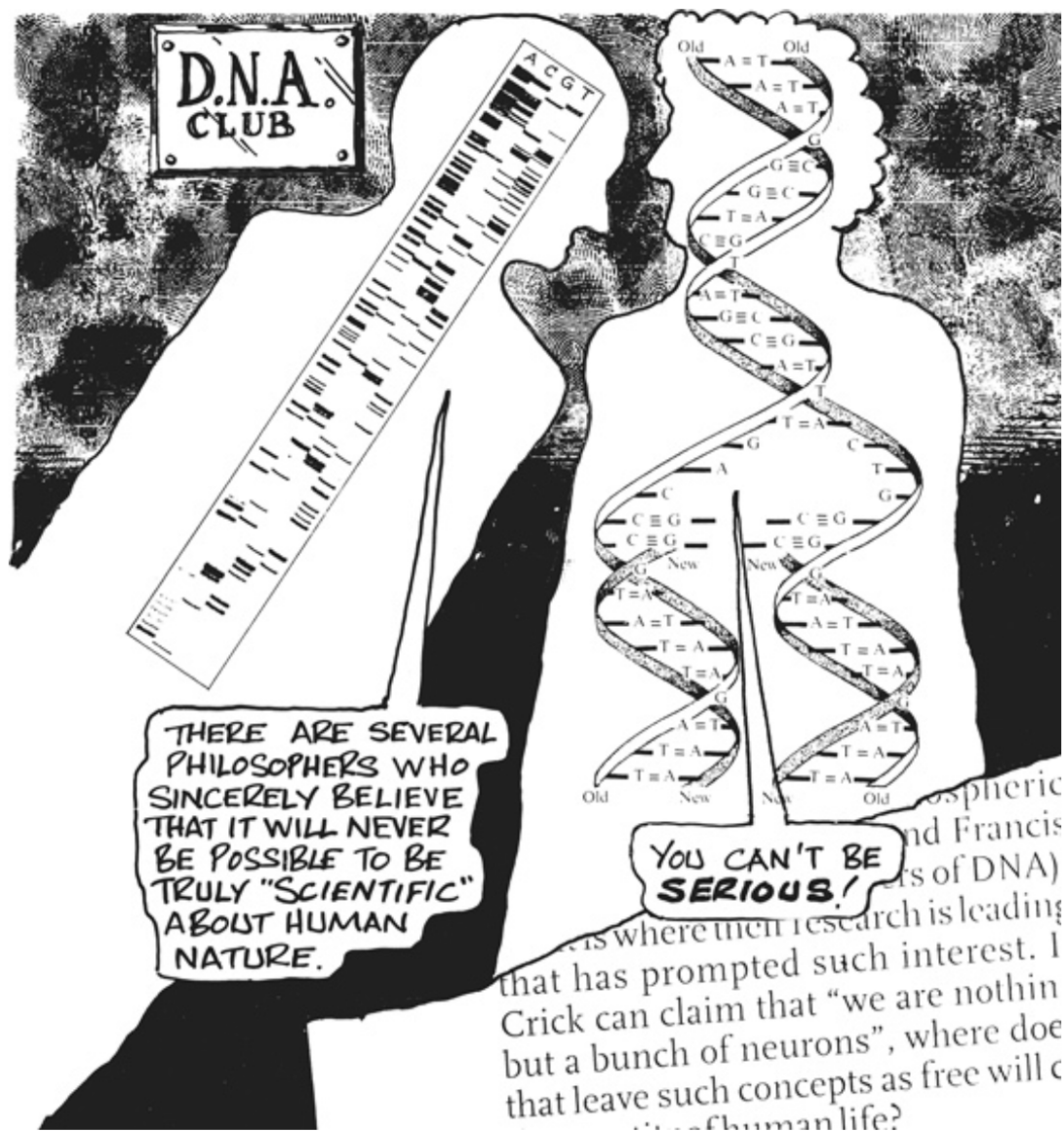
This negative Christian verdict is an example of the “programmed” view of human nature. There is an opposite “Romantic” view of human nature which assumes it to be positively programmed for good.



Men may kill other men in different uniforms because society encourages them to do so, but their genetic instincts might be to do things like play football and drink beer with each other.

Genetics

Nowadays, arguments about human nature centre more and more on genetics. Words like “selfish gene” and “altruistic gene” turn up in popular science articles, but no-one is sure yet what these terms mean or what the full implications of them are. Geneticists use the word “selfish” in an odd sort of way, so that many people now assume erroneously that it is possible to identify “criminality” from DNA. Genetics is an empirical science, but the subsequent arguments and discussions about “human nature” that new genetic “facts” stimulate are full of political myths, ideological assertions and dangerous tosh.



The whole debate is highly speculative and unscientific. Worse, it may be what philosophers call a form of “**language bewitchment**”. We assume that because there are convenient human terms like “good”

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and “bad” and “human nature” that there are real physical concrete entities to which these words refer. They very probably don’t exist as “genes” at all. Geneticists prefer words like “potential”, “propensity” and “encourage” rather than “cause” or “determine”.



Talk about genes means that the old and eternally unsolvable debate about “nature versus nurture” crops up and drags all the usual political baggage along with it. Those who wish to preserve political power structures are often very keen on **genetic determinism**.

Do We Have Any Choice?

Some philosophers maintain that DNA and social environment have little or no influence on the sorts of people we become and the moral choices that we make. We are almost wholly autonomous individuals who make our own moral decisions in life and therefore we alone are responsible for all the good and bad things that we do. After all, without free will, we are little more than robots and cannot be moral beings at all. It is a commonplace in ethics that “**ought implies can**”. You can’t even begin to talk about morality, unless you assume that human beings have freedom to choose.



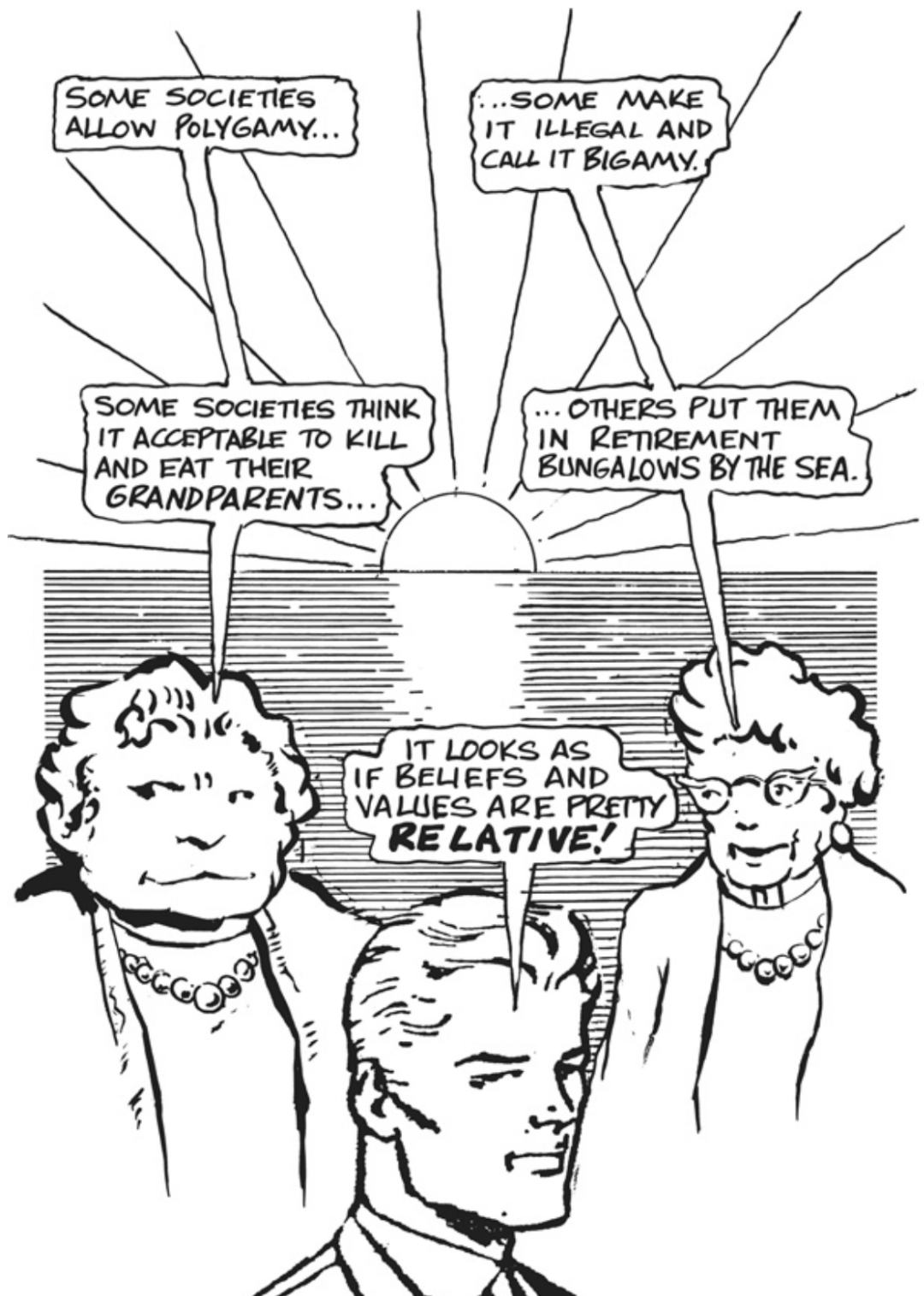
Nevertheless, “commonsense” views like these can be naive or prejudiced. A brutal society can often have a strong negative influence on the formation of someone’s moral character.

Is Society to Blame?

Even if DNA has little or no influence on our moral character, perhaps we are still products of our social and cultural environment. At birth, we are blank sheets of paper that are gradually written on by parents, teachers, peer groups, the media and all sorts of other ideological forces. The influence of society on our moral personalities is infinitely stronger than any genetic inheritance and almost totally responsible for everything that makes us both human and moral. This means that it is nonsense to talk about some absurd fiction like “human nature”, as if it has some kind of pre-societal existence. This view is held by many sociologists:



Human nature might either be wholly **plastic**, and subsequently given “ethical shape” by social forces, or a **programmed** bundle of moral software. What puzzles philosophers is the variation in ethical beliefs held by different societies at different times.



Moral Relativism

The recognition of this wide variety of ethical beliefs and practices is usually called **moral relativism**. Differences in moral belief exist between different countries and tribes, but can also exist between different subcultures within a society, or between different classes. History also demonstrates how time alters moral beliefs.



Nowadays there are very different sets of moral beliefs held by feminists and religious fundamentalists about abortion.

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Ethical Absolutism

If there are all of these moral beliefs floating around, which one is right? How could we prove that one belief was right and others wrong? Most ethical relativists would say that there are no possible ways of deciding, and no such thing as moral “knowledge” at all. This kind of scepticism has worried other philosophers who think that there must surely be a set of universal moral rules that are always true. These philosophers are often called “**Universalists**”, “**Realists**” or “**Absolutists**”.



All three would say that it was always wrong to sacrifice babies, regardless of the beliefs of the culture that encouraged or allowed this practice.

The danger of **Ethical Absolutism** is that it can legitimize one powerful culture imposing its own local moral values on all others, by claiming a monopoly on the moral “truth”.

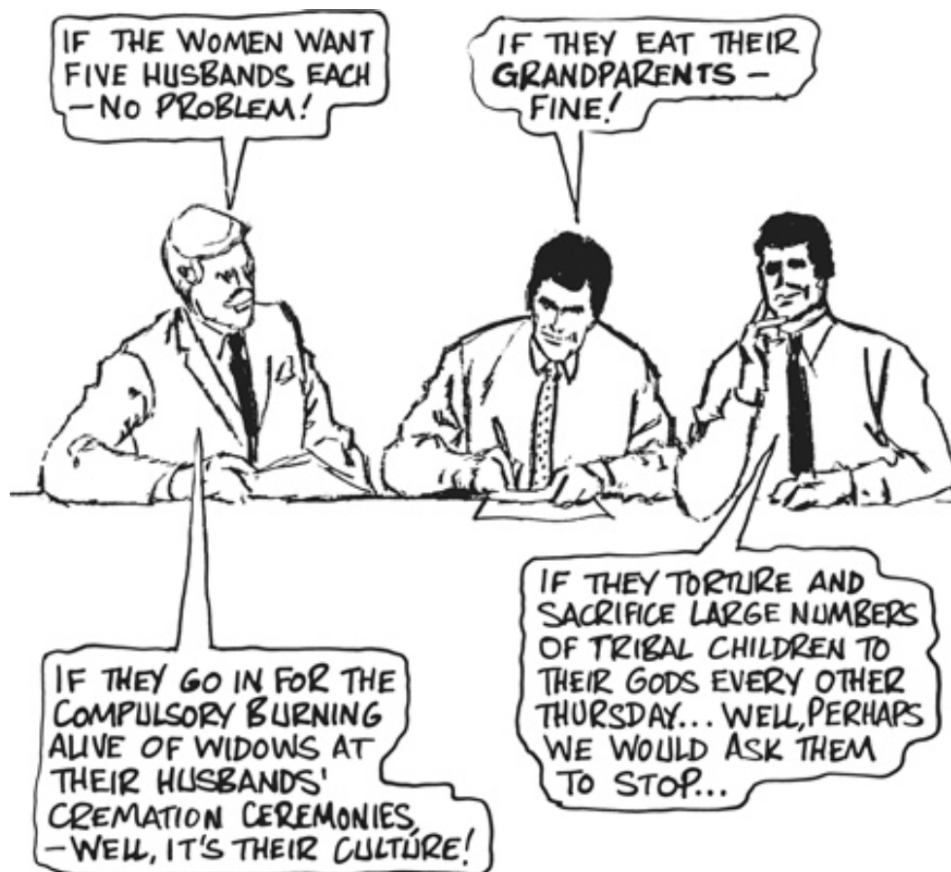
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Westerners have also been witness to, and a cause of, the wholesale destruction of hundreds of unique cultures with their own ethical beliefs. Now we make some inadequate attempts to protect "innocent" and "primitive" tribal cultures and wring our hands in shame when we hear of their annihilation. We send out anthropologists and leave our Bibles and underwear at home.

Relativism versus Absolutism

Now most Western liberals and academics would not interfere with the moral beliefs and customs of other cultures.



An ethical absolutist would then smile rather smugly and get us to admit that perhaps there are a few universal moral rules that are always true, wherever you are, like:



Another Absolutist Reply

Some societies may look as if they go in for weird immoral behaviour, different from our own, but there seem to be a few fundamental core values like “Murder is wrong” that are always followed. A tribe may burn widows and sacrifice children in the belief that this is for the ultimate long-term heavenly good of the victims involved, but they don’t sanction the murder of widows and children as such. Absolutists say that Relativists only look at what people do, not at what they actually **believe**.



Absolutists say that human morality is like this – there is real “moral knowledge”. Some moral beliefs are “true” and some aren’t, it’s just that we haven’t figured out how to prove which is which yet.

Are They Both Wrong?

Although the differences between Relativists and Absolutists are clear enough, they both face certain problems. Absolutists have to explain what the “core” moral rules are, and why they’ve selected the ones they have. Absolutists claim that the core moral rules are generally those “foundational” ones that enable societies to exist. But there can be problems with this definition of core values.



Yet most Relativists also believe in one absolute moral rule: “Don’t interfere with other cultures”.