1 WHY THERE IS NO PROBLEM OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Relativism is nothing new. Throughout the history of Western philosophy, when we find skepticism, we often find relativism. The most extreme skepticism of the ancient Greek world, created by Pyrrho but best described for us by Sextus Empiricus, was explicitly based in the relativity of perception to the perceiver. Like them, skeptics have often counseled obedience to local social convention, having eschewed any higher or more universal principles. But *cultural* relativism is peculiarly modern. It is only since the eighteenth century that we find thinkers espousing, or fighting, the claim that the validity of acts and utterances is relative to cultures *per se.* Cultural relativism would not exist as a concept but for the intellectual and sociopolitical revolutions of the Enlightenment. The reason is not that the new age brought international exchange and interaction among cultures; there had always been such interaction. Nor is it a novel deflationary Western self-consciousness as merely one among many civilizations; arguably the modern West has never had such a consciousness, or only in very recent bouts of ambiguous revisionism. Rather, it is due to a uniquely modern collision of politics and philosophy and society whereby, for the first time, all seemed inexorably to condition each other.

As we have seen, it is during the simultaneous demise of Western imperialism and philosophical foundationalism in the second half of the twentieth century that Western thought took a further cultural turn. Dewey, the later Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, Quine, Gadamer, Habermas, and Derrida all made meaning public rather than transcendental or private, hence historically variable, thereby opening the door to relativism. Today few philosophers endorse relativism but many court it. In reaction to this reaction some think that "cultural relativism" is a bogeyman only anachronistic foundationalists could fear. If we give up outmoded hopes of justifying knowledge from the ground up, they say, then relativism loses its power to threaten. Clifford Geertz's "Anti Anti-Relativism" makes just this point (Geertz 1989).

In supporting his "frank ethnocentrism" (Rorty 1991a: 168), which endorses universal rights and rational critique as the culture of the modern West rather than as valid in themselves, Richard Rorty has suggested that Hilary Putnam and other philosophers should cease to conjure up the "relativist menace" (Rorty 1998). For Geertz and Rorty the demise of objectivity is unproblematic. They affect what we could call the Alfred E. Neumann response to relativism: "What, me worry?"

It will turn out that, oddly enough, Geertz and Rorty are right but for the wrong reasons. The point is not to stop worrying and love relativity. Relativism is arguably incoherent, and its abandonment of realism, the belief that the validity or truth of our utterances is determined by their fealty to reality, would indeed have serious social consequences (Cahoone 2002b). The point is rather that a properly conceived realism remains unthreatened by a limited cultural relativity that, while undeniable, is not the last word on human cognition.

Relativity and Rationality

The recent background of the relativism debate arose from a remarkable convergence of four distinct strains of thought between 1958 and 1962. The first, explicitly anthropological, was inspired by the 1958 publication of Peter Winch's *The Idea of a Social Science,* in which he applied the work of the later Wittgenstein to anthropological interpretation. He was quickly criticized by Alasdair MacIntyre and Ernest Gellner, initiating what came to be called the rationality debate. Next, in "Translation and Meaning," a chapter in his *Word and Object* (1960), W.V.O. Quine argued for the "indeterminacy" of translation between natural languages that shared no expressions. Donald Davidson would later make a major contribution to that line of thought, arguing that "conceptual scheme relativism," and with it global skepticism, is nonsensical. Third, also in 1960, the hermeneutics of Hans Georg-Gadamer's *Truth and Method* argued, as we saw, that we must accept the historically embedded nature of cognition as the source of, rather than an obstacle to, truth. Last, in 1962 Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* claimed that scientific revolutions involve "paradigm" shifts so deep and far-reaching that the meanings of terms from one paradigm to the next may be "incommensurable," making rational, noncircular evaluation of the paradigms impossible. These formed the background for the

philosophical debate over relativism in the late twentieth century. More recently MacIntyre, Samuel Fleischacker, and Lorenzo Simpson have proposed nuanced accounts of the logic of intercultural communication and evaluation that open the way for a realist rejoinder to relativism.

While Winch's 1958 book initiated the debate, his response to its critics is most relevant for us. In the essay "Understanding a Primitive Society" (1964) he criticized anthropologist Evans-Pritchard's study of an East African people, the Azande. Winch argued that while having improved on the Eurocentric approach of Levy-Bruhl, Evans-Pritchard still assumed the irrationality of those Zande beliefs that contradicted modern Western science (Wilson 1970). Winch's critique is straight out of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations:* norms of rationality have meaning only *within* a practical-social situation of language use. The Azande *are* realistic, consistent, and rational, but according to *their own* distinctive criteria. For "rationality is not just a concept in a language like any other. . . . It is a concept necessary to the existence of any language: to say of a society that it has a language is also to say that it has a concept of rationality" (Wilson 1970: 99). It is also striking to recall Winch's motivation, made clear in his political conclusion: "What Marx called the 'alienation' characteristic of man in industrial society. . . . Our blindness to the point of primitive modes of life is a corollary of the pointlessness of much of our own life" (Wilson 1970: 106).

As we noted in the preceding chapter, the most prominent twentieth-century attempt to promote an account of what could be called cultural knowing, comes from Gadamer's *Truth and Method*. The first task of Gadamer's work was to establish that there exists a tradition, or rather a family of traditions, in Western thought which acknowledges forms of understanding that lie outside "method" or more precisely "scientific method," including *phronēsis* or practical wisdom, the theory of "judgment," taste in aesthetics, and rhetoric in politics. Focusing on aesthetic and historical understanding, Gadamer argued that reason operates *through* history, tradition, and culture, not *outside* them. Rather than make objective knowledge impossible, reason's immanence is our sole means of access to truth. True understanding, for example of a historical artifact, occurs not by doffing one's historical prejudices but by mobilizing them into a dialogue with the other. But this means there is no rational understanding outside or independent of cultural tradition. Consequently, "truth" in interpretation requires, for Gadamer, that dialogue achieve a fusion of the interpretive horizons of interpreter and interpreted.

Quine denied the very possibility of such a fusion. As he famously argued in *Word and Object,* when the native points at a rabbit hopping by and shouts "gavagai!" an observant anthropologist may take *gavagai* to mean "rabbit." But the meaning of *gavagai* is in principle *under*determined by the observable stimulus conditions of the speaker and any ostensive act (pointing). No behavioral situation would allow the anthropologist to distinguishing the native's foreign ontology, whether she meant by *gavagai* "An individuated physical object we call rabbit!" or "The unfolding of a process of rabbit-ing!" or "An instantiation of the ideal form of Rabbithood!" Indeed, as a behaviorist who denies that meanings are mental entities, Quine claims that there is no uniquely right translation, since *there is no fact of the matter* that could decide which is right, no hidden object in the native's mind for the anthropologist to be right or wrong about. Quine extends the case to a general conclusion: "To the same degree that the radical translation of sentences is under-determined by the totality of dispositions to verbal behavior, our own theories and beliefs in general are underdetermined by the totality of possible sensory evidence time without end" (Quine 1960: 78). He thus endorses what he elsewhere calls ontological relativity, the underdetermination of our own ontological schemes by observations between which evidence can never decide (Quine 1969).

The most important attack on the very problem of relativism in post–World War II Western philosophy arrived as an extension of Quine's view in Donald Davidson's "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (Davidson 1984). In a criticism of the global relativism of the linguist Benjamin Whorf, Davidson denied that relativism of a robust sort can make any sense at all. He rests his argument on the recognition that a relativism of *meaning,* which would be inevitable for a global cognitive relativism, would undermine the relativism of *validity.* If the meanings of statements were culturally relative in a strong sense, then we could not discover that two cultures made contrary statements, since one culture's translation of another culture's claims would be "deprived of things to go wrong about." We can never find enough evidence to assert a deep relativism of meaning; the translation of another culture's claims *must* employ the principle of "charity," by which the translator assumes a sizable background agreement of beliefs in order to translate any claim in question. Without the assumption of commonality we cannot even begin to interpret their statements. Elsewhere Davidson presses this argument further. Just as we can never find

evidence necessary to justify statements like, "That culture over there shares none of our beliefs," we can make no sense of the claimed possibility that the preponderance of our system of beliefs could be false, that we might be wrong about everything. Thus "most of our beliefs must be true" (Davidson 1986: 314).

Relativism and Culture

With the historical resources now developed we can now turn to our systematic task. Relativism, if it is to mean something philosophical and troubling, hence worth discussing, must claim that the judgments we take to be valid or true are so because of their relation to traits of judges or judgments, rather than traits of what is judged. Of course, even realists admit that the traits of judgments, theories, and languages matter, but deny that they are decisive. As such, relativism is a form of epistemological antirealism, denying that what is judged, as something independent of the judgment, determines the validity of the judgment. Note that in what follows I will be solely concerned with epistemic relativism, relativism about the validity of knowledge-claims. In particular, nothing said here implies that moral norms must all be universal; there may well be such thing as "moral relativity" (Wong 1984). Also, I will not treat "objective relativism," the metaphysical claim that real things are constituted by their manifold roles in diverse contexts. Last, nothing herein specifically rebuts more technical forms of relativism, like Joseph Margolis's relativistic attack on bivalence—although I would reject such approaches for other reasons (Margolis 2000; Cahoone 2002c).

What then does "cultural" add to "relativism"? Presumably it makes cultures the things to which the validity of judgment is relative. So if culture is a society's network of practices, artifacts, and representations, and the interpretive patterns embedded in them, cultural relativism must imply that cognition of reality is social, mediated through and dependent on semiotic structures like language, gesture, and art, *and* that those social-semiotic structures are particular and historical, different systems being inherited by different human societies.

Now there are some versions of cultural relativism we can disqualify with dispatch. First are any global hence self-undermining relativisms, such

as Davidson analyzed, relativisms which say, "There are cultures so different from ours that we don't agree on anything," "Cultures are incommensurable," and so on. As David Wong has pointed out more recently, such claims actually undercut the relativist's ability to problematize Western judgments of cultural superiority, for that ability requires the critic to *understand* the subordinated culture and sympathize with its validity. The interesting forms of relativism presume a significant degree of cross-cultural understanding (Wong 1989). Second, and related, is what Bernard Williams calls vulgar relativism (Williams 1981: 142). This is a moral position with which we are all familiar. It holds that any culture's attempt to judge another, or to demand another culture's conformity with its own judgments, is cognitively unsupportable and/or morally wrong. Upon reflection we can see that this position in fact *violates* relativism. It asserts a universal morality of noninterference or toleration. In fact, it is just a universal "democratic" or "liberal" or "rights-based" morality, albeit one whose sole injunction is against interference in the self-determination of each cultural unit. A truly relativistic notion of freedom, absent any constraining universal rules, would have to say that whether a culture is morally justified in imposing its rules on others is *itself* relative to that culture. If one culture thinks cultural imperialism is fine, then it *is* fine, *for* that culture. Vulgar relativism is a universalist morality that mistakes itself as relativism. Last, there is a lesson for cognitive relativism in the most common argument against *moral* relativism. That argument is a combination punch, a *reductio ad absurdum* argument followed by a charge of inconsistency, namely, that those who assert relativism will eventually find themselves condemning evil (such as the Holocaust) nonrelativistically. In effect this is to argue that there are no relativists in foxholes. But the smart relativist will soon discover that the best tactical response to this *reductio* is to adopt the passive voice, not to *say* " 'True' means 'true-in-a-perspective" but merely to undermine any nonrelativist assertion. It is when following this tactic that relativists like Richard Rorty are most successful. I have argued that they are not in fact successful, but their reticence certainly restricts their liability to charges of self-reflexive inconsistency (Cahoone 2002b). We cannot assume a silent relativist herein, but the principle holds that the less the relativist says, the better.

Thus, a genuine, consistent, and plausible relativism must be a third-person view of the limits, and true meaning, of judgmental validity. By itself it has no unmediated moral implications. For the intercultural communicator can always respond, "Yes, our principles, which assert universal

validity, are valid only with respect to themselves (hence ourselves). But, we are committed to them, and there being no contravening universally valid principles, we will act on them, even in our relations with and judgments of other cultures." As stated, the recursive use of relativism by a speaker need not derail any assertion or action based on his or her cultural principles. At this point the nonvulgar job of the relativist is done, and she must retire to her study, allowing the intercultural dialogue to unfold as it will; any further intervention is vulgar, that is, the effect of a nonrelativist, universal standard of noninterference. This is a bit like the existentialist "ethics" of authenticity: observing an attempted murder, the existentialist can admonish the agent to give up bad faith and sociocultural programming, to recognize fully his absolute freedom and total responsibility, and the true meaning, in the light of finitude, of his reasons for this act. If the prospective murderer, now fully conscious of the weight of his actions, gets back to the business of slaughter, the existentialist can only say, "Well, I tried . . ." In this sense the only effect of relativism is to modify the type of validity claimed by the agent, not to deny that validity. Trying to be more definitive and effectual leads to trouble for the relativist.

So, in what follows, let us assume a relatively powerful, troublesome yet not obviously incompetent cultural relativism that will avoid the David-sonian and Williamsian traps and make no extravagant positive claims. To avoid cumbersome locutions I will generally refer to judgments or beliefs normed by truth as the things whose relativity must be determined, meaning these to represent as well cognitions, perspectives, theories, and even practices (where the validity of the last hangs on the truth of the beliefs they presuppose). My approach will be double-jointed, to unpack the "problem" of cultural relativism and in the process to examine what a robust cultural relativism must presuppose about culture. In effect I will be asking, Are cultures really the kind of things they would have to be for the relativity of the validity of our cognitions to them to constitute a philosophical problem?

The Problems of Cultural Relativism

"The" problem of cultural relativism is not one but three distinct, albeit related, troubles which arise in three situations, given three beliefs about what cultures are like. One arises when a policy is proposed within a

polity, and some object that the policy is itself "cultural." *"That's cultural"* implies that the belief in question is "culture-bound" and thereby not potentially universal, presumably because determined by local prejudice rather than by free choice or agreement based on evidence and reasons. This epistemic debility would hold only if cultures are sufficiently unified belief systems that the objective truth of each cultural judgment is dependent on cultural presuppositions whose truth is unsupportable. The second, perhaps most famous, situation is one of intercultural evaluation. Not to put too fine a point on it, the question is: *"Are they wrong? Are they evil?"* More soberly, can *we validly* judge that their cultural practice or belief is wrong, morally or cognitively? This can only be possible if cultures overlap, if they share beliefs that make intercultural evaluation possible on a shared basis. The third situation will sound strange, since people rarely ask it in the following form, but it is nevertheless crucially bound up with the appeal, and fear, of cultural relativism. It is: *"Is my culture right?"* More completely, does the fact of my being embedded in a culture mean that I have no noncircular way to judge the validity of my own practices and beliefs? Cultural membership would present such a problem only if it were *epistemological.* I will argue that the first of these problems is what Carnap called a pseudo-problem, hence can be *dissolved* by rejecting the presupposition about culture on which it is based. The second, once we see that there is no support for its presupposition about culture, will be recognized as a contingent problem of interpretive practice, in effect a political and not a philosophical problem at all, hence one that may be practically *resolved.* And the third is a social retelling of a philosophical problem that may indeed by *unsolvable,* but has nothing particular to do with culture at all.

Can Cultural Judgments Be Valid?

The first problem is, can cultural beliefs be validly judged to be right or true? This may seem odd; certainly cultural beliefs are generally regarded as right or true by cultural members. But for that very reason we normally defer applying to such beliefs the tests we would force upon beliefs in the professions, in science, in our daily pragmatic dealings with social institutions. Are cultural beliefs beyond normative judgment, incapable of rational adjudication or universal validity, hence *merely* cultural?

The threat that the trait of "being cultural" might make a belief un-justifiable hangs on its claimed dependence on a broadly effective epis-temic context whose holistic relation to objects either cannot be validated or cannot be validated in a noncircular way. It hangs on what being "cul-turally embedded" does to a belief's chances for justification. My answer is: sometimes very little.

Suppose two women are seated at a lunch counter discussing meta-physics. One is a panpsychist, insisting that everything is a mind or a prop-erty of mind, while the other is a reductive physicalist. The panpsychist, perhaps unsure in handling solids, drops her spoon, while the physicalist, leaping to her strong suit, catches it in midair. We might imagine that on any logical reconstruction, metaphysical beliefs would be sufficiently basic and central to their respective "belief systems" that their beliefs about and dealings with the spoon ought to be significantly different. But that is not so. Despite their utterly opposed metaphysical beliefs, their interaction shows that they in fact share an uncountable list of beliefs (uncountable if for no other reason than that we have no reliable way of counting beliefs); neither tries to pass a hand through the spoon, eat it, or move it telekinetically.

The same can be applied to lunchers from different cultures. In Quine's example, the tree encountered by the native on the day before the first Western anthropologist arrives is the same tree the anthropologist hides behind the next day. Whatever the metaphysical differences between native and anthropologist, however the former may understand *gavagai* as a "moment-in-rabbit-becoming" or a "part-of-the-collective-mega-rabbit," while the latter sees an individuated physical object, they *both* include ref-erence to the same cuddly, pet-able, edible target. The alternative meta-physical schemes cannot be behaviorally discerned in this case, as Quine says. But other things *can* be discerned while metaphysics varies in the background. The meaningful tie between rabbit and metaphysics may be quite *loose* and pose little problem for the anthropologist and native in making rabbit stew. For the two can disagree, even fail to understand each other, on metaphysics, while understanding and agreeing on everything else. In fact, Quine's argument showed not the *indeterminacy* but the mere *underdeterminacy* of translation, the absence of *complete* epistemic constraint. Complete constraint would narrow the possible translations to one. Quine is right that such is unavailable. But some meanings are ruled out even in the one present speech act: by "gavagai" the pointing native cannot mean

"Don't look, nothing is happening over there." And his observed linguistic behavior over time will rule out far more possible meanings, even in the situation of "radical" translation.

For as we know, the degree of unity or coherence within the beliefs of a culture, as within any group or individual belief "system," need not be particularly high. A culture's beliefs about marriage, its death rituals, its engineering practices, and its cuisine need not express or subtend one single set of ideas, values, or images. The degree of coherence among spheres of life, institutions, practices, and so on, is itself variable among cultures. And this means that the dependence of any particular agent's act or assertion on a framework of culture prejudgments is highly variable. We must conceive of what an individual brings to the act of judgment or interaction as a loose web with many nexuses of connected interpretive patterns, memories, motivations, and so on, and not assume that every response equally implicates the entire web, or what is the same thing, a set of principles presupposed by the entire web.

The notion that there is a controlling subset within a person's or a culture's "system" of beliefs has of course a more familiar name. Since the publication of Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in 1979, philosophers have become sensitive to the extent to which the metaphor of "foundations" is operative in their work. The foundationalist imagination, since Descartes, not only pictures that philosophy can demonstrate the truth of deep claims, but that we can arrange beliefs into a hierarchical system with one finite set of foundational beliefs on whose truth the truth of all others depends. This set the stage for Rorty to deny the possibility of justifying our beliefs at all, since if all depend on the foundational set of beliefs, and the latter really are foundational, then there are no beliefs that can be noncircularly used to compare the foundational set to reality. Rorty mainly aimed to show that the traditionally realist theory of truth as the "correspondence" of belief to world could never be established, but the foundationalist picture was equally entangled with another metaphor, less infamous but equally misleading, that truth is coherence of belief and thus exists within *enclosures.* If we ought not regard a finite set of beliefs held by a believer to be "founded" on deeper presuppositions, we ought to see that, absent that vertical relationship, we can no longer say what is "inside" and what is "outside" an enclosure that has been defined by that relation of dependence. For in either case what matters is that any given belief of a

person or culture must be dependent upon—vertically or horizontally, founded on or enclosed in—one set of "ultimate" beliefs.

Thus I grant that "final vocabularies," as Rorty once called them, cannot be compared to reality (Rorty 1989). But my question is, *are there any?* If final vocabularies, foundations, and enclosures are bad epistemology—that is to say, unjustifiable—they are also bad logic, bad as a description of how our beliefs relate to each other and to the world. They are cases of what Karl Popper called the myth of the framework (Popper 1996). Popper objected that rational justification cannot be regarded as the discovery of an ultimate set of asserted truths that positively justify belief (although for him the underlying reason was that "justification" can only mean "not yet falsified"). The horizontal metaphor of enclosure is indeed no better than the vertical metaphor of foundations, because either way we can find no "framework" in our beliefs. We cannot identify, let along articulate, a deep structure presupposed by or implicated in every judgment made by an agent, or group of agents, even if the group is our own. This imputes too much unity to minds, judgments, and cultures, and too much dependency to the beliefs and practices we evince from day to day. Note that I do not mean we can *never* identify *any* of our beliefs, or regarding cultures, identify *any* of the beliefs that are "in" or characteristic of a culture. That would be absurd. I am claiming we cannot specify the boundaries, hence general criteria for deciding whether beliefs are in or out. *And if cultures do not provide boundaries, judgments cannot be culture-bound.* Each culture, like each mind, is a continuum in which discrete first and last elements, either temporally or logically, cannot be identified. As Charles Peirce might put it, in minds and cultures *nothing is first or last,* nothing founds all beliefs or comprehends all beliefs. If no perceptual content is identifiable as an uninterpreted datum logically prior to linguistic shaping, there are also no identifiable first principles that underlie or justify any of my beliefs (Peirce 1931b). If we have no foundations, we also have no frameworks or containers. We may put it simply: *no human being, and no culture, has a belief system at all.*

If a metaphor is required for thinking about the relations among our beliefs or meanings, then better than foundations or enclosures would be *crystals.* Our beliefs and meanings are collected in irregularly shaped and structured clumps capable of growth from any point. As in a child's construction of tinker toys, every judgment is connected to, made in reference to, some clump, none of them ever stands alone. But this does not mean

each is related to *every other judgment* of the agent's mind; some hang in mid-air with only one connection to the rest. What philosophers do, among other things, is articulate the logical relations holding within and among these clumps. If you prefer, our beliefs cohere like rhizomatic plants, in Deleuze's metaphor, as in a series of mesquite bushes each member of which shares some roots with some other member of the family (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Or, conflating two Peircean metaphors, knowledge is like seaweed. Parts of the seaweed are indeed linearly or hierarchically related, but the growth of the seaweed as a whole is not. What happens rather is the more or less simultaneous growth of each clump and the grow-ing together of some clumps, forming a greater expanse more intricately interrelated. Regarding cultures, an indefinitely large number of clumps of my interpretive-practical repertoire can be shared with members of another culture, always open to growth or atrophy. Some of the components of some of my clumps are far from yours, and their difference is clear, but other parts are near and ill-differentiated.

Every judgment of reality by a cultural agent is culturally funded, but is no more hermetic, or more mediated, than any other human judgment. Cultures *have* arguments, they *are not* arguments. The relationship of a sub-sidiary belief or practice to a more "fundamental" belief or practice is not the relation of a conclusion to a premise. The "problem" of cultural rela-tivism is one of the costs of treating cultures as if they were philosophical systems, sets of beliefs having hierarchical, logical relations, an approach the Enlightenment made possible. In this sense cultural relativism is the child of the misguided philosophy of universalism it seeks to oppose.

Is Their Culture Wrong?

The existence of intercultural comparison and judgment is not at issue. We judge and compare all the time. The issue is rather, can such judgments be *interculturally valid,* legitimate, true, or rational, which implies, can they satisfy a criterion that does not, by being internal to one of the compared cul-tures and not the other, beg the question of their validity? This is perhaps the most typically compelling issue raised by those who accept that cul-tural relativism is a problem. For there is indeed no such thing as a justifi-cation across ultimate or absolute difference, meaning difference that is

foundational, logically prior to all other beliefs, subtended by no commonality, just as we cannot make sense of a demand that we know things while abstracting from *our entire way* of knowing. But this formulation already hints at the path to, if not a solution, then a resolution of this problem.

At the most mundane level, in the interpretation and judgment of fellow humans we always presuppose a common species and natural environment. We dwell on the same earth, have similar biological needs, presuppose a common set of cognitive and perceptual abilities revealing a commonly available physical reality, and exhibit a rather small set of overlapping practices and techniques for social organization and the acquisition of the necessities of life. Geography varies, but none of the humanly habitable environs on earth fail to exhibit climate, causality, sky above, and earth below. Food, water, shelter, clothing, sexual reproduction, care of young, communication, and group decision-making must be secured, however they are secured. Cultures thus concern a metaphysically common set of objects on the same planet and a common set of human processes. Not that *all* their objects were, or are, common. A polytheist and animist society believes in the existence of things that a secular society does not; writing exists in literate but not illiterate societies. Nevertheless, we respond to and express the rudimentary universal pragmatic demands of the human species (food, water, etc.), including some virtually universal social institutions (family, property, status, warfare, religion, and so on). All this, of course, underdetermines the constitution of any surviving culture.

Further, internal diversity of all larger cultures is such that external diversity is not of a *wholly* different order. As noted, we should never overestimate the internal uniformity of preindustrial cultures. There uniformity existed only at the most local of levels. In agrarian civilizations internal caste differences have far greater importance than many intercultural differences. Minimally put, there is no reason to think cultural group differences are necessarily the greatest of all group differences. And if individuals are familiar with greater differences that must be negotiated within their own cultures or societies, this means cross-cultural differences are not the "most different" differences. Historical consciousness also has a place here, for the present generation's awareness of its temporal distinction from ancestors likewise brings an awareness of how to negotiate difference. Certainly we have record of the fact that cultures have interacted. Wherever this interaction implied some sort of mutual intelligibility, there was something in common. This

does not mean that interaction cannot increase difference; it can. But it must simultaneously increase mutual understanding, even if it also increases misunderstanding.

Indeed, among what cultures pass from generation to generation is knowledge of *other* cultures. In some cases this knowledge emerged in response to episodic interactions. In other cases, it was continuous, as in the great imperial trading cities of the premodern world, whose knowledge of other cultures could be very sophisticated. In that sense multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism are not new. Add to this the various forms of "duplex" cultural housing that resulted from migration and conquest, in which communities that regarded themselves as culturally distinct lived side by side, perhaps rarely interacting but nevertheless acquiring the knowledge of, and skills for dealing with, the other. One must imagine that such knowledge alters the understanding of one's own folkways as well. Cultures need not regard themselves as superior to other cultures in *every* way; they can decide that a foreign culture is in some respects superior. If post-Wittgenstein philosophy has recognized that a solipsistic *individual,* that is, one with a private language, is logically impossible, how much less plausible is a solipsistic *culture,* given that any culture already contains far more diversity, as well as the communicative resources for negotiating differences, than any individual? The notion that cultures cannot understand each other in principle is no more plausible than the skeptical claim that persons who seem to be understanding each other *might* in fact be using their terms in systematically different hence undiscoverable ways.

Certainly the diversity within cultures makes the relation to outer diversity more intelligible. But that aside, any sophisticated culture is itself aware of cultural difference and seeks ways to deal with it. For example, cultures often make their own internal distinction between the universally valid and the culturally particular. Any historical culture that is used to welcoming strangers (for example, in its trading centers) must distinguish among its own beliefs and practices a subset to which visitors or resident aliens are not to be held to account, and other beliefs and practices which they regard as universally binding or *anthropine,* normative for human beings *per se.* A culture that cannot bracket the former cannot tolerate visitors at all. That bracketing indicates an awareness not only of its members' own peculiarities, but of levels of validity or normative necessity. Modern cultures have no monopoly on the ability to imagine the perspective of the stranger or the visitor, or on the ability to distinguish one's countrymen from human

beings *per se.* And this distinction is common to different cultures, although of course each may construe the anthropine norms differently.

More conceptually, it is often possible to ascribe second-order commonalities to peoples as a way of rendering their differences intelligible. In *The Silent Language* Edward Hall tells the story of a Southwestern American town, predominantly Mexican, where the local motorcycle policeman was in the habit of enforcing the 15 mph speed limit on Anglos traveling through town with precise efficiency, handing out fines for anyone exceeding the speed limit by so much as one mile per hour (Hall 1973). Among the Spanish population, Hall suggests, the habit was for the policeman to enforce the law to the smallest technicality, then judges would negate or reduce the fine in the court system, often based on personal and familial ties. The Anglos were accustomed to the opposite, lax enforcement but stringent and bureaucratic legal processing. Frustrated, they responded by repeatedly beating the policeman. Hall's account relies on the homeostatic notion that in both Anglo and Mexican culture a balance is struck in a zero-sum game between the extremes of rigid conformity and chaotic looseness, but in different places. The Anglos could not, for example, alter their ways by abandoning laxity in enforcement while retaining technical legal process; there would be too much pressure with no safety value, no room for judgment and exceptions. The Mexicans could not abandon strict enforcement while retaining informal adjudication, for there would be vehicular chaos. Thus Hall renders the distinctive practices intelligible by assuming that each must attain a balance—restraining speeders without fining too many people too much money—but they do so through different distributions of laxity and discipline.

Now, the point of these observations is not to sing a few stanzas of "We are the world . . ." in celebration of universal understanding. It is that a visitor from an alien planet would be as taken by the sameness among cultures as by the differences. The burden of proof is on those who claim that the differences "go all the way down," which is to say, are so fundamental that they prevent the sharing required for communication and mutual understanding, that each culture is so holistic, so highly integrated that none of its practices, beliefs, or signs can function similarly outside its whole. Still, we may wonder how to conceive of valid comparative evaluation, "rational" evaluation if you will, across cultures? For this we can turn to three contemporary writers who ply a common theme, that the answer to cross-cultural rationality lies not in *going around culture* to a noncultural

rationality, but in *going through cultures* to discover ways that rational debate can flourish through these very differences.

We begin with the most long-standing contributor to this discussion among living philosophers. In his books *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988) Alasdair MacIntyre claimed that all argument, and rationality itself, is tradition- or culture-specific; rationality is literally "rationality-in-a-tradition" (MacIntyre 1988). There is no reasoning outside a culture with its "canonical texts," ultimate ends, and inherited practices. This would appear to dive right into relativism of the worst sort. But MacIntyre argues that except in a very narrow range of circumstances, no social actor is ever justified in asserting, as relativism does, the identity of "is true" and "seems true to us."

MacIntyre limits relativism by arguing along two tracks. On the one hand, he provides an *immanent* criterion of rationality universally applicable to each tradition. Within a tradition there are inherited vocabularies and problems; progress occurs whenever recognized problems are resolved, usually through a reinterpretation of canonical texts and practices. A rationally superior view is able to solve problems earlier versions could not solve, and to explain why they could not, in the sense that Einsteinian physics solves problems that Newtonian physics could not but incorporates the latter as a special case, explaining where Newton was right and wrong (MacIntyre 1989). The rationally superior view thus writes a superior history of the tradition and its problems. Now, within such "living" (meaning pluralistic and contested) traditions, there can never be a reason to fuse "true" and "seems true to x" as long as there remain such immanent rational criteria for cognitive progress. Even in radical moments of "epistemological crisis" when cultures exhaust their resources, they can judge the resources of another tradition to be superior according to their *own* criteria and import the former. In the process MacIntyre makes the important point that untranslatability does *not* entail incomprehensibility. Indeed, it is only the truly bilingual individual who can say comprehendingly, "That phrase is untranslatable."

Now, it is the bilingual person and this person alone who can, under special circumstances, face a situation in which there is no rational alternative to relativism (MacIntyre 1989). This arises in what MacIntyre calls "boundary situations," where two "incommensurable" traditions compete. For example, after a conquest by a culturally incommensurable power, conquered individuals may be confronted with two competing languages and

cultures. Simply saying the name of a town can then be a political act. Most will identify with their historical or descent culture. Only those who are bicultural and bilingual, who can understand each competing tradition on its own terms, will face a dilemma. In some of these cases bilinguals may have access to a third language, one which is rich enough to produce a description of each and that does not presuppose the validity of the essential resources of either of the competing traditions. But absent a third language the bilinguals will indeed be in a relativistic position, forced to make a criterion-less choice between incommensurables. Otherwise, there is never a reason to assert relativism.

Samuel Fleishacker's *The Ethics of Culture* (1994) argues that while ethical universalism is bankrupt, ethics has little to fear from culture, for a form of cultural relativism can be accommodated to ethics. Culture he defines as *authoritative tradition,* where authority is allegiance-deserving judgment, and tradition is a set of unquestionably compelling texts, practices, and standards presented to each new generation by a particular society. Deep ethical choices, he asserts, occur in situations of risk where reason by itself cannot decide. Hence moral reasoning needs cultural traditions, which are based in faith and not reason. These posit ultimate goods which cannot be reduced to rational rules; traditions are "incarnations" of the ultimate good in a "specific way of life." Fleischacker asserts that to speak of tradition is to speak of "submission" (Fleischacker 1994: 78). Authority without tradition is dangerous, since then there is no canonical good to which the authority is beholden, before which he/she must be humble. But when ensconced in tradition, authority embodies *phronēsis,* practical wisdom, whose judgments apply a canonical narrative about the ultimate and obscure good to a particular case. Regarding the problem of normatively judging other cultures, Fleischacker argues for cross-cultural understanding through the interaction of each culture's narratives without reverting to a non- or supracultural standpoint.

The upshot of this approach is that the proof is in the pudding. The demonstration of the plausibility of intercultural communication and evaluation can only be established in actual cases where the participants in intercultural dialogue find an interpretive *modus vivendi.* Fleischacker rightly recognizes that theoretical reason cannot establish these paths; they are the product of judgment. Thus he writes, "Between universalism and relativism, between authority and reason, between a culture as a unified moral self and cultures as impermanent nodes in the flux of universal human

interaction, between the specific way of life that we know we should not impose on anyone else and the general conditions which that way of life and all others ought to meet, there lies nothing but judgment" (Fleischacker 1994: 150). Only in judgment, practical wisdom, which applies generals to individual cases and hence cannot itself be reconstructed as rule-governed, can reasoning across cultures occur. Fleischacker presents fascinating examples of how cultures in seemingly fundamental disagreements may find points of commonality in their traditions' unofficial, sometimes recessive, narratives. In this he mirrors the work of Bhikhu Parekh in political theory.

We may add to MacIntyre's and Fleischacker's approaches other resources, in particular Martha Nussbaum's notion of "thick but vague" universal norms and Michael Walzer's notion of a "thin" layer of a culture's values (Nussbaum 1990; Walzer 1994). There are moral notions, which, if interpreted minimally or vaguely, in Nussbaum's sense, are shared by many cultures. David Wong and Lawrence Becker have separately claimed this for reciprocity, and one could make similar arguments for notions like justice, indebtedness, humanity-compassion-generosity, virtue, and reasoning (Wong 1995; Becker 1986). Now, no one is sufficiently polycultural to say with confidence that *all* existing cultures share those, or other, crucial notions, not to mention all past cultures. But strong arguments can be made that a number of large, complex, very different civilizations have shared these concepts. Walzer argues that in order to deal with and understand other cultures, traditions "thin" some of their concepts and norms to be capable of more universal employment and so to inform their interaction with foreigners. That the full, thick, or precise versions of a culture's practices, artifacts, and narratives fail to overlap with another culture does not prevent employment of thinned versions.

Following MacIntyre's lead, a generalized version of his narrative criterion of an explanation's rational superiority, which bears comparison both to W. W. Hartley's "comprehensive critical rationality" and to Popper's falsificationism, might be accepted as normative for a variety of cultures in some contexts. If we say that validity means comparative cognitive superiority, then the theory that is valid or superior at this moment is one that can explain or consistently account for everything competitor theories account for while avoiding or answering the problems of those competitors, *and* can explain why those competitors seemed under various conditions to be right. The standard of validity here is essentially progressive (we accept the account that improves our understanding), falsificationist (the winning

account is superior because it has not been shown inferior yet), and abductive (the point of any account is to best give reasons why things are the way they are). Other things being equal, the criterion of rationality claims that theories which explain something are superior to theories that don't. The question would then be whether this criterion, where sufficiently thin, can be accepted by otherwise recalcitrant cultures.

Last, even where cultures do not already contain, or have not had to evolve, procedures of justification or thin/vague normative terms that bear easy comparison to those of other cultures, two cultures that face each other may be able to evolve a *bilateral* comparative language. How they can do so is addressed by Lorenzo Simpson in his *Unfinished Project: Toward a Postmetaphysical Humanism* (2001). In this work Simpson presents a Gadamerian account of intercultural understanding, which he labels situated cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism nevertheless characterized by communal identification. Simpson wants to explain the possibility of a non-"invidious" appreciation of the perspective of the other that still avoids adopting the other's perspective, hence maintains the resources for "critical rejoinders." He rightly points out that even to say that "your culture is not mine" presumes an ability to represent each as a perspective on a common object. He writes, "Identifying contrasts presupposes the identification of a *Sache* (fact), an 'X', a fundamental concern. A contrast can only be properly understood as the condition of there being two (or more) ways of addressing X" (Simpson 2001: 84). Simpson recognizes that this identification, not the importation of "foreign" standards, is the core difficulty of intercultural dialogue. For identifying what X *they* are talking about is tantamount to deciding in what register, under what description, the X in question functions in their sociocultural life, hence in what kind of "game" it is located. We must ascertain "In what game of theirs is X an intelligible move?" To do this is in effect to open the question, "What would I be doing/saying in doing/saying what they are doing/saying?" Hence understanding *them* makes a claim on *us.* This presumes a "second-order" principle of charity, analogically "modeling [their doing/saying] upon what can be logical spaces or dimensions of experience for us" (Simpson 2001: 90).

We may add to Simpson's analysis that one major axis of comparison in deciding what *they* are doing is the distinction, or lack thereof, they make between cognitive and aesthetic-practical projects, which is to say, the degree of multifunctionality in Gellner's sense—and how this relates to the same question about what *we* are doing. Wong suggests that for non-Western,

and especially Chinese, ways of inquiry and advanced thought, the goal is less often knowledge of the world *per se* than "attunement" to the world, which leads him to distinguish the "epistemic warrant" of a belief from the "rationality of holding" it (Wong 1989). Attunement is multifunctional, including cognitive, practical, and aesthetic elements; and rationality, if understood broadly as reason-giving, can be as well. Multifunctionality, I may hasten to add, does not by itself imply primitivism or underdevelopment. The West has its own multifunctional norms, "wisdom" being the most prominent for philosophers. But different cultures have given multifunctional norms different roles in their activities. Today's Western philosopher, carrying with her our utter divorce of cognitive from other values, in the end often finds the non-Western philosopher naive, while the non-Westerner wonders why the Westerner, if the results of her work are so irrelevant to the conduct of life or the improvement of society, bothers at all.

Simpson accepts that rationality is universal, but very thin. As he writes, "Every form of life can be understood to make the following validity claim: its practices are the best way for it to flourish; that is to say, they represent the best way for it to address the *Sachen*" (Simpson 2001: 94). Consequently, in determining whether a belief or practice enhances or is consistent with such flourishing, cultural members must occasionally debate the former.

> The form or rationality that I have implicitly referred to here is a form of rationality that I take to have transcultural, or cross-cultural, or culturally invariant standing. It is what I would call a "second-order rationality" that we are entitled to impute to everyone—that is, an inclination to reforms one's practices in the direction of more rationality when one's lack of rationality is pointed out to one in terms with which one is conversant. (Simpson 2001: 96)

Consequently, we may discover that their practices of justification—as they may discover about ours—are "arbitrary and/or untrustworthy," that is, "not . . . truth-tracking or truth-sensitive in the way that members of a given community thought they were." The result of this interpretation-that-inevitably-becomes-dialogue is "a newly forged common language" which transforms both agent and alter. Each language is transformed, stretched, by the addition of the dialogically formed metalanguage it must evolve. The metalanguage permits a shared noninvidious representation of

each position in which the explicit or implicit contest between the two is reframed through "redescriptions" acceptable to each. Echoing but modifying Richard Rorty's ethnocentrism, Simpson's interpreters become "hermeneutically self-aware ethnocentrists." The point is that cultures change, can rise to occasions of interaction, and develop the resources for mutual understanding. There is at least as much evidence of that in the human past as ethnic cleansing or uncomprehending slaughter of the other.

In summary, the denial of the possibility of the intercultural validity of cross-cultural claims bears a very high burden that it cannot meet. It must presume a cultural unity, rigidity, and obstinacy that is hard to find in the real world. It must ignore intracultural diversity, change, and procedures of rational adjudication. The relativist may respond that shifting the burden of proof onto her shoulders does little to prove intercultural validity. That is true, but it is a truth that indicates a more basic point, suggested earlier: *not around but through*. We can only establish intercultural validity through the hermeneutic work of exploring and relating cultures, not by third-person philosophical arguments. But this means that the problem of the validity of cross-cultural judgment, while a real problem, is *not a philosophical one*. It is a contingent, imaginative problem of practical wisdom, of finding resources internal to cultures that make mutual judgment valid. It is no more a philosophical problem than a contract negotiation between union and management, research into the relation of Old English words to German, or the interpretation of the Qur'an. It is a *political* problem open to neither conceptual dissolution nor philosophical solution, but case-by-case hermeneutic-practical *resolution*.

Is My Culture Right?

This question may seem an odd one. People rarely ask it out loud, unless they have advanced degrees in the social sciences. One may argue that this very doubt is itself characteristic of some contemporary cultures, namely the postmodern West. But it can arise in a variety of cultures and contexts. Concerns about avoiding cross-cultural judgment, both characteristic of multiculturalism and, one might say, political correctness are, while not ubiquitous, a common enough phenomenon. At any rate, "Is my culture right?" does seem to be an at least implicitly postmodern question. Where does it come from historically?

We have seen that culture as a problem emerged in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the West. The Enlightenment, in a remarkably productive fit of ambivalence, on the one hand, eschewed cultural particularity, declaring that truth is universal and cognized only when tradition is loosened, making culture important as something to be rooted out, surpassed, cleansed from the "mirror of nature" or experience or cognition. On the other hand, the Enlightenment recognized the importance and distinctiveness of cultures as equal, fundamental, Leibnizian monads of apperception. In each case it made culture *deep,* the collection of concepts, beliefs, and assumptions shared by a society. Notice the modern egalitarianism implied: in the ancient and medieval traditions the philosopher rarely assumes that he or she shares concepts with nonphilosophers, that the prejudices of the uneducated may well skew her own inquiry. For the first time, Enlightenment philosophers begin to understand cultures as philosophically important, as *collective foundational premises.* So, if we are to follow Socrates in the examined life, we must reflect on our own culture and its validity, since that culture underlies our philosophical beliefs. In other words, the "problem of cultural relativism" assumes that cultures are to be identified and questioned much like philosophies, as if they were articulable systems of belief striving to be true, or at least cognitively founded and dependent on certain basic propositions. Cultural relativism presupposes a *social-political problem become philosophical.* It only arises where philosophy invades our naive life in the world, where we assume that the everyday, shared life of our people (whoever they are) hangs on a system of concepts and propositions open to philosophical evaluation. Once this happens, the educated class within a people may get to wondering if its own culture is "just another culture," a strange enough thought-event, which may get attached not only to any dealings with other cultures but also to internal matters of iconoclasm, liberty, and minority cultures. The philosophical discovery of culture is the *philosophicization of* culture.

Under this interpretation, to ask if my culture is right is to ask if my fundamental way of understanding the world is right. "Is my culture right?" is no more or less than the question with which Descartes started modern philosophy: "Are all my beliefs, especially my most fundamental beliefs, true? What if they are all wrong? How can I know they aren't?" The only difference is its intersubjective character: rather than a solitary Descartes doubting his beliefs in his study, it is now our shared beliefs that are sus-

pended in disbelief. We then become *social Cartesians.* Thus this third problem of cultural relativism is not merely *a* philosophical problem, it is *the* philosophical problem *par excellence,* the problem of knowledge, the problem of whether human judgment can be known to be valid or not, albeit here collectivized. *The problem of cultural relativism is what the problem of knowledge sounds like once you accept that human cognition is social and historical.* As such, "Is my culture right?" has no solution if the problem of knowledge has no solution. Some antirealists, postmodernists, and evolutionary epistemologists, of course, think that there is no philosophical problem of knowledge at all, that to imagine such a problem is to assume foundationalism. Whether they are right or not is a story for another time, but certainly their rightness would only further undermine any epistemic problem posed by culture. The problem is the philosophical one of answering skepticism, a problem neither created nor exacerbated by embedding cognition in culture.

Cultural Knowing

Even if the foregoing negative argument against relativism holds, without a positive account of knowledge that is both cultural and realist its claim may still seem dubious. Now, by no means can we afford a major foray into epistemology here. Time, energy, and wood pulp are limited. But a suggestion such as what follows does, I think, at least render plausible as an avenue for further inquiry the proposition that an epistemology which accepts the cultural embedded-ness of cognition need not break with a chastened, minimal realism.

Twentieth-century epistemology is a series of footnotes to Hume, in spirit even when the footnotes serve to correct Hume's letter. A long list of critiques from Wittgenstein to Derrida have wakened us from any dogmatic slumbering we might have hoped to do. With much of this revisionism we can agree. Yes, all judgments have mediated relations to their objects, hence cannot claim "privilege" or "immediacy" or a grasp of "presence"; are fallible and open to revision, hence devoid of certainty; never cognize an objectivity devoid of traces of the cognizer, leaving no "immaculate perception"; are perspectival, linguistified, historicized products of particular cultures, not grasped in a "view from nowhere"; always presuppose unanalyzed conceptual and political commitments open to deconstruction and

genealogical critique; and cannot hope to be given a noncircular philo-
sophical justification, whether by foundationalism, coherentism, or as Susan
Haack puts it, "foundherentism." All this is, if not true, at least presump-
tively valid. We must accept the burden that these critiques place squarely
on the shoulders of any would-be realism.

But these shoulders, if not broad, are yet strong enough. Realism mini-
mally requires that the validity of our judgments be constituted by their
validity *with respect to* what they judge, that the truth of the assertion is
decisively constituted by a relation to *what* is judged rather than to charac-
teristics of the judge or the act of judgment. Such is unavoidably impli-
cated by three homely facts that, I would argue, can hardly be dismissed.
First, "true" implies true *of* something. That is, assertive judgment is inten-
tional, and truth is an object-relational property of such judgment. Second,
what is truly judged, as *a* what, cannot be truly judged by judgments that
contradict each other. Something, call it A, cannot be q and ~q at the same
time in the same respect and remain A. This holds whether A is a physical
object, a phenomenal quality, a process, a network of signs, or a thought.
Last, the relevant character of that *what,* of which the judgment is true, must
obtain independently of our judgment of it. The judging cannot *make* it
true. Saying shares with making and doing the status of being human judg-
ments, but unlike making and doing, assertive judgment is in a crucial sense
reactive or representative. That is inherent in the desire to be "true of."
Whether we parse this through the metaphor of correspondence or fit or
being "made true" by objects is an important but derivative question, as is
the issue of what cognitive unit the realistically judged object must be
independent (such as proposition, perspective, theory, or culture). As I have
argued elsewhere, we cannot make sense of any notion of "knowledge" or
"truth," or of judgments being "true" that rejects these three homely param-
eters, nor can we identify a society whose repertoire of semiotic practices
can consistently dispense with the quoted terms (Cahoone 2002b). Not
that all judgments, or all uses of signs, are assertive hence normed by truth.
They are not. But those that are are indispensable. The deflationary attempt
to disavow truth always contradicts itself, as where postmodernists and
antirealists *claim* to avoid truth as if their claim were *true.* Whether philoso-
phy can prove my realist parameters, can justify realism, is another question.
Failure to reach the bar does not by itself invalidate where the bar is set.

If this account seems anachronistic, well, things will now get far worse,
for with minimal realism go two other doctrines.

First, we cannot give up the *unity of truth*. As said, the rules by which we methodically investigate truth cannot accept that contrary judgments be true of the same thing at the same time. But this only means that *all truth-claims must be consistent*. If that were false, then contradiction in truth-governed inquiry should not motivate further inquiry, should not be a problem, any more than you and I singing different songs or marrying different persons is a problem. In inquiry, however, whether in a laboratory, a Senate subcommittee, or an Easter-egg hunt, contradictory truth-claims *are* a problem. Relativism, then, as a theory about what is true, cannot make sense of our actual behavior. We cannot give up the logic of realism and the unity of truth without, at the very least, giving up inquiry as we understand it.

Second, along with realism and the unity of truth goes the notion that cognitive advance implies a *linear* relation of objects-as-judged across differing or changed but intertranslatable semiotic nets, hence the rejection of incommensurability. This rejection is justified every day by bilingual individuals, whether fluent in Armenian and Russian or Newtonian and Einsteinian. That is, if we accept a realist interpretation of inquiry, then we have no choice but to deny that incommensurability is ever more than an artifact of contingently chosen incompatible languages, to be resolved through translation via a more comprehensive or "neutral" language. "Neutral" here means, of course, locally neutral, neutral with respect to the languages in question. No language is neutral universally or *per se.* But none is needed.

Thus we are led to an admittedly Neanderthal epistemology. What lies behind my insouciance are two convictions. One is that many contemporary revisionists are in the habit of conflating a long series of alleged bugaboos—foundationalism, the "view from nowhere," essentialism, logocentrism, a "God's eye view," the imperialism of reason, and so on—which need a careful analysis. Some of the things listed, or some of the things those terms connote, are indeed indefensible, wrong, or even bad. But they are different, and between those differences lie narrow trails we can realistically walk. Second, nobody can do without truth as understood in a realist sense in their aesthetic and practical activity. For quite some time after September 11, 2001, many in the Arab world believed that the World Trade Center was bombed by Zionists—Jews having been warned, it was claimed, not to go to work in the towers on that day—in order to discredit Muslims. This belief is *either* true *or* false, not both (I pray the reader

does not wonder which). It is valid either everywhere or nowhere, not invalid in Manhattan but valid in Cairo. Without an at least minimal realism we are left in a moral, legal, and political never-never land of alternate universes, in some of which African slavery never happened, the Holocaust was a clerical error, and Stalin the Russian George Washington. Saying this does not justify realism's truth, of course. It merely indicates the price of rejecting it.

How then are we to understand a realist yet culturally embedded, mediated, historical, interested, fallible, decidedly nonimmaculate human knowing? Our cognition first has parameters dictated by the perceptual–affective–cognitive–motor capacities liberally distributed among modern *Homo sapiens.* Following Joseph Margolis we can accept that, *contra* Aristotle, these capacities evolved and are perhaps evolving, and that, *contra* Kant, no complete or *a priori* inventory of them is available (Margolis 2000). An indeterminately large module of that cognitive medium is historical, cultural, linguistic, or most broadly, semiotic. Our perception, interpretation, and knowledge are thus biocultural. The experiences, or better, saliences that cognition must explain are limited and structured, even if we cannot say completely what those limits are. Perception, as a biologically prepared receptive appropriation whose modality at some level is uncontrollable and unconscious, is both passive and mediated, intertwined with motor activity, affectivity, and semiosis. Margolis is certainly right to summarize much epistemic revisionism with the claim that language and world are *symbiotic* (Margolis 2000). We never face an un-languaged world or an un-worlded language, never confront objectivity uncolored by our cognitive means nor a perfect synopsis of our cognitive means uncluttered by reference to bits of the world.

But I claim that symbiosis is *graded*. That the adverbial means of judgment and what is judged are *ultimately* inseparable does not mean they are not *incrementally* separable. Experienced and judged objects are tied to background perspectives, methods, worldviews, and cultures, but are they *all tied to all those media in the same way and to the same degree?* It would be rather serendipitous if they were. On the contrary, not every fact or belief is as embedded as every other; degree of entanglement varies with degree of control of our own terms of judgment. That we can abstract from particulars of each makes cognitive advance and communication across nets of beliefs possible. It is not true, as some holists imply, that given disconfirmatory evidence *any* component of our worldview is *equally* up for

rejection. Neither scientist nor cabbie behaves that way. The mind being at least as complex as sneakers, regarding theory- or culture- or perspective-embeddedness there is no reason to assume that one size fits all. A minimally realist notion of truth, knowledge, and the world is entirely coherent with the adverbial nature of the "media" of knowing (judgments, concepts, worldviews, cultures, and so on), the denial of "presence" or "privilege" (the claim that we have cognitions that are immediate to their objects, hence irrefragable), and the assertion of objective indeterminacy (that not every possible proposition is or must be either true or false of real things, because the latter, like our propositions, vary in their determinateness, no object being either utterly determinate or utterly indeterminate).

None of this is tantamount to that view which is arguably the dominant theme of recent revisionist epistemology, namely constructivism. Constructivism is untenable. It is far too simplistic a metaphor. Constructing is *building,* which implies making and control. If it were true that we cognitively make the world, we would presumably have done a better job, for example, have left out pain, misery, and death. The idea of a self-creating human sphere, unconstrained by anything real outside its sculpturing, fails. For while it is plausible that our perceptual-affective-cognitive-motor apparatus, with its historico-cultural variants, *shapes* the world-as-we-know-it, it is equally true that such shaping, like all other processes, has *constraints.* If it did not, then it would be a creation *ex nihilo;* presumably not even constructivists wish to deify themselves. The world, even the world-for-us, is not simply the product of our construction; indeed, to claim that it is the product of a single process of *any* kind is a metaphysical assertion of a high order. Rather than constructed it is *shaped, refracted,* or *selected,* or any other of a host of less than Promethean figures. And it should be noted that constructivism's inadequacy does not hang on the now-anachronistic notion of an *agent* of construction, which has been discredited by post-Wittgensteinian and post-Heideggerian philosophy. Construction without an agent or subject *doing* the constructing is still construction, and still untenable. Wherever the agent-less construction of postmodernism has its strongest innings, the materiality of the world and the manifold constraints on the process of "construction," which are doubted by almost no one, go strangely unmentioned. Constructivism's apparent tenability is maintained only where it implicitly accepts a distinction between "meaning" and "being," denying that it has to answer questions about the latter, about what is independent

of human appropriation. Like many intellectual movements, its success depends on allowing it to make up the exam it then has to pass.

At any rate, from perception of the object through description to conceptualization and theorization runs a continuum from largely universal-thin-uncontrollable-minimally informed to historically particular-thick-controllable-maximally informed levels of appropriation. Realism and the unity of knowledge do not then imply a "God's eye" view; we cannot claim to have *the* true representation of the one real world. But we can claim *a* true representation of the one real world in our cognitive medium, other media of representation being *possibly* possible (that is, how "possible" as in plausible, how adequate and free from troubles, remains to be seen). What we know is the *one and only real world as it systematically affects and is interpreted through* the human perceptual-affective-cognitive-motor apparatus in its historical, cultural modalities. True representations in different media must then have a systematic, lawful relation, just as the common sense or brute fact must have a linear relation to the scientific fact, the earlier cognized fact must have to the cognized fact subsequent to cognitive progress, and the fact as known by one culture must have to the fact as known by another. And the account of those linear relations must itself be internal to the description of reality thereby achieved.

The relation of any particular act of knowing and its object is best pictured as a kind of genetically deformed daisy in which the center of the flower is simultaneously encircled by nested elliptically shaped petals of different sizes. Each ellipsis contains, or "knows," the center, which is the object. But the ellipses vary in how large they are, hence how much of the center and how much else they include. Our judgments each reveal the object in their own ways. We must just remember one misleading feature of the picture: we can never discern the precise difference in enclosed area between the target and the ellipse that targets it, since all we have to make such a discernment is the set of elliptical petals that *are* the known object for us. Borrowing from earlier discussions, we can use the distinction between "thick," hence particular, and "thin," hence common or universal but vague, components of any society's moral code (Walzer 1994; Nussbaum 1990). When particular, historically laden societies deal with each other, they employ a "thinned" version of their values and rules. So, members of different cultures can agree on the importance of "Justice" or "Democracy" or "Rights." Of course, when they do so they must be *vague;*

how to apply or specify justice or rights can only occur in their own thick particular moral worldview.

Applying these metaphors to our epistemic question, we can say that our networks of judgments overlap around portions of our perception that are least controllable, hence most thin and universal, albeit subject to diverse subsequent interpretation. That they overlap means that some portions of our world are minimally interpreted, least embedded, least open to cultural or other cognitive reformulation. The thicker and more particular, the more the judged or known object is colored by interconnections with diverse other judgments. The thinner and more universal, the more the judgment of the object abstracts from the particularities of other cultural judgments. For we can now see that "thinning" means first of all the *abandonment of multifunctional judgment*. In the case of assertive judgment or propositional knowledge, modern science is the *thinnest* form of cultural cognition yet created. It is not utterly thin; that would imply presuppositionless-ness or complete transparency, which is unattainable. But it is, as Cassirer argued, the most transparent of our symbolic forms, the most unconstrained in its handling of its symbols, the most fully differentiated from other modes of judgment (Cassirer 1965, vol. 3). The good news is that science is thus most capable of cross-cultural travel; the bad news is that it must fail to support the thicker needs and narratives of any culture, including the cultures that birthed it.

Nevertheless, the antifoundationalists, postmodernists, and constructivists are right about one thing: there is *no possibility of a noncircular justification of all I have just said*. Realism and the unity of truth are indispensable but cannot be ultimately shown to be true. Once we have gone down the open-ended road of validating propositions via inquiry rather than faith, social and pragmatic demands, aesthetic appeal, or private intuition, we are stuck both with realism *and* with the search for realism's validation, knowledge's "foundations," a search that *cannot* be consummated. Inquiry has its own constitutive features which inevitably exclude other modes of handling the world. What lies within these borders cannot justify itself by its own rules, any more than it can lift itself by its own beard. As I have argued elsewhere, we cannot maximize the methodological sophistication of our individual modes of appropriating the world—like inquiry—while at the same time integrating them (Cahoone 2002c). Nevertheless, we are not at liberty to reject progress. In short, once we have eaten of the fruit of the

Tree of Knowledge, there can be for us no cognitive Paradise of certainty, rest, or completion, only the endless toil of inquiry to which we have been condemned. Such, at any rate, is the legacy of realism.

Conclusion

There is then no specific epistemological problem attached to the recognition that human cognition is cultural. That is, *there is no philosophical problem of cultural relativism*. There might be if it made sense to say that human belief occurs in systems, that all our beliefs are founded on identifiable subsets of beliefs or enclosed in conceptual containers, and that cultures are such containers. But it doesn't and they aren't. There might be, if cultures did not overlap, exhibit commonalities, or have the resources for comparison. But they do. There might be if there were no such thing as the problem of knowledge, if the philosophical justification of human knowing *independent* of culture were apparent. But it isn't. None of this implies that culture is not a cognitive problem, that a culture's beliefs or values can be definitively and noncircularly justified. It only means that the fact of the location of beliefs and values in culture adds no additional barrier that the subject must escape to contact objectivity. The philosophical problem is the same, with or without culture.