

assumes a *one-size-fits-all* approach to moral thinking. I am suggesting that this probably isn't the best way to use theory to illuminate practice.³²

Returning now to the challenge that began this section, I have tried to address it in two ways. First, moral theory is not arbitrary in the sense that you can just pick and choose your favorite or make up your own: there are standards for evaluating moral theories that have to do with the theoretical and practical aims of moral theory. Second, the variety of moral theories on offer can positively aid in one's moral thinking about controversial moral issues in two ways. First, it can do so by providing rigorous articulations of common ideas about morality. And second, it can do so if one views these theories as diagnostic tools for getting to the heart of moral problems. Some tools are better for some jobs than other tools. My suggestion is that a particular moral theory may be a better tool than others when it comes to thinking through some particular issue, though a different theory may be better at helping one think through other issues.

APPENDIX: ETHICS BY AUTHORITY?

DIVINE COMMAND THEORY AND ETHICAL RELATIVISM

The idea that morality depends on some authority—whether the will of God or the norms of one's culture—is well known, even if not generally well understood. The readings in this collection by and large reflect the impact of the six moral theories presented in section 2 on philosophical thinking about disputed moral issues. This does not mean that other moral theories or approaches to moral issues are not worthy of philosophical attention. My presentation has been selective. However, because what I am calling ethics by authority in one form or another will likely occur to readers, I think it is important to explain why many who think about moral issues have grave reservations about both divine command theory and ethical relativism.

According to the **divine command theory**, what is right or wrong depends on God's commands in the sense that what *makes* an action right or wrong are mere facts about God's commands, nothing more. On this view, an action is wrong whenever (and because) God commands that we not do the action. An action is morally obligatory whenever (and because) God commands that we do it. Otherwise an action is morally optional. So the fundamental moral principle of this sort of theory can be expressed as follows:

DCT An action is right if and only if (and because) God does not command that we not do that action.

For many people, being told that God does or does not command some action is crucial in their thinking about moral issues. But surely if God commands that we perform some action, there must be some reason why God issues this command—some reason that explains *why* the action is something we ought or ought not to do. But then, as philosophers, we can ask what it is about the action in question that makes it wrong and is a basis for God's command. And once we put the question to ourselves in this way, we are simply raising the general moral questions about the right and the good that we began with. So, appealing to God's commands (at least for believers) may help the believer decide what to do, but the fact that God

commands this or that action does not answer the deep question about the underlying nature of right and wrong that a moral theory attempts to answer—it does not plausibly address the main *theoretical aim* of moral theory explained earlier.

Of course, someone sympathetic to DCT may claim that it is just God's commands that make an action right or wrong. But this won't be acceptable to a theist who thinks that God's actions are rational. After all, if one says that there is no reason behind God's commands, then one is saying that God has no good reason for commanding that we keep our promises and not commit murder, that God's commands are completely arbitrary. But this can't be right. So, a theist must say that there are facts about an action that make it wrong and that since God knows all facts, and since God is all-good, God commands that we do what is (independently of his commands) right and not do what is wrong.

As for **ethical relativism**, there is a good deal of confusion generated by the vague (and unfortunately popular) talk of morality being relative. Surely anyone can agree that whether a particular action—say, addressing a professor by her first name—is morally right may be importantly affected by what a society considers to be insulting. In the United States at present, the social norms that help specify what constitutes an insult do not seem to consider a student addressing a university professor by her first name as an insult. If that's right, then a student in a U.S. university would not be insulting a professor in addressing her by her first name (unless, perhaps, the professor had expressed a desire not to be so addressed). But in other countries (at present), the social norms governing student–professor relationships are such that the sort of address in question does constitute an insult. If we agree that insults are morally wrong (see the chapters dealing with hate speech and with sexism, racism, and reparation for more about the morality of insults), then we can easily see that the action of addressing a professor by her first name is morally wrong in some social circumstances (when in certain countries) and not in others (when in the United States). But this kind of context-sensitivity of morality according to which one's circumstances, including the social norms of one's culture, may have a bearing on what is right or wrong to do in that culture is something that all of the moral theories we have considered do accept.

So if ethical relativism is to represent a moral theory that competes with the ones we have surveyed, what must it say? It must say something like this: (1) there are no correct moral norms or principles that are valid for all cultures at all times; rather (2) there are only the moral norms that some group or culture happens to accept, and these norms—*no matter what those norms say*—are what determine what is right or wrong for members of that group or culture. We can encapsulate these ideas in the following principle:

ER An action (performed by members of a group G) is right if and only if the moral norms that are accepted by G permit the performance of the action.

Thus, if some culture accepts the moral norm that the enslavement of other human beings is morally right, then (according to the relativist) enslavement really *is* right—for those people.

Now relativism has its popular allure. Some people seem to take ethical relativism as an enlightened view about the true nature of morality. In order to disabuse the reader of the kind of simple ethical relativism just described, consider abortion. Suppose we find out that a majority of current U.S. citizens accept a set of moral norms that find nothing wrong with abortion. If we suppose that the moral norms of some culture are those norms that are held by a majority of its members, then according to ethical relativism, we would have to conclude that abortion (for members of U.S. culture) is morally right. Even if you think that abortion

is morally right, do you (the reader) really think that the actual moral rightness and wrongness of an action depends on majority opinion? If so, then you might think we can settle moral issues by a vote. But this would mean that no matter what the majority of some group accepts as part of that group's moral norms—genocide, slavery, infanticide, lying, cheating, whatever—those actions would be right for members of that group. Granted, the members of some group may honestly *think* that genocide is morally right, but thinking something is right does not *make* it right. Right?

So, we can agree to the following thesis of **context-sensitivity**:

CS The rightness or wrongness of an action may depend in part on facts about the agent and her circumstances, where her circumstances may include facts about the norms for what counts as constituting insults, a person's privacy, proper respect for others, and so forth.

The example of insulting behavior illustrates how CS can be true. But as we have already noted, CS is compatible with all of the nonrelativist moral theories that we have surveyed in section 2. According to each of those theories, there are basic moral principles or norms whose correctness is objective and not dependent on whether they happen to be accepted by some culture. Of course, in applying one of these principles to some particular case, we must consider various details of the case including facts about particular agents and their circumstances as well as facts about the society in which one happens to live.

Whether some version of ethical relativism can be defended is controversial and cannot be settled here. If so, it would have to improve upon ER. My main point was to note the important difference between CS and ER (they are often confused) and explain why CS is uncontroversial and why ER is problematic.

According to both divine command theory and ethical relativism, morality depends on the dictates of some authority—God or culture. I have tried to indicate very briefly why many moral philosophers are not satisfied with either of these theories.³³ In any case, in our readings, although a few authors appeal to theological premises in attempting to support a position on a disputed moral issue, none of these authors rest their case solely on a brute appeal to what they take to be God's commands. And none of the authors appeal to ethical relativism.

NOTES

1. A few paragraphs of material in this essay are taken from my "Ethics" in *Reflections on Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. L. McHenry and T. Yagisowa, (New York: Longman's Publishers, 2003), 103–25.
2. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), 24.
3. Given this understanding of the notions of intrinsic and extrinsic value, it is possible for something to have value of both sorts. Suppose, for example, that both happiness and knowledge have intrinsic positive value. Since knowledge can be of use in promoting happiness, knowledge can also have extrinsic value.
4. The "if and only if (and because) . . ." is meant to make clear that what follows the "and because" is meant to be a moral criterion that explains *why* the item being evaluated has whatever moral property (e.g., rightness) is mentioned in the first part of the principle.
5. To categorize Kant's ethical theory as deontological in the sense of being fundamentally duty-based may be inaccurate. Arguably, the notion of dignity—a kind of status that all persons have—is the explanatory basis of duties in Kant's ethical theory. Since dignity is a kind of value, this would make Kant's theory a certain kind of value-based theory, but nevertheless distinct from consequentialist views.