I. Introduction

Although most people are unfamiliar with the term ‘ethical relativism,’ almost everyone has probably encountered relativist slogans like the following:

(1) What’s right for you may not be what’s right for me.

(2) What’s right for my culture won’t necessarily be what’s right for your culture.

(3) There are no absolute moral truths.

(4) No moral principles are true for all people at all times and in all places.

(5) No ethical principle is any better than any other.

(6) All ethical opinions, lifestyles and worldviews are equally right.

It is possible to be a relativist either about all truths whatsoever or only about truths in certain domains—e.g., truths in ethics or religion. Though some people claim to be relativists about all truths across the board, it is more common today for people to be relativists about ethics and to be absolutists about truths in other areas, like science and mathematics. Because ethical relativism is the most common variety of relativism, it will be the focus of our discussion in this essay.

There are two basic kinds of ethical relativism: subjective ethical relativism and conventional (or cultural) ethical relativism. The two kinds of relativism are defined as follows:

**Subjective ethical relativism** =_{df} the view that:

(i) there are no absolute or universally true moral principles; and

(ii) the truth of moral principles is relative to individuals.

**Conventional ethical relativism** =_{df} the view that:

(i) there are no absolute or universally true moral principles; and

(ii) the truth of moral principles is relative to cultures.

Notice that both views deny that there are any absolute or objective ethical truths. Let’s call the view that there are absolute or universally correct moral principles **moral absolutism.** The only difference between two relativist views is that they disagree about that to which ethical truths or principles are supposed to be relative. Each version of ethical relativism, then, is composed of both a negative and a
positive element—the negative claim that there are no absolute or objective ethical truths and a positive account of that to which ethical truths are relative.

According to subjective ethical relativism (‘subjective relativism,’ for short), whatever you think is right for you really is right for you, and no one can tell you any differently. What is right for you is completely up to you to decide. You are sovereign over the principles that can tell you how to live your life.

According to conventional ethical relativism (‘conventional relativism,’ for short), what is right for you as an individual depends upon what your culture thinks is right for you. What your culture says is right for you really is right for you. The culture or society is the highest authority about what is right for individuals living within that society. On this view, an individual’s will is subordinated to the will of the cultural majority.

II. Arguments in Favor of Conventional Ethical Relativism

In the next two sections we will consider arguments for and against conventional ethical relativism. We will put off discussing subjective ethical relativism until after we have finished discussing conventional relativism.

A. Cultural Diversity

The argument from cultural diversity seeks to support conventional relativism by appealing to empirical facts about the wide variety of cultural practices around the globe. The argument goes like this: Centuries ago, when cultures were relatively isolated and little information was known about distant lands, it might have been reasonable to think that the traditions and practices of one’s own culture represented the only right way of doing things. But now we know that each of our conventions and norms reflects only one out of an endless number of possibilities and that other cultures have opted for other ways of doing things. In this modern age of worldwide communication and information it is no longer reasonable to view the practices of one’s own culture as being the only correct cultural practices.

Louis Pojman (1999, p. 27) describes some of the facts about cultural diversity that are often cited in support of this position:

For instance, Eskimos allow their elderly to die by starvation, whereas we believe that this is morally wrong. The Spartans of ancient Greece and the Dobu of New Guinea believe that stealing is morally right; but we believe it is wrong. Many cultures, past and present, have practiced or still practice infanticide. A tribe in East Africa once threw deformed infants to the hippopotamus, but our society condemns such acts. Sexual practices vary over time and clime. Some cultures permit homosexual behavior, whereas others condemn it. Some cultures, including Moslem societies, practice polygamy, while Christian cultures view it as immoral. Anthropologist Ruth Benedict describes a tribe in Melanesia that views cooperation and kindness as vices, and anthropologist Colin Turnbull has documented that the Ik in northern Uganda have no sense of duty toward their children or parents. There are societies that make it a duty for children to kill their aging parents (sometimes by strangling).

According to the present argument, to think that your culture’s way of doing things is the only right way or the best way to do things reflects an extreme ignorance of the wide cultural diversity that has always
existed in the world. The anthropological study of foreign lands has opened our eyes and set us free from any closed-minded adherence to the parochial standards of our own culture. Faced with the tremendous cultural diversity the world offers, it is simply not reasonable to think that one set of cultural practices can be the one and only right set. Hence, we must conclude that all cultural practices are equally valid.

B. Avoiding Ethnocentrism

The first argument in favor of conventional relativism uses facts about cultural diversity to argue against moral absolutism. The second argument claims that there is something intrinsically wrong with the view of moral absolutism itself. Moral absolutism implies that some cultures are better, ethically speaking, than others. Conventional relativists, however, argue that such a claim is ethnocentric. Ethnocentrism, roughly, is judging another culture through the eyes of your own culture and not trying to see things from their perspective. This almost inevitably leads to thinking that your culture is superior to others. Most people today agree that ethnocentrism belongs in the same category with racism, sexism and other unacceptable forms of discrimination. To be racist is to think that, simply because someone belongs to a different ethnic group, that person is inferior. To be sexist is to think that, simply because someone is a member of the opposite sex, that person is inferior. All forms of bigotry and prejudice involve judging other people solely on the basis of their group membership. Ethnocentrism is not any different. Instead of looking down on other races or sexes, the ethnocentric person looks down on and devalues other cultures.

Conventional relativists claim that their position—unlike moral absolutism—is not ethnocentric. Because conventional relativists maintain that all cultures are equally valid and that no culture is any better than any other, they claim their position avoids any kind of ethnocentrism. Because ethnocentrism is a pernicious form of discrimination, the apparent fact that conventional relativism avoids it and moral absolutism seems to fall into it is a reason for choosing conventional relativism over moral absolutism.

C. Culturally Conditioned Values

The third argument for conventional relativism begins by focusing on the source of our values and beliefs about morality. Think about how people have acquired most of their views about what is right and wrong. From infancy our parents and teachers have sought to instill within us the values of our society. Friends, books, television, movies, and sometimes priests or preachers have also contributed to helping us internalize the values of the society around us. Children in America today grow up thinking that women and minorities deserve the same educational and professional opportunities as white men. One hundred years ago, children in America grew up with different views because those around them impressed upon them a different set of values. Most women from the nineteenth-century did not believe that women should have the same educational and professional opportunities as men. It wasn’t just nineteenth-century men who thought that. Because the women of a century or more ago were surrounded by a culture that did not place a high value on the capacities of women, most of them simply internalized the values of their society and accepted them as true. It is only because women today grow up in a different cultural milieu that they find themselves with different views about the equality of the sexes. We are conditioned by our cultures to have the ethical values and beliefs that we do.

If we were to try to make judgments about the rightness or wrongness of the practices of some other culture, our thoughts would inevitably reflect the beliefs and values of our own culture. If culture A’s practices are different from culture B’s, how is a person from culture A going to assess the practices of culture B? If that person were to rely upon the standards of culture A, the practices of culture B would obviously be viewed as wrong because they deviate from what culture A’s standards say
are right. Of course, if you were to ask someone from culture B about culture A, we would get the same result in the opposite direction.

If we were somehow able to throw off all of the cultural baggage we have inherited from our social environments and to break free from all of the cultural conditioning that has shaped our minds, our emotions and our personalities, we might then be able to formulate a completely neutral and objective assessment of some other culture. However, conventional relativists claim, this is not a realistic human possibility. We can never get beyond the cultural conditioning that has shaped us and our views of morality. Therefore, any time we try to sit in judgment on other cultures, we’re going to be just like the hypothetical people from culture A and culture B above: our judgments will simply reflect the values of our own societies. Since this is the fundamental human condition, there is no reason to think that the judgments any person makes about some other culture will have any objective validity or truth. Such judgments will always be subjective and culturally conditioned.

It is as if we all are wearing tinted glasses, the particular tint of your glasses being a function of your upbringing and cultural background. People from different cultures have glasses that are tinted different colors from ours. Consequently, their view of reality will be different. The catch is this: No one can take off their glasses and see reality as it really is in itself. No one can view truth or reality, except through the distorting lenses of their own cultural biases.

Conventional relativists claim that those who believe in moral absolutes are simply blind to the cultural influences that have shaped their ethical opinions. Absolutists think they can view reality as it is in itself, when in fact they can only see a prejudiced and subjective view of reality.

Since we are incapable of freeing ourselves from the cultural influences that have shaped our ethical views, what kinds of judgments should we form about other cultures? According to conventional relativism, we should stop judging other cultures altogether. We should stop pretending that our ethical judgments and opinions reflect anything more than the contingent, historical forces that have shaped our lives.

D. Lack of Knowledge

The argument from lack of knowledge makes explicit a theme that is probably implicit in some of the earlier arguments for conventional relativism. According to this argument, if there is some absolute or objective fact about which cultural practices are the right ones, we simply have no way of discovering what this fact is. Even if we wanted to believe in moral absolutism, we would be faced with the daunting—and perhaps unanswerable—question, “How can we tell for certain that these cultural practices but not those are morally correct?” Where would we go to obtain an answer to this question? Some people suggest that certain sacred texts contain the answers we seek. But the question that arises for these people is, “How can we tell for certain that this sacred text but not that one contains the absolute truth?” How do we know that any sacred text will tell us the truth? Once again the conventional relativist will point out that people raised to believe in one sacred text will think that theirs contains the truth, but people raised to believe in another sacred text will think that theirs is the only true sacred text.

For those who do not want to bring religion into the debate, the question is equally challenging. There are just as many different secular opinions about what is right or wrong as there are religious opinions. In science we can rely upon experimental methods and empirical observations to resolve differences of opinion. But what can we use to resolve ethical disagreements? There do not seem to be any experiments we can run or empirical observations we can make that could show some ethical
judgments or principles to be the right ones. In ethics there seems to be no way to prove some answers right and other answers wrong.

Since none of us seems to have any privileged access to the absolute truth about morality, conventional relativists urge us to stop treating our own ethical opinions as infallible or indubitable. Every culture has its own view of morality. Since we have no way to prove that some views are better than others, we should simply treat them all as being equally valid or correct.

III. Arguments Against Conventional Ethical Relativism

A. A Universal Conscience

Some people respond to the conventional relativist’s arguments—particularly the culturally conditioned values argument—by claiming that all people have an innate ability to know what is right and wrong. This source of this inborn ability, they say, is your conscience. Your conscience tells you what the right thing to do is, and it’s the thing that makes you feel bad when you do something you know is wrong. Because everyone has a conscience, moral absolutists say, we can rise above the cultural conditioning we have received from our social environments. Contrary to what conventional relativists maintain, we can take off our colored glasses. Our conscience shows us the truth about morality—not what our culture says is the truth, but the truth itself.

Mark Twain’s portrait of Huckleberry Finn provides a compelling counterexample to this line of argument. Huck is helping his slave friend Jim run away from Miss Watson, Jim’s owner. The two of them are taking a raft down the Mississippi River to a place where Jim will be legally free. Huck says:

Jim said it made him all over trembly and feverish to be so close to freedom. Well I can tell you it made me all over trembly and feverish, too, to hear him, because I begun to get it through my head that he was most free—and who was to blame for it? Why, me. I couldn’t get that out of my conscience, no how nor no way.... It hadn’t ever come home to me, before, what this thing was that I was doing. But now it did; and it stayed with me, and scorched me more and more. I tried to make out to myself that I warn’t to blame, because I didn’t run Jim off from his rightful owner; but it warn’t no use, conscience up and say, every time: “But you knowed he was running for his freedom, and you could a paddled ashore and told somebody.” That was so—I couldn’t get around that, no way. That was where it pinched. Conscience says to me: “What had poor Miss Watson done to you, that you could see her [racial epithet] go off right under your eyes and never say one single word? What did that poor old woman do to you, that you could treat her so mean?...” I got to feeling so mean and miserable I most wished I was dead. (Quoted in Bennett 1997, pp. 23-24)

Jim tells Huck that he plans to work hard and save enough money to buy his wife and children out of slavery. He goes on to say that, if he is unable to save enough money to buy them, he will steal them. Huck is horrified at hearing this:

Thinks I, this is what comes of my not thinking. Here was this [racial epithet] which I had as good as helped to run away, coming right out flat-flooted and saying he would steal his children—children that belonged to a man I didn’t even know; a man that hadn’t ever done me no harm.
I was sorry to hear Jim say that, it was such a lowering of him. My conscience got to stirring me up hotter than ever, until at last I says to it: “Let up on me—it ain’t too late, yet—I’ll paddle ashore at first light, and tell.” I felt easy, and happy, and light as a feather, right off. All my troubles was gone. (Quoted in Bennett 1997, p. 24)

When Huck gets the chance, he sets off toward shore in a canoe, telling Jim he is simply going to look around. In reality, he plans to turn Jim in.

As I shoved off, [Jim] says: “Pooty soon I’ll be a-shout’n for joy, en I’ll say, it’s all on accounts o’ Huck I’s a free man... Jim won’t ever forgit you, Huck; you’s de bes’ fren’ Jim’s ever had; en you’s de only fren’ old Jim’s got now.”

I was paddling off, all in a sweat to tell on him; but when he says this, it seemed to kind of take the tuck all out of me. I went along slow then, and I warn’t right down certain whether I was glad I started or whether I warn’t. When I was fifty yards off, Jim says:

“All you goes, de ole true Huck; de on’y white genlman dat ever kep’ his promise to ole Jim.”

Well, I just felt sick. But I says, I got to do it—I can’t get out of it. (Quoted in Bennett 1997, p. 25)

While ashore, Huck runs into two white men searching for runaway slaves. They ask Huck whether the man on his raft is white or black. Huck tells us:

I didn’t answer up prompt. I tried to, but the words wouldn’t come. I tried, for a second or two, to brace up and out with it, but I warn’t man enough—hadn’t the spunk of a rabbit. I see I was weakening; so I just give up trying, and up and says: “He’s white.” (Quoted in Bennett 1997, p. 25)

Huck’s conscience was telling him that the right thing to do was to turn Jim in. Jim was the property of Miss Watson, and his children were the property of someone else. This “stolen” property needed to be returned to its rightful owner. In Huck’s mind, he didn’t have the moral fiber, the courage, or the strength of will to do what was right. He does not turn Jim in, but he does not think that he has done the right thing. He despises himself for his weakness, and his conscience tells him that he is a morally despicable person.

We see that Huck’s conscience is not something that rises above the cultural conditioning he has received throughout his life. Instead, it merely reflects the values of the slave-owning society he grew up in. In response to the conventional relativist’s culturally conditioned values argument, some moral absolutists want to argue that only part of us is subject to cultural conditioning. There is, they claim, another part of us that is immune to cultural conditioning—a part that can really tap into the absolute truth about morality without reflecting the contingent values of our society. Twain’s very believable description of Huck suggests that cultural conditioning may very well extend so deeply into our psyche that there is no part of us that is left unaffected. Even our consciences appear to be shaped by the values of our society. Thus, it seems that this first argument against conventional relativism does not succeed.

B. Conflicting Cultures

Consider the following case: Lacey is both a feminist and a Roman Catholic. (This case is a modified version of Pojman’s (1997, p. 36) case of Mary, who is a U.S. citizen and a Roman Catholic.) In her law practice, she specializes in defending the rights of women. Most of the time, her commitments
to feminism and Catholicism do not conflict with each other. Her religion views women as being created in the image of God and as having an intrinsic value that should not be violated. Consequently, Catholicism condemns most of the same abuses and injustices suffered by women that feminism condemns. However, there is one obvious issue where Lacey’s joint commitments conflict: abortion. According to the feminist movement, abortion is morally permissible. According to Catholicism, however, abortion is not morally permissible.

Conventional relativism claims that what is right for you as an individual is determined by the culture you belong to. Lacey, however, belongs to more than one culture, and the values of the two cultures conflict. So, is abortion morally permissible for Lacey or not? Which culture takes precedence over the other? Which one should she listen to?

Some students think that Lacey should listen to the Catholic church more than to the feminist movement. But why? If you find yourself belonging to one religious culture and one secular culture, why should the religious culture take priority? Simply because it is a religious culture? That doesn’t seem like much of a reason. And what do you do if you belong to two secular cultures whose views conflict? How do you decide which one to follow?

Before offering an answer to these questions, I want to present another case, due to Pojman (1997, p. 36): John is a college student. He belongs to a fraternity that is racist in both its creed and its practices. However, John is also a member of the larger university community, and the university is officially non-racist in its policies and procedures. The university, it turns out, is located in a town that is overwhelmingly racist. Because this is John’s sixth year of college (he’s had some trouble with calculus), John has been living, working, shopping, and paying taxes in this town for quite some time. He is, thus, very much an integral part of his community. Of course, this town is located in a nation that is officially non-racist in its policies. So, is racism right or wrong for John?

Pojman (1997, p. 36) writes,

As a member of a racist university fraternity, KKK, John has no obligation to treat his fellow Black students as an equal, but as a member of the university community (which accepts the principle of equal rights), he does have the obligation; but as a member of the surrounding community (which [rejects] the principle of equal rights), he again has no such obligation; but then again, as a member of the nation at large (which accepts the principle), he is obligated to treat his fellow students with respect.

Conventional relativism says that what is right for John depends upon what his culture says is right. But which of the overlapping and conflicting cultures that he belongs to should be listen to?

Some students think that the nation is the most important culture John belongs to and that, therefore, he should not be racist. But what if John identifies more with his fraternity than he does with his country? Suppose that members of his fraternity believe the nation has gone downhill ever since the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and that it is their sworn duty to combat civil rights for minorities wherever they can. It is difficult to see how, in such a case, the culture that defines what is right for John should be the nation when he has rejected the beliefs, principles and practices of that nation.

Moreover, opting for the nation as the relevant culture for John seems completely arbitrary. Conventional relativism itself does not say anything about nations, as opposed to smaller cultures. John could just as well identify with white people worldwide or college students worldwide or people in
Western industrialized nations or even with humanity itself. Why should national affiliation trump all others?

The most tempting solution to the dilemmas facing Lacey and John is one that conventional relativists cannot accept. It is natural to think that the decision about which culture to identify with should be left up to Lacey and John. They should each decide for themselves which culture’s values will be the ones that determine what is right and wrong for them. However, this way out of the dilemma is not open to the conventional relativist. It is subjective relativism that claims that morality is relative to individuals and that individuals can decide what is right and wrong for them. But conventional relativism says that it is cultures—not individuals—that decide. A conventional relativist who says that Lacey and John can decide for themselves what is right for them would be giving up on conventional relativism and adopting subjective relativism instead. Is there a solution to this dilemma that does not require abandoning conventional relativism? It is difficult to see what such a solution could be.

Conventional relativism appears to work fairly well when we are considering a culture other than our own, especially when that culture meets the following conditions:

(a) The culture is non-Western and non-industrialized.

(b) The culture would be described by ethnocentric Westerners as “primitive.”

(c) The culture is monolithic or homogeneous, meaning that there is (or at least appears to outsiders to be) only one uniform social structure that defines the culture’s social relations.

Condition (c) is simply another way of saying that the culture is not pluralistic. In other words, it does not contain a variety of overlapping and sometimes conflicting cultures that (as in the Lacey and John cases) cause problems for conventional relativism. I doubt that “primitive” cultures are ever as uniform or homogeneous on the inside as they appear to Western observers who have only limited and superficial exposure to them. But even if Western stereotypes of these cultures were accurate, the fact remains that conventional relativism could not be made to work very well when applied to an obviously pluralistic and modern society like our own. Each of us (like Lacey and John) belongs to many different subcultures, and this sometimes results in conflict. It seems much more plausible to say that we must each, as individuals, decide what is right for ourselves than to say that “our culture” (whatever that is) decides what is right for us. In short, subjective relativism seems like it might work better in America than conventional relativism.

C. Create Your Own Culture

Thinking about the cases of Lacey and John, in which people belong to many different overlapping cultures, raises questions about the nature of a culture. What exactly is a culture anyway? Cultural anthropologist Richley Crapo (1993, p. 24) defines a culture as “a learned system of beliefs, feelings, and rules for living around which a group of people organize their lives.” According to this definition, the shared way of life of any group of people counts as that group’s culture. This seems to imply that you could organize any group of people into some set of shared practices, beliefs and rules and it would count as a culture. In other words, you could create you own culture.

David Koresh did. If you are charismatic enough, you can take any rule—regardless of how lame-brained, idiotic, cruel, ignorant or twisted it may be—and convince at least some people to go along with it. One of the rules that David Koresh instituted in the Branch Davidian culture was that married couples
living in the Branch Davidian compound outside of Waco, TX, were not allowed to have sex with each other. Only David Koresh was allowed to have sex with the women of the compound, and he could have sex with whomever he wanted. This included sex with young girls. According to conventional relativism, David Koresh’s sexual lifestyle was right for him. Why? Because the norms of his culture—which was in part something of his own making—said that it was OK.

If there is some kind of activity you would like to engage in but that is viewed as immoral by the rest of society, take heart. According to conventional relativism, all you have to do is to convince a few of your buddies to go along with you, and—Voila!—you will made the previously questionable activity morally correct for you.

Surely it is absurd to think that any seemingly evil practice can become morally good simply by convincing a few other people to go along with it. And yet that is what conventional relativism seems to imply.

D. Reformers

Conventional relativism subordinates the will of the individual to the will of the cultural majority. What is right for you as an individual is not up to you to decide. What is right for you is what your culture says is right. Think about what conventional relativism implies about reformers like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mahatma Gandhi. Reformers are people whose beliefs and actions run contrary to those of their surrounding culture and who strive to change the beliefs and actions of their culture for the better. If MLK’s culture says that African-Americans should not be allowed to eat at the same lunch counters, drink out of the same water fountains, attend the same schools, and sit in the same seats on crowded buses as white people, then it was morally wrong for MLK to praise Rosa Parks for refusing to yield her bus seat to a white person one cold December day in 1955. If the culture says that African-Americans should be treated as second-class citizens, then according to conventional relativism you are morally obligated to treat African-Americans as second-class citizens. It is morally wrong for you to buck the system. The system is always right. In the eyes of conventional relativism, reformers are—by definition—always in the wrong.

It is difficult to stomach the idea that the majority is always right and that the status quo should always be respected. The people whom we treat as our greatest heroes were people who stood up to the system and fought against the tyranny of the majority. When was the last time you saw an action movie starring Mel Gibson or Harrison Ford in which they were on the side of the powerful majority? Our movie heroes are always lone individuals, often misunderstood by those around them, who take courageous stands against the injustices of their society.

The fact that conventional relativism implies that reformers are always wrong provides a strong reason for thinking that conventional relativism is false.

E. Culture vs. Culture

Consider the following case: Lothar is a barbarian. Raping, pillaging and plundering are central to Lothar’s barbarian culture. One day Lothar and his band of warriors set off for Pleasantville, a quiet little town in sunny, southern California. The residents of Pleasantville are peace-loving vegetarians and animal rights activists who, when they are not tending to their organic farms or making pottery for burning incense, work as strong advocates for conventional relativism. When Lothar’s barbarian war party arrives in Pleasantville, the sandal-shod residents of Pleasantville are faced with a dilemma: Should they defend themselves against the barbarian attack or not?
You may be thinking, “Dilemma? What dilemma? How can the question of whether they should defend themselves against an unwanted attack be difficult to answer? Of course, they should defend themselves!” Despite the plausibility of this response, it is important to see that the Pleasantvilleans’ belief in conventional relativism poses a problem for them. As conventional relativists, they believe that the right thing for Lothar to do is determined by his culture. But Lothar’s culture says that adult barbarian men should display their bravery and strength by sacking at least one city (preferably one with a Starbucks) per year. So, according to conventional relativism, it is morally right for Lothar to sack Pleasantville. Since it is morally correct for him to do so, it doesn’t seem right for the residents of Pleasantville to try and stop the barbarian attack. They would be keeping Lothar from doing what, according to their own moral standards, is the morally right thing for him to do. However, if the citizens of Pleasantville do not defend themselves against the barbarian invasion, they will be brutalized and killed.

Another problem that would be generated by any attempted defense of Pleasantville concerns ethnocentrism. One of the main motivations for conventional relativism is that it supposedly allows us to avoid ethnocentrism—the view that our culture is superior to others. A great deal of harm has been done throughout the ages by people who have forced their way of life upon other cultures. By claiming that all cultures are morally equal and that no culture is morally better than any other, conventional relativism is supposed to help us lead more tolerant lives. But killing barbarians doesn’t seem to be a very good way to display tolerance for barbarian culture. By keeping the barbarians from sacking Pleasantville, the Pleasantvilleans would be ethnocentrically forcing the barbarians to accept what they think is right in opposition to what the barbarians think is right.

It is difficult to see how the citizens of Pleasantville could be morally justified in fighting against the barbarians. Their belief in conventional relativism seems to undermine any moral justification they might have for fighting. Keep in mind that I am not asking whether they would fight against Lothar and his warring band. I am asking about the morality of their actions. I want to know whether conventional relativism can provide a reason for thinking that the defeat of the barbarians would be a morally good thing. I am unable to see how conventional relativists could provide such a reason. Since it is absurd to think that it might not be justified for them to defend themselves, the case of Lothar and the barbarians provides a reason for thinking that conventional relativism is false.

(If my tale of Lothar and the barbarians seems a little too far-fetched to some of you, note that I could have told basically the same story as a clash between the culture of a violent urban gang and the culture of the law-abiding citizens in the city where the gang lives. Clashes between cultures with opposing viewpoints are more than merely fictional.)

F. Consistency

What should conventional relativists say about a culture that is ethnocentric? Is it right for them to be ethnocentric? Or is it wrong? Remember, according to conventional relativism, what is right for you to do is determined by your culture. If your culture is ethnocentric, it seems like it should be morally right for you to act in an ethnocentric way. And yet conventional relativists condemn ethnocentrism as morally wrong. They use the fact that most people today view ethnocentrism as being wrong as a way to motivate people to become conventional relativists. But if my culture says that it is OK to look down upon other cultures, then according to conventional relativism it should be OK for me to do so.

What if my culture is absolutist? What if a belief in absolute moral truths is a central feature of my culture? According to conventional relativism, it should be right for me to believe in the existence of moral absolutes. But, of course, a belief in moral absolutes is incompatible with a belief in conventional
relativism because the first component of conventional relativism is the claim that there are no moral absolutes. So, if my culture is absolutist, conventional relativism says that it is right for me to believe that conventional relativism is false. Think carefully about this claim before reading further. Does it make sense for a conventional relativist to believe that conventional relativism is true and yet at the same time to believe that it is OK for me to think that conventional relativism is false? Conventional relativists think that it does. It might (just barely) be possible for a conventional relativist to act consistently on their relativist views, but it looks like it will be extremely difficult.

G. Diversity and Dependency

One of the most common ways to argue in favor of conventional relativism involves appealing to facts about cultural diversity. Conventional relativists say, “How can you believe in moral absolutes? Just look at all of the moral diversity in the world. It should be obvious that no moral truths are universal or absolute.” This line of argument, however, involves a confusion. To sort out the confusion Pojman (1999, pp. 37-38) distinguishes between the following two claims:

The Diversity Thesis:

What is considered morally right and wrong varies from society to society, so there are no moral principles that all societies accept.

The Dependency Thesis:

What really is morally right and wrong depends upon what societies think is morally right and wrong.

(I have changed the wording of the dependency thesis, but the idea remains the same.) The diversity thesis makes a claim about people’s moral opinions—about what they think is right or wrong. It simply says there is a wide diversity of human opinion about morality. Taken by itself, that claim is pretty harmless and indeed uncontroversial. The diversity thesis itself does not make any value judgments about this diversity of opinion. It simply reports the existence of the diversity.

Some people try to suggest there really are some moral principles that all societies accept. It is difficult to know whether this is really true because so many social scientists disagree about this issue. Some say that the ban on incest is the only universally accepted moral rule, while others claim there are dozens of other such rules. Many social scientists claim there are no universally accepted moral rules at all. It’s hard to know who to believe. We do not, however, need to resolve this issue in order to consider the heart of the controversy concerning conventional relativism. The most important of the two claims above is the dependency thesis, not the diversity thesis.

The dependency thesis says that moral principles depend upon cultural acceptance for their validity or correctness. In other words, if a culture accepts some principle, then it will be right for the members of that culture. If they do not accept another principle, that principle will not be right for that culture. The heart of conventional relativism is the claim that cultural acceptance determines morality.

To illustrate the differences between the two theses, think about what a moral absolutist like Socrates would say about the diversity thesis. Would he think it was true or false? Many students are initially tempted to think that Socrates would disagree with the diversity thesis. But think carefully about it. The diversity thesis simply claims that people disagree about what is right and wrong. How could Socrates deny that this is obviously true? A moral absolutist need not (indeed should not) deny that
people disagree about morality. The difference between the conventional relativist and the moral absolutist concerns how the two parties view the diversity of moral opinions. Conventional relativists think that everybody is equally right, while moral absolutists think that only some moral opinions are right while the rest are all wrong. According to moral absolutism, the fact that there is an extremely wide diversity of opinions about morality simply shows that there are a lot of very mistaken people in the world.

Distinguishing between the diversity thesis and the dependency thesis allows us to see that—contrary to what most conventional relativists think—demonstrating how much diversity of opinion there is in the world does not in any way undermine moral absolutism. Many relativists think that conventional relativism can be (and has been) proven true simply by doing enough anthropological research on the divergent beliefs and practices of people around the globe. All of this anthropological research, however, simply supports the diversity thesis. But it provides no reason for believing the dependency thesis. Consequently, the argument from cultural diversity fails to show that conventional relativism is true.

IV. Arguments in Favor of Subjective Ethical Relativism

Conventional relativism seems to face several serious problems. It is, however, only one of the two main versions of relativism. Some people claim that subjective relativism is more defensible than conventional relativism. In this section we examine some of the main arguments offered in favor of subjective relativism.

A. Immunity to Some Earlier Objections

One point in favor of subjective relativism is that it does not fall prey to some of the same objections that were levied against conventional relativism. For example, recall the cases of Lacey and John. They each belonged to overlapping cultures with conflicting values, and there did not seem to be any way for conventional relativism to say whether abortion was morally permissible for Lacey or whether racism was morally permissible for John. Subjective relativism, however, can easily handle this sort of case. According to subjective relativism, Lacey and John are free to choose how they will live their lives. If Lacey chooses to make the values of the Catholic church her own personal values, then abortion will not be morally permissible for her. If, however, she chooses to identify more with the feminist movement and to adopt their values, abortion will be morally permissible for her. Similar considerations apply in John’s case. By making moral correctness a function of personal choice, subjective relativism avoids the problem of conflicting cultures.

Subjective relativism is also able to provide a seemingly more acceptable verdict in the case of reformers who challenge or reject the values of their culture. Because conventional relativism subordinates the will of the individual to the will of the culture or society, it seems that little room is left over for individuals to make their own, autonomous decisions about how they ought to live their lives. Conventional relativism says that anyone who challenges the values of their society will be in the wrong. Subjective relativism, however, says that what is right for you is up to you. Regardless of what the majority says or what anyone else in your culture thinks, you are the one who should decide what kind of lifestyle or what kind of values you will adopt. If you want to be a reformer and you want to challenge the society around you, subjective relativism says you are acting rightly if you are true to yourself.
Subjective relativism, then, seems to give answers to the ultimate questions about morality that are more plausible than those given by conventional relativism. Consequently, some objections that seem to undermine conventional relativism do not harm subjective relativism in any way.

B. The Importance of Individual Liberty

By relativizing ethical truth to individuals rather than cultures, subjective relativism is able to give more consideration to the importance of individual liberty. In America we place an extremely high value on our freedom, our ability to direct the course of our own lives. Subjective relativism makes individual liberty and freedom central to morality. According to subjective relativism, it is not right for anyone to try to force their oppressive morality upon you against your wishes. The only morality that is right for you is one that you have autonomously chosen.

Many subjective relativists believe that the theories of conventional relativism and moral absolutism do not adequately respect individual liberty. Conventional relativism makes the culture or the majority in control and allows them to trample on the rights of individuals to choose how to live their lives. Moral absolutism says that you don’t have any choice about what is right for you. The moral absolutes that define morality are all predetermined ahead of time, and you have no say in the matter. Because subjective relativism respects individual liberty more than conventional relativism and moral absolutism, subjective relativists claim this is a reason for choosing subjective relativism over these other views.

C. Tolerance

Subjective relativists argue that conventional relativism’s emphasis on tolerance of other cultures is good but that it does not go far enough. Conventional relativism says that no culture is better than any other and that we should treat them all as being equally valid. However, conventional relativism does not make tolerance of other people within a society a priority. Subjective relativists claim that it is not only cultures but individuals as well who deserve to be treated with tolerance. Subjective relativism claims that no individual’s ethical opinions, values or lifestyle is any better than any other individual’s. All opinions about morality and lifestyles should be treated as being equally good. Tolerance of other individuals, then, is an important part of subjective relativism.

Think about all of the injustices that have been committed because of intolerance. In the years following the Protestant Reformation, Protestants and Catholics slaughtered each other by the thousands because each side would not tolerate the religious views of the other side. Racism, genocide and ethnic cleansing all involve an unwillingness to tolerate other people who are different from us. Subjective relativists believe that most of the world’s intolerance results from a belief in moral absolutism. If you believe in moral absolutes, you think there is only one right way to do things. Moral absolutists think that everybody who disagrees with them is dead wrong. It is this kind of belief that has led people throughout the centuries to think it is OK to abuse and slaughter other people. They are the pagans, the barbarians, the heretics. So, it is only right to rid the world of their corrupting influence.

Subjective relativism promotes tolerance and takes its advocacy of tolerance farther than conventional relativism does. Moral absolutism seems to lead to intolerance. Subjective relativists think the choice is clear: subjective relativism is preferable to either conventional relativism or moral absolutism.

D. Lack of Entitlement
Subjective relativists ask, “Who’s to judge what is really right and wrong for everybody? What person has the entitlement or authority to sit in judgment on the rest of us?” Their answer is: “Nobody.” When you judge other people, you are placing yourself above them and pretending that you have the authority to decide what is right and wrong for them. But you do not have any such authority. So, it is inappropriate for you to judge other people. If you actually did have the authority to make such judgments, there might not be a problem. As it is, however, there is nothing that entitles you to pass judgment on anyone else. You’re no better than the rest of us. Thus, you have no business judging us.

Not only do we not have the authority or entitlement to judge other people, there is something problematic about the act of judging itself. Judging someone else displays an intolerance for the judged person’s way of life. To judge another person is to do something unkind to that person. It is not unlike insulting them because it involves say negative things about them.

Subjective relativism urges us to admit that we are not entitled to stand in judgment over other people. According to subjective relativism, we should view other people’s opinions about morality, their lifestyles, their habits, and their actions as being as equally valid as our own. It is only by adopting subjective relativism that people can learn to stop judging others.

E. Lack of Knowledge

Subjective relativists have their own lack of knowledge argument that is similar to the one offered by conventional relativists. None of us, they note, can really tell for sure what is the absolute truth about morality. What is right for us is something that we each have to make up our own minds about. Conventional relativists correctly note that none of us has an infallible access to absolute truth, but they go wrong in concluding that what is right for you is something to be determined by your culture. It is ultimately a personal decision. You have to decide for yourself what the right way to live is.

Moral absolutists think they have everything all figured out. They think they know what is right for everybody, and they try to force their morality on everyone else. It is arrogant of them to think they know what the absolute truth is. No one person has any better access to the truth than the rest of us. So, none of us should presume to speak on behalf of everyone else. What is right for you is something for you to decide and no one else.

V. Arguments Against Subjective Ethical Relativism

The arguments offered in favor of subjective relativism can sound very convincing to many people. There are, however, some serious problems for the view lurking just below the surface.

A. Violent Lifestyles

Subjective relativism would have us believe that no opinion about morality is any better than any other and that no lifestyle is any better than any other. All moral opinions and lifestyles are equally valid, they say. Consider now the lifestyle of the Baton Rouge serial killer. If no lifestyles are any better or any worse than any others, that means the lifestyle of the serial killer is not any worse than the lifestyles of Baton Rouge’s law-abiding citizens. Remember: we are supposed to be tolerant of all lifestyles. Also, according to subjective relativism, the opinion that rape and murder are morally wrong is not any better than the opinion that rape and murder are fine and dandy. Both opinions are equally valid. Each person (including the Baton Rouge serial killer!) gets to decide what is right and wrong for that person. If a
serial killer has decided that rape and murder are right for him, then these horrible crimes really are right for him, and it is inappropriate for us to think any differently.

Can anyone seriously believe that the subjective relativist’s assessments of the Baton Rouge serial killer’s lifestyle and ethical views are correct? I don’t see how they could. Subjective relativism’s claim that all lifestyles and all opinions about morality are equally valid cannot be true.

B. Judging Other People

Subjective relativism claims that it is wrong to be judgmental, that we should not judge other people. Something about this claim seems reasonable. However, subjective relativism’s claim that we should not think that anyone else’s lifestyle or opinion is wrong seems absurd. But if forming an opinion about someone else is judging them, how can we accept the first relativist claim and reject the second?

The key to understanding this issue is realizing there is an ambiguity in the phrase “judging someone else.” In the most basic sense of this phrase, to judge someone else is to form an opinion about them. For example, Louisiana voters were recently asked to decide whether Kathleen Blanco or Bobby Jindal should be their next governor. Voters had to form an opinion about which candidate they think will do the best job. Regardless of which candidate you may have voted for, no one will condemn you for having “judged other people.” That’s what you were supposed to do. In this sense of “judging,” it is impossible not to judge other people. In fact, it is necessary in order to get along in society.

The foregoing example reveals that there must be another sense of the phrase “judging someone else” that is reasonably taken to be objectionable. When we speak of judging someone else in a negative sense, what we sometimes have in mind is an inappropriate rejection of the person being judged. We have probably all seen an episode of some television show with the following motif: A couple’s estranged son has finally come home. He has been gone for years, and they have hardly spoken since he left. The mother weeps tears of joy. However, the son has brought with him a “special friend,” and he has some important news to share: “Mom, Dad, I’m gay.” The father disowns the son and will not speak to him. He says, “You are no longer my son” and orders his son to leave his house. The father is intolerant, unloving and verbally abusive.

When we call the father “judgmental,” we are not merely saying that the father has formed some opinion or other about his son. We mean there is something about his opinions and the way he is acting upon them that is inappropriate. To judge other people in this negative sense means that you will shun them, disown them, cut off whatever relationship you had with them, refuse to associate with them, look down upon them, exclude them, or deny them the same privileges as those who have not been so judged. Subjective relativists claim that judging in this negative sense is wrong. That seems like a reasonable suggestion. Responding in a hateful way to another person is usually going to be a bad thing.

However, this does not mean that we should stop judging them in the first sense discussed above, but this is what subjective relativists recommend. Couldn’t the television father continue to believe that his son’s alternative sexual lifestyle was morally wrong but embrace and love his son anyway? Disagreeing with another person does not (and should not) always lead to shunning, excluding or disowning that person. In other words, “judging someone” in the first sense of forming an opinion about that person, does not always lead to “judging someone” in the second sense of rejecting or cutting off all social ties with that person. You can still love someone with whom you disagree.

Subjective relativists, however, do not distinguish between these two senses of “judging other people.” They argue that, since the second sort of judging is inappropriate, so is the first. But this
conclusion does not logically follow. It is possible to judge in the first sense but not the second. However bad the second sense of judging may be, this does not mean that the first sense is also bad.

C. Deciding for Yourself

Subjective relativists claim that you should get to decide what is right for you. Something about this claim seems very true. As autonomous, rational agents, we have the ability to make our own decisions, and our autonomy and rationality should be respected by others. However, it seems absurd to think that the Baton Rouge serial killer should be free to decide that rape and murder are right for him. We need to distinguish two different senses “deciding for yourself.” Subjective relativists slide from using one sense of “deciding for yourself” to using a completely different sense, without acknowledging this is what they are doing.

In one sense, you must decide for yourself what to believe not only in ethics but in every area of your life. You must evaluate the evidence that is available to you, the arguments for and against various positions, and make up your mind about what you think is true. For example, if you are unsure about whether to believe in global warming, you can go to the library, check out some books, read some journal articles, and familiarize yourself with the various arguments that have been put forward. Then, you must decide for yourself whether you think the evidence supports or does not support a belief in global warming. Talking about “deciding for yourself” in this sense seems unobjectionable.

However, subjective relativists also like to talk about “deciding for yourself” in another sense. In this second sense, subjective relativists claim that the fact that you chose lifestyle X for yourself makes lifestyle X right for you. To see that this sense of “deciding for yourself” is different from the first, recall the global warming case. Choosing to believe in global warming does not make global warming a fact. When it comes to issues like global warming, your choices determine your beliefs, but they do not determine the facts. You hope that your belief in global warming corresponds to the facts. But the facts do not depend upon you believing in them in order for them to be the facts. The facts are the way they are, regardless of what you think about them.

By contrast, subjective relativists claim that in ethics your choices determine not only your ethical beliefs but also the ethical facts. If you decide that cheating on your boyfriend or girlfriend is morally permissible, that makes cheating morally permissible for you. You never have to wonder or worry whether your ethical beliefs correspond to the facts. Your beliefs create the ethical facts. Without your beliefs, there would be no ethical facts about what is right for you. So, there is never any possibility that you could be wrong about what is right for you. According to subjective relativism, believing so makes it so.

Subjective relativists claim that, because we must obviously decide for ourselves what to believe (in the first sense of “deciding for yourself”) in ethics, we are also able to decide for ourselves (in the second sense of “deciding for yourself”) what the ethical facts are. In their discussions of “deciding for yourself,” they never distinguish the two senses and use the plausibility of the first sense illicitly to support the second sense. But the fact that the first sense gives no support to the second sense. Consequently, subjective relativists cannot appeal to the importance of autonomous decision making to show that their view is true.

D. The Psychology of Belief

The subjective relativism position also seems to misunderstand the psychology of belief. Subjective relativists believe it is OK for you to think that capital punishment is right but that you should
not think the opinions of those who oppose capital punishment are any less correct than your own. Think about that for a minute. Is what they recommend even psychologically possible? How can I believe that position A is true and yet at the same time believe that those who think that position A is false are just as right as I am? That sounds like nonsense. If I believe position A is true, I am committed to believing that anyone who thinks position A is false is wrong. Subjective relativism seems to be asking us to do something that is not humanly possible.

E. The Truth of Relativism

Consider the following simply question: Do subjective relativists believe that subjective relativism is true? This may seem like an utterly ridiculous question, unless you think carefully about it. At first glance, the answer seems obvious. Of course, they believe subjective relativism is true. That’s what makes them subjective relativists. However, this seemingly obvious answer causes serious problems for the subjective relativist.

Subjective relativists deny that there are any absolute truths in ethics. No ethical principle, they say, is true for all people at all times and in all places. The problem, however, is that subjective relativists think subjective relativism is the TRUTH about ethics. They do not merely think that subjective relativism is true-for-them. They think it is true for all people at all times and in all places. They seem to be contradicting themselves. Subjective relativism also claims that no moral view is any better than any other. Since subjective relativism is itself a moral view, this means that subjective relativism is not any better than any other moral view, such as moral absolutism. And yet you will never meet a subjective relativist who does not think that moral absolutism is just plain wrong. They contradict themselves once again.

(By the way, conventional relativism falls prey to this same problem. Conventional relativists also deny that there are any absolute truths in ethics, but they claim that conventional relativism is the absolute truth about ethics. They also claim that no culture’s moral viewpoint is any better than any other, and yet they claim that any culture that subscribes to conventional relativism is correct while any culture that subscribes to moral absolutism is objectively wrong.)

Is there any way for the subjective relativists to keep from contradicting themselves. There might be one way, but it has some serious drawbacks. Instead of claiming that subjective relativism is TRUE, subjective relativists could argue that subjective relativism is simply true-for-them and not necessarily true-for-others. So, if you are a moral absolutist, this kind of subjective relativist would not try to tell you that you are wrong—even if you were intolerant and ethnocentric. The subjective relativist I am imagining would claim that, while subjective relativism is true-for-them, moral absolutism would still be true-for-you. This kind of subjective relativist does not fall into self-contradiction.

However, the subjective relativist’s position is no longer a very interesting one. The features that make subjective relativism an attractive position for a lot of people are no longer present: the emphasis on trying to get other people to be more tolerant, the opposition to ethnocentrism, the critique of the injustices done in the name of moral absolutism, etc. Subjective relativists want other people to become relativists, too. They want to tell those who believe in moral absolutes that they are really wrong for being absolutists. Relativists of all stripes are continually criticizing people who believe in absolute moral truths for being closed-minded, intolerant, dogmatic, politically incorrect, and just plain wrong. But if belief in moral absolutism is merely wrong-for-the-subjective-relativist but not necessarily wrong-for-you, then the relativist is not in a position to criticize you for being an absolutist. Going with the option under consideration avoids a contradiction, but only by making it impossible for the subjective relativist to disagree with absolutists.
Consequently, although the position I have just sketched is logically possible, you will never meet a subjective relativist who believes in it. All of the subjective relativists you will ever come across will believe that subjective relativism is the fundamental, objective and universal truth about morality. This is not something they can believe in without contradicting themselves. (For more on contradictions, point your browser to: http://www.geocities.com/beebejames/Contradictions101.)

F. Living Together in Peace

Subjective relativists suggest that the only way for us to live together in peace in a pluralistic society like ours is for us to treat everyone else’s opinions and lifestyles as being as equally valid as our own. They suggest that moral absolutism leads to intolerance and injustice. If we all stopped thinking that our opinions and ways were superior to those of other people, we would have a more peaceful, more egalitarian society.

Subjective relativists, however, misunderstand what democracy is all about. Living together peacefully in a democracy does not mean having no opinions about what is right and wrong. It means living together in peace with those with whom you strongly disagree. It is ridiculous to think that we will never have a peaceful, just and fair society as long as Democrats are convinced that Republicans are wrong (and vice versa), pro-lifers are convinced that pro-choicers are wrong (and vice versa), evangelical Christians are convinced that purveyors of pornography are wrong (and vice versa), proponents of the death penalty are convinced that opponents of it are wrong (and vice versa), and proponents of affirmative action are convinced that opponents of it are wrong (and vice versa). Subjective relativism makes the absurd suggestion that the only way to live together in harmony is to stop having any convictions about what is right or wrong. Subjective relativists want us to stop thinking that anybody else’s opinion is wrong. As long we think that, they say, we will be intolerant, judgmental and unjust. Such a position completely misunderstands the beauty of democracy.

Citizens in a democracy are expected to respect the rights of others and to find peaceful means of resolving their disagreements. You don’t have to agree with the people on the other side of the aisle, but you are not free to abuse them or deprive them of their rights simply because they disagree with you. You are free to debate, to persuade, to campaign, to make commercials, and to donate money to political parties or private organizations that promote your interests. But you are not free to harm those with whom you disagree. That’s democracy: peaceful disagreement. It’s not (as subjective relativism suggests) a lack of any real disagreement.

G. Moral Absolutes in Relativism

Subjective relativists contradict themselves not only in claiming that subjective relativism is true but also by believing in the following absolute moral truths:

(1) Every person deserves to be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of race, religion, class, color or creed.

(2) Different lifestyles and cultures should be treated with tolerance.

(3) Intolerance is morally wrong.

(4) The basic human rights of every individual should be defended by a free and just society.
(5) We should strive to provide the citizens of our nation with as much individual liberty as is compatible with the free exercise of everyone else’s liberty.

(6) It is wrong to deprive those with whom one disagrees of their right to make their voices heard in an arena of public discourse.

(7) Racism, sexism and all forms of hateful discrimination are unjust and have no place in an equitable and peaceful society.

Every relativist I have ever met (or expect to meet) believes in (1) through (7). And they do not merely believe that (1) through (7) are true-for-them. They believe these truths apply to all people in all cultures at all times and in all places. In other words, relativists (subjective and conventional) treat (1) through (7) as moral absolutes. Thus, contrary to the explicit statements of their own position, they do believe in moral absolutes after all.

H. You Can’t Live It Out

Not only are self-contradictory positions necessarily false, they are also impossible to put into practice. You couldn’t really live your life in accordance with subjective relativism if you wanted to.

Suppose that Boudreaux deliberates about what he should do in the following manner:

(a) One is morally obliged to keep one’s promises.

(b) I promised my cousin Jethro that I would attend the premiere of his performance art piece.

(c) I am morally obligated to attend Jethro’s premiere.

(d) I want to do what is right.

(e) Therefore, I will attend Jethro’s premiere.

Statement (a) is an expression of a universal principle about what is morally right or wrong. (b) is a statement of descriptive fact regarding Boudreaux’s interaction with Jethro. (c) states a logical consequence of (a) and (b). (d) expresses one of Boudreaux’s desires, which provides him (let us suppose) with sufficient motivation for caring about (c) and for following through with what he knows to be right. Finally, (e) expresses Boudreaux’s decision or determination to undertake the specified course of action.

Suppose, however, that Boudreaux is a subjective relativist and consider what effect this might have on his practical deliberations. Since he denies that there are any absolute moral truths, the moral principle in (a) can only be interpreted as being true-for-him, if he has decided to believe in it. But Boudreaux could just as well have chosen to believe in any of the following, incompatible moral principles:

(f) One is morally obliged to keep one’s promises, unless it is inconvenient to do so.

(g) One is morally obliged to keep one’s promises only if one has promised to do something pleasurable.
(h) One is not morally obliged to keep any of one’s promises.

Which one of these is right-for-Boudreaux? Whichever one he happens to believe in. Remember: According to subjective relativism, what is right-for-him is whatever he thinks is right-for-him. So, none of the above options can be any more accurate or true than the others. Since, according to subjective relativism, whatever Boudreaux believes to be right really is right-for-him, there is no reason for him to worry that his beliefs might be wrong-for-him. They are right-for-Boudreaux of necessity.

How is Boudreaux supposed to choose which one to believe or adopt? His relativism cannot be of any help in this matter. If Boudreaux had chosen (f) instead of (a), then (f) would have been right-for-him. If he had chosen (g), then (g) would have been right-for-him. And so on. There is no belief choice he can make which will be ‘wrong-for-him.’

In such circumstances, it is difficult to see how genuine practical deliberation can still be possible. To deliberate is to weigh one’s options in light of one’s evidence, reasons, consequences and background beliefs. But no process of weighing is applicable in the relativist’s case because every belief has equal weight or merit. Regardless of what ethical beliefs Boudreaux may have, each of them is ‘true-for-him.’ Subjective relativism seems to make it impossible for Boudreaux’s practical choices to be anything but arbitrary.

VI. Conclusion

We have seen that conventional relativism and subjective relativism are both subject to very serious objections. However, you should not forget that both forms of relativism also put forward some very challenging arguments against moral absolutism. Relativists seem to be right about the evils of ethnocentrism and the virtue of tolerance. Both forms of relativism also try to promote a seemingly healthy respect for other ways of life and other people. Both relativists and absolutists face philosophical objections they must answer if their views of morality are going to be fully adequate.

References

